

**Kicking the Can down the Road? Educational Solutions to the Challenges of Divided Societies: a Northern Ireland Case Study.**

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## **Abstract**

There is considerable research around education in divided societies. Some seeks to defend separate schools, often for different faith groups, while others stress the benefits of school integration on social cohesiveness. Contact theory has often been employed to address social discord. Northern Ireland, a deeply divided multicultural society with a largely separate system of education for its two main communities, has a small but growing Integrated schools sector, where the communities learn together and where contact is established. A more recent intervention is that of Shared Education: separate schools are retained but shared classes and other opportunities for sharing are offered. This paper examines these models of educational provision and evaluates them in light of political developments. This is of particular important as the structure of education is key to social cohesion in Northern Ireland, as well as in other jurisdictions across the world contemplating educational solutions for divided societies.

**Key Words:** Northern Ireland, segregation, Shared Education, integrated education, creative ambiguity, contact theory

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Many parts of the world experience civil unrest; some conflicts are apparently intractable (Bar-Tar, 2007). Other areas may lack violence, but strive to meet varying needs of different groups to achieve social cohesion. Some states have embraced ‘multiculturalism’, such as Canada and the Netherlands. Critics have characterised multiculturalism as merely a mechanism to assimilate diversity into the dominant culture and there has been a move towards ‘critical multiculturalism’ which challenges inequalities (Al-Haj, 2005), although that approach also has detractors (see Zembylas and Iasonos, 2017). Education is an important mechanism for addressing division, and that is the focus of this paper. We will look at some international examples of education in divided countries, and the theory that seems to support these approaches. A detailed case study will then be explored: Northern Ireland. Two main approaches using education to support social cohesion there will be described, and the structural support for those initiatives examined.

A shared national consciousness can be advanced through education. Particularly in contested areas, this can raise suspicions, and be perceived as the state using educational initiatives as a mechanism ‘...to control the discourse on state, citizenship and nationalism’ (Singh, 2018:49). Perhaps this is why attempts to develop collaborative educational opportunities often originate from groups independent of government.

Sri Lanka has undergone considerable intercommunity violence and education and has a secondary school system segregated by language and religion (Duncan and Lopes Cardozo, 2017). A Government-sponsored Programme for Social Cohesion and Peace Education was established in 2008, with peace education

supposedly integrated across the curriculum. However, implementation has been limited and ‘...formal (peace) education is perceived ... *not* to be addressing the post-war needs for reconciliation’ (ibid:84). Duncan and Lopes Cardozo identify the agency of teachers, students and the communities themselves in developing the role of education beyond that prescribed by government, developing opportunities for reconciliation. These include using texts which are not on the approved list, or hosting study opportunities open to all communities.

In Israel, except for the Jewish ultra-Orthodox sector, government controls the school curriculum, textbooks, examinations and initial training and Continued Professional Development (CPD) for teachers. Education is segregated, with the Arab-Israeli sector state-funded but dependent and with a centrally determined curriculum over which it has limited control. The system has been described as ‘feigned multiculturalism’ used as a cover for assimilation (Reingold and Zamir, 2017). Attempts at integration include the NGO-led Hand-in-Hand schools. Established in 1997, this initiative has now grown to six schools, but they aim to increase that provision to 15 in the next decade, involving more than 20,000 Jewish and Arab-Israeli citizens (HandinHand website, n.d.). For Amara *et al.* (2009), these schools provide a ‘...a new model of Hebrew-Arabic bilingual education...assuming direct contact and dialogue between Arab and Jewish pupils [with the aim of achieving] far-reaching changes in the conflict-ridden Israeli reality’ (ibid:18).

While not always acknowledged, these approaches appear to embrace contact theory (Allport, 1954). Arguing that prejudice can be addressed by contact with members of other groups, Allport identified required criteria to effectively address

prejudice: equal status within the contact, common goals, cooperation and explicit social sanction from authority.

While recent work suggests that Allport's criteria may be more facilitative than mandatory in the reduction of prejudice (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2011), an opportunity to develop "friendships" seems to be important. This

...invokes many of the optimal conditions for positive contact effects: it typically involves cooperation and common goals as well as repeated equal-status contact over an extended period and across varied settings' (ibid:275).

Working in Muslim and Christian communities in Indonesia and the Philippines, Kanas *et al.* (2017) found that friendships between people from different religions reduced negative attitudes towards the out-group. They noted that 'casual interreligious contact appears to be much less beneficial for out-group attitudes' (ibid:106), supporting Pettigrew *et al.*'s finding that '...prejudice is more likely to be diminished when the intergroup contact is not superficial and group salience is sufficiently high' (ibid:276). In an Israeli context, it has been noted that

...it is not sufficient to provide an opportunity for an encounter between conflicting sides, especially when the conflict is historical, ideological and national. Real dialogue can be created only provided emotional and cognitive barriers have been overcome first (Amara *et al.*, 2009:16)

## **Northern Ireland**

Politically part of the UK but geographically part of the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland (NI), underwent a period of ethno-sectarian conflict for 30-years from 1968. Largely a result of ‘opposed nationalisms’ (Boal, 2002:688), the protagonists are ‘Catholic’ Irish Nationalists who favour a reunification of Ireland and ‘Protestant’ British Unionists who prefer continued union with Great Britain. Other profound social cleavages are present in NI, particularly related to social class, and there are small communities of recent migrants. Nonetheless, among all of the social divisions expected in a late capitalist, post-colonial society, the Catholic/Protestant divide continues to dominate much of NI life, including education.

Conflict has now mostly ended following ceasefires and the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998. That agreement has been described as an example of ‘creative ambiguity’ (McVeigh and Rolston, 2007). This use of Kissinger’s phrase may reflect a pragmatic flexibility to achieve political progress but may equally indicate difficulties underplayed or ignored, only to re-emerge. Political processes in Northern Ireland continue to work only intermittently, with periods of uncertainty or of Direct Rule from the UK Parliament. From early 2017, local politicians were largely inactive with the devolved administration – the Northern Ireland Assembly – suspended. The Brexit proposal, withdrawing the UK from the European Union (EU), brought more uncertainty to NI: most of the electorate there voted to remain, but the largest political party (DUP) vigorously campaigned to “leave”. This caused considerable political tension in NI with the concern that a hard border in Ireland would be created, undermining the spirit, at least, of the 1998 agreement (Soares, 2016).

The population of Northern Ireland remains very heavily segregated along ethno-sectarian lines, particularly residential areas and schools. So great are the divisions that many communities effectively live separate lives (Roulston *et al.*, 2017). They often have little knowledge of the “other” and ‘... communal polarisation remains undiminished’ (OFMDFM, 2005:8). Hughes (2011) highlights stereotypes and deep-seated misconceptions, such as the belief by some Protestant 11-12-year olds that Catholics wear veils or have squints in their eyes, and equally uninformed views from the Catholic side. This emphasises ‘...the formative influence of the separate environment on the establishment of negative stereotypes ...the limitations of schools that inhibit opportunities for “lived” experience of others in a plural society are clear’ (ibid:838).

### **Segregated Schools**

Despite repeated attempts to establish non-denominational education (see Gardner, 2016), Irish schools were almost always segregated by religion. After the first Northern Ireland parliament was established in 1921, the minority Catholic population were understandably suspicious of politicians who were explicitly establishing what the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland later described as ‘...a Protestant Government for a Protestant People’ (Craig, 1934, cited in Gardener, 2016). Despite the first Minister of Education’s attempts to establish an integrated education system, the implacable opposition of churches on each side made a segregated system of ‘state’, but *de facto* Protestant, alongside Catholic Church-run schools almost inevitable (Gardner, 2016:349).

**Insert Table 1 close to here**

Educational segregation persists. Post-Primary schools are shown in Table 1, with similar patterns in Primary Schools. The school types reflect differences of ownership, funding arrangements, governance, and employment. ‘Maintained’ schools have a Catholic ethos while ‘Controlled’ schools are largely Protestant. Fifty of the selective Grammar schools have ‘Voluntary’ status, some Protestant and some Catholic. (Grammar schools, for which pupils are selected at age 11, and non-Grammar Schools are referred to collectively as Post-Primary schools in NI). More recently a small, largely Catholic at present, Irish-Medium sector has developed<sup>1</sup>. Socioeconomic segregation, as exemplified by the persistence of the Grammar school system, adds considerable complexity to NI society but that particular social division lies outside the scope of this paper.

Gardner highlights the ‘...economic argument against such national-scale segregation’ (2016:352), citing the Bain report (2006), which identified 53,000 unfilled places in existing schools, 15% of capacity. This surplus capacity has persisted with 63,063 unfilled places comprising 17.5% of all approved school places (DENI, 2018, Appendix B). There is duplication of provision in virtually every settlement across Northern Ireland with, for example, most mixed villages in NI providing a primary school for each community, often with neither having a viable pupil intake. This might suggest a segregated education system that is increasingly untenable, particularly with austerity finances under a ‘...constantly expanding neoliberal model of governance’ (Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012:46). Segregated schooling may also have costs in social cohesiveness<sup>2</sup>.

Gallagher identifies three responses introduced in the 1980s to address the divided



school system:

...the development of new curriculum programmes, the establishment of contact schemes to bring young Protestants and Catholics together and efforts to establish religiously integrated schools (2005:434)

Despite considerable investment in Northern Ireland, neither curricular change nor contact schemes had significant lasting impact on social attitudes. In relation to curriculum change, Gallagher ascribes that to

...the limited priority accorded to these issues by most schools  
... and the reluctance to address issues related to conflict and division in Northern Irish society more generally (Gallagher, 2005:435).

An avoidance of the subject of community division by people in Northern Ireland has been a finding of many studies (see Hayes *et al.*, 2007), thus allowing ignorance of the views of the “other” to remain unchallenged.

It is the third response, integrated schools, and the challenges to them which are the focus of this paper.

### **Integrated Schools**

In the late 1970s, a parent-led movement was established which proposed educating Protestants and Catholics together. This came to be known as Integrated education with the first school opening in 1981 in a temporary building in a fairly prosperous suburb of Belfast. Initially it was portrayed as a ‘middle-class’ movement, which was much resented (O’Connor, 2002:16). However, a variety of parents supported the initiative and the subsequent opening of schools in less affluent areas close to ethnic interfaces in North and South Belfast did something to address this perception.

Initially operating without any government funding, the first Integrated schools relied on charitable institutions (Smith, 2001:564). Many churches and existing schools saw them as a threat to existing provision. Some teacher unions were concerned that they would leach resources from existing schools (Morgan and Fraser, 1999:370f). However, by the mid-1980s the British government began covering Integrated schools’ capital and recurrent costs when they had been established for a few years, and government ministers began to make favourable comments about the sector (ibid:370). Funding was regularised in the Education Reform Order (1989) which committed the Department of Education (DENI) to ‘...encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education’ (H.M.G., 1989). This introduced day-one funding for any Integrated schools with reasonable prospects for pupil growth. Consequently, 27 more Integrated schools opened between 1990 and 1998.

Building schools from scratch requires new buildings on greenfield sites so this proved an expensive strategy. DENI policies imposed increasingly stringent requirements on new-build Integrated schools between 1995 and 1997. These

included a larger number of pupils enrolled, notification of those enrolled pupils long before the proposed opening of the school, evidence of long-term viability and a permanent site. All Integrated schools established during that period that did not meet those enhanced criteria had to cover their own costs. Unsurprisingly, growth slowed.

Despite these challenges, there are now 65 such schools across Northern Ireland comprising around 7.0% of pupil enrolments. As Gallagher *et al.* (2003) observe, ‘...given the ubiquity of separate schools throughout the history of education in Ireland, the fact that an Integrated sector has developed at all in Northern Ireland is remarkable’ (2003:16). Indeed, ‘...parent-led growth at this scale, and in a society emerging from conflict, is unique in the world’ (Topping and Cavanagh, 2016:23). O’Connor (2002) captures the audacity of the initiative noting the ‘...stunning nerve by many people: parents, teachers and those who lent or granted them the money to sustain schools until the government finally recognised their viability’ (ibid:17).

Increasingly, DENI policy for Integrated education was to encourage existing schools to “transform” into Integrated schools, a less expensive option which created more Integrated schools more quickly. Parents were required to vote in favour of change, with a minimum level of participation, and the Minister of Education had to give approval. “Transformed Integrated status” was met with suspicion by some Integrated education proponents, who feared that it was a money-saving strategy and that only schools facing closure through falling pupil numbers would transform (Morgan and Fraser, 1990:375). Doubts continue.

Gardner (2016) terms it “faux-integration” and speculates whether transformation ‘...undermined the development of integrated education’ (2016:350).

Any school can transform into an Integrated school if they meet the criteria. The resultant school can be “Controlled” with the Education Authority (EA), the body that operates state, *de facto* Protestant, schools, as the employing authority.

Alternatively, the transformed school can become “Grant Maintained”, which would allow the Catholic Church to retain ownership and continue to act as employer. While 25 schools in Northern Ireland had transformed into Integrated schools by 2017 (DENI, 2017), all were Controlled schools. That no Maintained schools have transformed thus far<sup>3</sup> may reflect ‘...consistent opposition from the Catholic Church who see integrated schools as a threat to the ethos which underpins maintained schools’ (Borooah and Knox, 2013:931).

Transformed Controlled schools, with their largely Protestant staff and *de facto* Protestant and British ethos, can find it challenging to accommodate the Catholic and Irish ethos of incoming pupils (McAleavy *et al.*, 2009). To achieve transformed status, schools are expected to achieve at least 30% enrolment from both Protestant and Catholic pupils and a similar mix of school governors. However, school enrolments can be difficult to predict and after transformation some Integrated schools struggle to achieve those requirements (Gallagher, 2016).

Further, in some Integrated schools, there can be a lack of consensus about how to address “integration”. Some teachers appear to consider shared classrooms as safe places for children of both communities to mix, but they avoid potentially

sensitive issues. Other teachers seize the opportunity to raise and address issues of diversity and division (Hayes *et al.*, 2007).

Notwithstanding the variety of approaches that teachers can adopt, contact in integrated schools appears to offer positive outcomes for pupils. For instance, there is evidence of more moderate political views (Stringer *et al.*, 2010), an increase in intercommunity marriage (Montgomery *et al.*, 2003) and an increase in mixed friendships (McGlynn *et al.*, 2004). Hayes *et al.* (2007) found that Integrated education has a positive impact which extends into later life and argues that ‘... these individuals have the potential to create a new common ground in Northern Ireland politics’ (ibid:477).

Insert Figure 1 near here

Consistent support for Integrated education has been demonstrated in public opinion and social attitude surveys and support and preference for integrated schools rose from 82% in 2003 to 88% in 2011 (Hansson *et al.*, 2013:8). Given this, it is unclear why the Integrated sector is not growing more rapidly. It might relate to ambivalence, at best, from local politicians and churches in Northern Ireland protecting “their own” sectors. Alternatively, Blaylock and Hughes (2013) suggest that parents are reluctant to forsake schools that ‘...are cherished representations of distinct cultural and religious identities’ (ibid:481). Reasons for parental choice of school are complex, particularly when the a “new” sector such as Integrated Schools might become available locally (Morgan *et al.*, 1993); parents may pursue what they perceive to be a “good” education within the segregated sector rather than favouring the wider social gains but, initially, uncertain educational outcomes promised by integrated education. Whatever the

reasons, there is considerable scope for Integrated school growth as Figure 1 shows, especially in the Belfast area, with its large youth population, and also in the southeast and west of Northern Ireland. Establishing a different system of schooling is challenging, and some Integrated schools have struggled to recruit and retain sufficient pupils. An Integrated College in Armagh, for example, found itself unsustainable after five years and closed in 2009. Nonetheless, Borooah and Knox (2013) acknowledge that there is continued demand for Integrated education, and concede that the two most oversubscribed schools in Northern Ireland are Integrated.

### **Shared Education – a New Way?**

A recent development in Northern Ireland education is Shared Education. The educational drivers for this seem to emerge from frustration at the limited success of other initiatives in addressing societal divisions (Gallagher, 2018).

Shared Education has been defined as

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

While apparently straightforward, conceptually Shared Education is ‘complex’ (Gardner, 2016:351). This is particularly true of the central purpose of the initiative in which some highlight the social benefits (Gallagher, 2016:366) while

others argue that it is more about delivering ‘...higher quality educational experiences’ (Borooah and Knox, 2017:330), unlike Integrated education which has ‘...a specific focus on reconciliation outcomes’ (ibid:330). While these claims are not mutually exclusive, there does seem to be some ‘creative ambiguity’ around how ‘Shared Education’ is ‘sold’ to school authorities and the wider community.

In Shared Education, schools retain their ethos, including separate pupil uniforms, buildings and staff, but they commit to collaborative partnerships. While there is a vision of some schools sharing a campus, none of these have yet materialised. Partnerships involve joint, curriculum-based classes and activities taking place ‘...on a regular basis – typically at least once a week for a year at Post-Primary level...’ (Loader and Hughes, 2017:119). In many Post-Primaries, Shared Education has been used to increase the breadth of the curriculum on offer. By sharing pupils, class sizes for specialist examination subjects may become viable (Borooah and Knox, 2013:932), with pupils taught together.

Shared Education has attracted significant financial support, including funding from some of the sources that once supported Integrated education, such as the US bodies Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland. European Peace Funding (Peace IV) has also been secured (Gallagher, 2016). In addition, a Shared Education Act was passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2016, mainstreaming the initiative and requiring DENI to ‘encourage, facilitate and promote shared education’<sup>4</sup>. It can be realistically claimed that ‘...in a relatively short period of time, shared education seems to have transformed the educational landscape in Northern Ireland’ (Gallagher, 2016:372).

However, if social benefits are to be gleaned from Shared Education, it seems key that the cross-community contact which it affords is not superficial and is ‘...over an extended period and across varied settings’ (Pettigrew, 2011:275). One study (2017) found that, after a Shared Education experience, most students had not developed “friendships”. Most relationships formed were confined to the classroom; 12 of the 60 pupils they interviewed described the pupils from the other school as ‘being relative “strangers”’ (Loader and Hughes, 2017:123), despite having shared the same classroom for a year or more. One respondent reflected, ‘I haven’t talked to one of them since I came ...I’ve never even said one word to them’ (ibid:124). While positive outcomes undoubtedly can result (see Hughes *et al.*, 2012), Shared Education may not always produce effective cross-community contact; and meeting with the out-group “at least once a week” may be insufficient for the affective relationships to emerge, particularly as most of these students return to highly segregated lives outside their schools.

Additionally, it is not clear how teachers’ reticence to confront difference so noted in many evaluations of Integrated education has been addressed in Shared Education, yet this seems crucial to success. Shared Education partnerships encourage schools

...to develop programmes of classes and/or activities that address the educational priorities of participating schools...

(Loader and Hughes, 2017:119),



and, in Post-Primary schools, that often involves examination classes. While it is stipulated that programmes should promote sustainable engagement, a classroom in which the focus is preparation for an examination may be unlikely to provide the best context to address reconciliation. It is suggested that issues may

...arise naturally as pupils develop cross-group friendships via shared classes; and second, that these topics will be introduced during lessons, with teachers making links between the curriculum material and relevant issues in Northern Ireland (Loader and Hughes, 2017:121f).

Capacity building is an integral part of the Shared Education roll-out, and considerable effort has been made to deliver Continued Professional Development support, and to provide opportunities for teachers to develop their skills in this area (Gallagher, 2016:369). Nevertheless, it is unclear how many teachers have been trained to make links between curriculum material and issues in NI, or equipped to ensure that maximum benefit accrues should opportunities arise. Borooah and Knox describe a shared classroom with pupils covering differential equations (2013:930). A tightly time-bound curriculum for a high-stakes examination will limit the scope for Mathematics teachers to discuss reconciliation, even were they motivated and skilled to do so and it is difficult to see where opportunities to address contentious issues will arise in such classes. In potentially the only shared experience over a few periods each week, very few meaningful opportunities to address societal division may emerge or be contrived.

Hughes and Loader (2015) are explicit about Shared Education “foregrounding” curriculum over reconciliation priorities, an understandable approach designed to encourage otherwise reluctant parents and teachers to agree to shared activities.

However,

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

There is considerable evidence of laudable commitment by many teachers and educationalists addressing reconciliation in NI using Shared Education, and many valuable outcomes (Hughes *et al.*, 2016). Despite this, Shared Education does not *necessarily* provide opportunities to explore and confront differences.

Indeed, Hughes *et al.* (2016) make it clear that Shared Education engages teachers ‘...without directly challenging them to promote relationship building between Catholics and Protestants’ (ibid:1096) but in the hope that the shared spaces so created will allow relationships to develop. They caution that ‘...there is little enthusiasm for the type of deep engagement with difference that can engender long-term social transformation’ (ibid:1096).

The underlying purpose of Shared Education is disputed. Borooah and Knox (2013) see it as a ‘Third Way’, alongside segregated and integrated education.

Hughes *et al.* (2016) identify it as a midpoint, with Shared Education ‘...introduced to “bridge the gap” between short-term opportunities for contact,

and “full immersion” integrated schools’ (2016:1094). DENI is explicit about Shared Education acting as a possible pathway towards transformation to integrated education as, ‘...over time, some schools involved in Shared Education might decide to adopt a fully integrated model’ (DENI, 2017:9).

Even if it is a pathway rather than a destination, there may be challenges in transforming from shared to integrated. Hughes *et al.* (2016) highlight one school in a Shared Education partnership which, on deciding to consider transforming, strained relationships with the other school in the partnership, as the schools would then have become competitors (ibid:1097).

With educational funding declining, CPD opportunities in education in Northern Ireland have dwindled. Shared Education is, however, very well-funded, and schools are taking advantage of this. It is unclear how much this implies commitment to Shared Education, or whether schools are using it to access otherwise unavailable staff training. Whether contact will continue between schools after funding ceases is also unclear. Additionally, Educational Research funding for Shared Education seems to dominate, and few dare challenge the dominant ideology.

### **Political Views on Integrated and Shared Education**

We conclude with a brief overview of the views of the main politicians.

Education is deeply ‘political’ in NI, as it is in Israel, Sri Lanka and in many other divided societies. Northern Ireland’s regional government was dismantled in 1972, heralding 35 years of Direct Rule from Westminster and it was then that

political and financial support for Integrated education was first demonstrated by a Direct Rule minister. Most local political parties were not supportive

Two key parties/partners, the “Protestant” Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and Sinn Féin, a “Catholic” party, were in the focus of research by Collins (1992). He found that the then leader of the DUP, Ian Paisley viewed

Integrated education [as] ... a direct attack on Protestant schools ... [and the DUP are opposed to] ... aspects of the curriculum which would suggest a coming-together of the two traditions, let alone any co-operation (ibid:110).

Sinn Féin viewed Integrated schools as

...propagandistic: to support the British Government’s presentation internationally of the problem [of Northern Ireland] as a religious one and to deliberately mislead people about the real sources of the problem (Ibid:111).

These two parties have come to dominate the political process in Northern Ireland, sharing power from 2003.

In a policy document of 2005, released during a period of Direct Rule, the Northern Ireland government accepted the need for both denominational and Integrated schooling but cautioned that

there is a balance to be struck ...between the exercise of this

choice and the significant additional costs and potential diseconomies that this diversity of provision generates, particularly in a period of demographic downturn and falling rolls (OFMDFM, 2005:33).

This policy was ‘...jettisoned by the DUP and Sinn Féin when devolution was restored ... in favour of a new strategy’ (Knox, 2010a:12f), which in turn faced criticism from the Community Relations Council, among others, as it was felt not to

present any analysis on the impact of existing levels of separation in education. There is no reference [to]...reducing the potential diseconomies of duplication (CRC, 2011:53).

Continuing, they lament ‘the presumption that we have parallel and polarised systems’ (CRC, 2011:54).

Party political manifestos can provide insights into perceptions of Integrated education and the DUP displayed a more nuanced approach in the local elections in 2011. There, they argued the need for a Commission to ‘... advise on a strategy for sharing and integration within our education system’, although the emphasis seems largely on sharing (Hansson *et al.*, 2013:19). Sinn Féin manifestos did ‘...not explicitly refer to integrated education but to “choice”’ (ibid:20). The researchers conclude that

collectively, the manifestos reflect a wider trend among

Northern Ireland's political parties to promote the idea of "shared" education [with]... less emphasis on the notion of structural reform and "integrated" education (ibid:23).

Peter Robinson, when leader of the DUP and the First Minister in the Assembly, called segregated education 'a benign form of apartheid' in 2010, and suggested a 'roadmap to create a single education system' (Matthews, 2012:345). However, as Gardner pithily notes, 'his solution — that the government should stop funding catholic schools — was unlikely to find favour with many people beyond his party faithful' (2016:352).

Hansson *et al.*, conclude that Shared Education

...represents a movement by political parties towards education policies that plan for separate development rather than structural change and a unified system of common schools (2013:66).

Knox (2010b) refers to Northern Ireland parties being 'lukewarm' with regards to Integrated education and notes 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' (ibid:230). Lacking commitment to structural change, both parties warmly embrace Shared Education instead.

## **Conclusion**

It is hard to avoid the impression that Shared Education with its concomitant retention of segregated schools is allowing politicians and community leaders to ‘kick the can down the road’, claiming that issues such as social cohesion and duplication of services are being addressed. As Shared Education generates interest in places as diverse as Macedonia, Israel and the United States (Gallagher, 2016:371), and groups around the world attempt to implement solutions for divided societies, it becomes even more important to evaluate whether such a process allows sufficient meaningful and sustained contact between groups, encouraging friendships to develop. Rather than fundamentally challenging division, it may instead support existing structures, allowing difficult but vital decisions to be deferred.

Gardner (2016) acknowledges Shared Education’s innovative approach in Northern Ireland to tackling school segregation but warns that it is ‘...without any sizable impact on the segregated system as yet’ (Gardner, 2016:359). This implies that Shared Education’s purpose is to tackle the segregated system, as educationalists presumably intended; it may be that some do not share that commitment. Stakeholders and other actors, such as politicians, may be happy to embrace Shared Education exactly because it does *not* impact on school segregation. Two questions can be asked:

- does Shared Education provide enough opportunity in suitable contexts to allow ‘real dialogue’ (Amara *et al.*, 2009:16), and maximise the opportunities afforded by authentic and sustained contact and potential friendships?
- Are some politicians using Shared Education to avoid addressing

challenging but necessary structural changes, for electoral rather than economic, social and educational reasons?

Despite the potential benefits of sharing, its introduction risks the deferral for a generation or more of any structural adaptation which could promote a sustained culture of tolerance in a multicultural Northern Ireland and elsewhere. The constructive ambiguity of Shared Education may yet become 'destructive ambiguity', entrenching existing divisions by stealth.

#### Note

1. There are plans for an Irish Medium nursery and primary school in East Belfast, an area which is predominantly Unionist and Protestant (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06w2dcr>).
2. While other jurisdictions have faith schools with few of the difficulties of social cohesion that Northern Ireland experiences, the impact is arguably higher there as the society is fundamentally divided outside schools also, particularly through social and residential segregation.
3. The parents of the Catholic Clintyclay Primary School voted unanimously to transform into a Grant Maintained Integrated, but this was denied by the Sinn Féin Minister of Education, a decision criticised by a senior judge (UNESCO, 2015:23).
4. Legislation for Integrated schools does not require 'promotion'.



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Table 1: Post Primary Schools: numbers and religious composition 2017-18  
(source: adapted from DENI, n.d.)

School type	School Management	Numbers of schools	Number of Catholics	Number of Protestants
Non-Grammar schools	Controlled	49	1047	21801
	Catholic Maintained	64	35393	#
	Integrated (Grant Maintained and Controlled)	20	4323	5344
	Other Maintained (Irish Medium)	2	683	*
Grammar schools	Controlled	16	1327	10016
	Voluntary (non-Catholic ethos)	21	2708	12878
	Voluntary (Catholic ethos)	29	27212	336

Key: # Number suppressed; \* Fewer than 5

Figure 1: Location of Primary and Post-Primary Integrated schools in Northern Ireland, and population aged 0-14 (Source: DENI data)