

# Teaching Divided Communities in Northern Ireland

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Subsequent to the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement of 1998 and ending of violent conflict, reconciliation of Northern Ireland's educationally divided Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist (PUL) and Republican / Nationalist / Catholic (RNC) communities remains a challenge which has been further exacerbated by additional socio-economic divisions. Most schools and teacher training institutions are segregated; consequently many teachers are ill-equipped to present a multi-faceted history or engage in dialogue on "the Troubles". Students rely on their families and communities to learn about the past, reinforcing sectarian mindsets and existing meta narratives. This paper reports personal and policy initiatives aimed at bridging the educational divide. It identifies current barriers to advancing shared education and a common curriculum, including erratically funded community and voluntary groups working in a piecemeal, inconsistent fashion. It shares lessons learned from a highly-regarded pilot project of the Peace and Reconciliation Group - "9000 Years on an Island", which brought together students from Northern Ireland and Eire to learn about Ireland's history through workshops, drama, and site visits and produced learning resources for students and teachers for wider use. In conclusion this paper will identify pathways for the future to build on current work realistically and meaningfully.

## **Introduction**

The partition of the island of Ireland in 1921 led to a new state that is now composed of approximately 55% Protestants and 45% Catholics (NISRA 2001). While these are common identifying terms used to distinguish the different communities in Northern Ireland, the terms Loyalist versus Republican and Unionist versus Nationalist are more descriptive of the goals of these groups. Tensions between the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) and Republican/Nationalist/Catholic (RNC) communities culminated in a deeply violent conflict from the 1960s to 1990s, known as “The Troubles”. The central issues of the violent conflict were sovereignty and inequality. The goals of the PUL community were to protect their union with Britain and resist the unification of Ireland, which would place them in the minority. Factions of the RNC community emphasized the desire for self-determination through a united Ireland, while others focused on the unfair and discriminatory practices of the unionist dominated government that followed partition. By the 1990s, more than 3500 people had been killed as a result of the conflict, out of a total population of 1.8 million. The Good Friday Agreement, which was ratified in 1998, signalled the official end to the violent conflict, but many issues remained unresolved (Darby, 2003).

While paramilitary violence has largely ceased in Northern Ireland, communities have become increasingly segregated. There are more peace walls in Northern Ireland today than ever before (Macaulay, 2008). Recent statistics (2007) reported 92% of Protestant students attending Protestant controlled or state schools, and 91% of Catholics attending maintained or voluntary Catholic schools. This extreme segregation is reflective of a wider societal divide. There is separation residentially and in the workplace, with little religious mobility or intermarriage (Hayes and McAllister, 2009). Bridging this learning gap through integrated education initiatives is often cited as a key component of improving community relations between the divided PUL and RNC communities.

## **Background and Context**

The modern education system can be largely accredited to one man, the former British Prime Minister Lord Edward Stanley, the 14th Earl of Derby. During his tenure as Chief Secretary of Ireland he introduced the Irish Education Act of 1831, which created the Irish Board of National Education. Under the auspices of this Board, children of all denominations were admitted to schools receiving government grants. Religious education was to be of an 'uncontroversial' nature. It was the responsibility of the board to collect the necessary money to build schools, set up a system of school inspection, pay teacher salaries, and establish training facilities for teachers. These were challenging tasks; nevertheless, the Board was so energetic in their fulfillment, that by the end of the 19th century there were over 8600 national schools and 490 secondary or superior schools in operation across the island of Ireland, attended by over three quarters of a million students (Ó, Buachalla, 1988)

The Catholic Church was initially accepting of the education act. However, the Protestant reaction was so violent and so many concessions were made to them that Catholic feeling against the Act increased and by 1859 they were demanding "a Catholic education, on Catholic principles with Catholic masters and the use of Catholic books" Soon the Anglican, Catholic, and Presbyterian churches were each fighting to mold the national school system to best meet their own interests and over time what had promised to be a

non-denominational system became so eroded by these influences that by the late 1800's, the Irish education system had become segregated into de facto denominational institutions. (Gibson, F., G. Michael, and D. Wilson, 1994)

This situation remained unchanged throughout the emergence of the Irish nationalism movement and its equally vocal opponents during early 20th century. The island of Ireland was partitioned by the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, as the majority of the population in the North wished to retain the union with Britain. A new government was established for the administration of the six counties which made up Northern Ireland, with Lord Londonderry appointed as Minister for Education. Taking advantage of the opportunity for a review of the system, he wasted no time in creating a commission under the chairmanship of Robert Lynn and tasked them with making recommendations for how education should be organised, delivered and administered in the new state of Northern Ireland.

The 32 man committee included representatives from the academic secondary schools, the primary school system and the technical schools. However, in spite of repeated invitations, the Catholic Church declined to accept a seat at the table, choosing instead to look towards Dublin for support in their mission to provide a Catholic education for their students. This decision has since been identified by many as the single most influential factor in the subsequent creation of the segregated system which still remains largely in place throughout Northern Ireland today (Smith, 2001).

The Committee recommendations eventually became the foundation for the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, which introduced the concept of local authority involvement in the financial support of schools as well as a link between levels of funding and the degree of state involvement in the management and control of schools. The Act effectively created three classes of schools, consisting of "provided schools", where all costs were met by the state, "voluntary schools", where most costs were met by the state and governed by a management committee of four trustees and two representatives of the local authority, and finally "independent voluntary schools", who received the lowest level of support from the state. The Catholic authorities did not immediately engage with the education authorities following the introduction of the Act. However, as time went on and it became apparent that the new state would endure, the church began to take a more proactive role in securing funding and lobbying to protect their own interests.

The 1947 Education Act created further changes to how education was administered in Northern Ireland, as it introduced a selection system for grammar, secondary and technical schools from the age of eleven years old. This system, known as the "Eleven Plus exam," came to be characterised by fierce competition for places at the academic and prestigious grammar schools. Rather than allocating according to need or ability, it became seen as a question of passing or failing. The exam was widely resented by some and strongly supported by others, but in spite of the controversy remained in place until 2008.

### **Current Education System in Northern Ireland**

By the end of the 1990's and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland had an education system in place which was not only segregated by religious denomination, but also, largely due

to the Eleven Plus system, by socioeconomic status, with the occasional exception of the newly established integrated schools.

The current education is complex, with ten statutory bodies involved in the management and administration of the system. The categories that are used to describe the different types of schools are references to the various administration, funding and managements systems in place, but can also sometimes be viewed as indicators of which religious ethos a school ascribes to. All schools in Northern Ireland receive financial support from the government to varying degrees, with the exception of a few Irish language schools and independent Christian faith schools.

There are four main categories of schools: the first two are “controlled schools,” which are managed by one of five Education and Library Boards and usually considered Protestant schools, and “maintained schools” who are managed by a statutory body, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). The CCMS exercises certain responsibilities in relation to Catholic maintained schools, including providing advice in matters relating to this sector and the employment of teaching staff. Controlled and maintained schools can be either nursery, primary or secondary schools. Voluntary schools are owned and managed by trustees, normally the local churches. They are usually grammar schools and have a selection system in place which allows them to select pupils on the basis of ability. Voluntary schools can be either Catholic or Protestant and cater to students aged 11 years and older.

Finally the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 also introduced a new category of schools, “integrated schools,” whose primary focus is to provide a religiously mixed environment capable of attracting reasonable numbers of both Catholic and Protestant pupils, both at nursery, primary and secondary level. Managed by a Board of Governors, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of these schools. Finally there are a number of smaller schools, usually Christian faith schools, which are known as “other maintained schools” (Gibson, F., G. Michael, and D. Wilson, 1994)

Though claims have consistently been made about past cooperation between Catholic and Protestant schools, a study in the 1970s called “Schools Together” measured the actual amount of meaningful contact up to that point. They found that little interaction had been maintained. This is not surprising, given that the Northern Irish government did not formally request that community relations be a part of education until 1982. The next year, a quasi-governmental curriculum development body called the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Development (NICED) was formed (Smith, 1999).

Meanwhile, a research and development project called “Inter School Links” worked from 1986-1990 to create more routine and sustained links between schools. Their findings emphasised the existence of parental support for such initiatives, that relationships worked best with a strong curricular focus, and that pupils subsequently had a more questioning attitude of Irish history as interpreted by their own cultural community. In 1987, the Department of Education put four million pounds annually toward encouraging inter-school contact. This led to about one third of primary and over half of the post-primary schools in Northern Ireland participating in some form of inter-school relationship where Catholic and Protestant pupils were brought together (Smith, 1999).

### **Support for Integrated Education**

Internationally, education is increasingly being recognized as an avenue for social change in post-conflict and post-genocidal communities. Part of this is tied to the necessity of economic stability in facilitating successful reconciliations. Because of its institutional nature, education can largely contribute to segregation, intolerance, and marginalization of populations. However, this also means that educational institutions have a great opportunity to promote inclusion and tolerance (Hayes and McAllister, 2009).

A study done by Bernadette Hayes and Ian McAllister (2009) evaluated the long term impact of attending segregated versus integrated schools on inter-community contact and optimism toward community relations efforts in Northern Ireland. The data suggests that those who attended integrated schools had more cross-community friendships and neighbors than those who attended segregated schools. They also expressed more optimism for the future of community relations. This held true even when controlling for religion, gender, age and other factors. While the study could not prove causation, their results are backed up by previous research that demonstrates how contact affects attitudes more than the other way around (Hayes and McAllister, 2009).

Several other studies have supported the contact hypothesis, pertaining to education both in and outside of Northern Ireland. Niens and Cairns (2005) also detail the potential significance of contact outside of one's own community that is experienced through the reports of others, as opposed to firsthand (Niens and Cairns, 2005). Additionally, a study by Schmid et al (2008) on mixed communities of lower socioeconomic status in Northern Ireland found that despite an increase in exposure to political violence and a higher perceived threat to physical safety, residents in these areas exhibited a lower ingroup bias and more positive outgroup attitudes. This also corresponded with less negative or offensive action tendencies toward the outgroup (Schmid et al, 2008).

### **Barriers: Current Political System**

When the Good Friday agreement was signed in 1998, it created a number of statutory bodies and governance systems, as well as the reestablishment of the Northern Irish government at Stormont, which had been closed since 1972 .

The most recent incarnation of the Northern Ireland administration is a power sharing system based on the consociational model of governance. This system was developed to assist with governments in countries emerging from conflict, particularly in situations where communities and their political representatives are so deeply entrenched that there are no floating blocks of voters to ensure a change of power between elections. The classic features of this system are proportional representation, mutual veto, grand coalition and segmental autonomy, all of which are, in varying degrees, reflected in the Northern Irish system.

In the context of the education system, the most relevant of these elements is that of the mutual veto, as there are particular voting arrangements in place in the Northern Irish Assembly that give veto rights to the minority. Certain Assembly decisions do not require majority support, but cross-community support from a certain percentage of both nationalists and unionists. This includes the election of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, changes to Standing Orders, budget allocations and other financial votes, determination

of the number of Ministers and their responsibilities, exclusion of Ministers or Members of political parties from holding office and petitions of concern.

While these systems and guidelines have worked well in the overall administration of Northern Ireland, they have been absolute barriers to any development or change to the existing system of education, as both sides view any type of change as a concession to the opposite side. This immobility is evidenced by how the Eleven Plus exam came to be abolished; In 2001 a “Life and Times” survey found that while there was very little consensus among the general population on the exact nature of any proposed changes, there was a high degree of dissatisfaction with key aspects of the selective system of secondary education and, in particular, the tests used to select pupils. This was confirmed by the results of a consultation undertaken by the Department of Education in the same year, on the Report of the Review Body on Post-Primary Education, known as the Burns Report.

Regardless of the growing dissatisfaction, it proved impossible to reach cross party support for any change until the eleven plus system was finally unilaterally abolished by the then Minister for Education, Caitriona Ruane. In the absence of cross party support, she took advantage of a provision in the Education Order (NI) 1997 which states that "the Department may issue and revise guidance as it thinks appropriate for admission of pupils to grant-aided schools". Citing this in January 2008, Minister Ruane passed new guidelines regarding post-primary progression as regulation rather than as legislation. This avoided the need for the proposals to be passed by the Assembly where the required cross-party support for the changes did not exist. Various parties with vested interests, including schools, parents and political parties, continue to object to the new legal framework and subsequently many post-primary schools now set their own entrance examinations contrary to the regulations set down by the Department.

### **Barriers: Teacher Training**

Not only are schools segregated by religion, but the teacher training system in Northern Ireland is also segregated to a high degree. While postgraduate training is available through three universities, the University of Ulster, Queens University and the Open University, and is not aligned to any religion or community, primary degrees in teaching are only offered by two dedicated institutions, St. Mary’s College, which caters to the Catholic maintained schools and Stranmillis College, which prepare teachers for the controlled sector.

Both are officially colleges of Queens University in Belfast. Following a public consultation process in 2011 and in light of pressing financial and practical reasons, plans to merge the two institutions came to an advanced stage. However, these plans are currently on hold in the face of opposition from the largest political party in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The First Minister Peter Robinson aired his concerns publicly at the time, stating: “I am convinced that the inevitable consequence will be a dilution of the existing [Protestant] ethos Stranmillis has proudly maintained. When considered in conjunction with the absence of similar proposals relating to St Mary’s, neither I nor my party could support the proposed merger.” He added “I have been publicly vocal on the need for Northern Ireland to progress toward an education sector that is truly shared yet feel the continued protection of St Mary’s privileged position, whilst undermining that of Stranmillis, would be a retrograde step” (Fergus, 2011). There is no reason to think the same objections would not be raised had the situation been in reverse.

Because teachers for Catholic and Protestant schools are educated separately, they are unequipped to deal with cross community issues. Research shows that prior to beginning the teaching experience phase of their education, student teachers support the philosophy of inclusion. However, in practice, they still show a strong attachment to traditional academic selection as an educational model (Lambe and Bones, 2006).

### **Barriers: Lack of Support for Educators**

In 1992 the recently formed NICED put a statutory requirement into effect in which obligated the inclusion of two cross-curricular themes in the Northern Ireland curriculum: “Cultural Heritage” and “Education for Mutual Understanding” (EMU). NICED provided procedures and techniques for teachers to implement activities that classified under EMU. However, evaluation of the program found that teachers were engaging with the theme on a minimal level. Some of the identified reasons were: suspicion of a hidden political agenda, difficulty implementing EMU in a way that permeated the curriculum, perceived gaps in education for younger students on current societal issues, reservations about addressing issues like violence and sectarianism, and reservations about the teachers’ confidence and capability of taking on sensitive or challenging community relations work. Many teachers criticized the introduction of EMU requirements without providing the necessary training and professional development (Smith,1999). These criticisms reflect generalised barriers for teachers in cross-cultural education.

More recent research indicated that there is an institutionalised silence of the subject of Northern Ireland's’ recent and conflicted past. The International Conflict Research Institute at the University of Ulster delivered a two year project entitled “Journeys Out”, which aimed to engage a new generation of community leaders in the debate about ‘dealing with the past’, to explore these issues within their local communities and to learn more from international experiences of ‘dealing with the past’ following conflict.

Research undertaken found that educators are fearful of “getting it wrong” or making things worse. A particular obstacle that was highlighted was that there is never only one version of the truth in Northern Ireland. One teacher stated that by remaining silent, she and her colleagues felt they would not expose their own affiliations or allegiances and thus would assist in creating a sense of neutrality that would allow the next generation to make up their own minds.

Another individual described the inability of institutions to deal with difference and how the safe fallback position was always one of silence: “If you don’t say anything, then you can’t get it wrong and no one can come after you for what you have said.” Her fear of being caught in a debate that would spiral out of control and somehow entrap her, risk her professionalism and therefore her job, meant that the recent conflict was strictly “off curriculum” for her. She said she feared how dealing with the past would be viewed by parents, members of boards of management and community leaders. She was afraid of possible reprisals if certain topics pertinent to the local area were discussed in class and if young people were encouraged to challenge prevalent attitudes or think for themselves. Others simply stated that they felt that the past had had its time and was no longer relevant; that we now have new issues to tackle and a future rather than a past to focus on. For them there was either nothing more to say or no point in saying it.

One of the most alarming findings of this research was that the rationale for institutional silence about the past was not based on actual experience, but rather on perceived experience. The Good Relations Officers or the teachers who had engaged in discussions about the past did not voice any concerns; on the contrary they found that that young people had legitimate questions and concerns, that they were open to exploring the diversity of the conflict and to acknowledge a range of truths. There was a genuine willingness among the students to put snippets of information into a broader context and they fully accepted that their teacher was there as a guide, not an expert. (Lapsley, 2010)

### **Voluntary Work**

One consequence of the lack of a strong government led integration strategy is the emergence of hundreds of shared education and “good relations” initiatives, as well as entire organisations dedicated to delivering these programmes. A large number of inter-school relationships have developed through voluntary organizations. While they have helped established the groundwork for government-led initiatives, the work they’ve done has largely been a patchwork of small, relatively isolated projects. They also tend to be geographically dispersed, which prevents the implementation of comprehensive change (Smith, 1999). Many voluntary, statutory and private organisations undertake projects and various types of community relations work in schools across Northern Ireland and the border areas as a part of their overall area of work.

The need for this work is well documented, with several studies supporting the need for, and advantages of increased cross border interaction. A Queens University research project on this subject found that “in the border area the economic and social legacy of the past persists. In this context, cross-border co-operation has been seen as one way in which past divisions can be healed and an integrated all-island economy developed” (Roper, 2007). Another report on the issue of public health in the border areas found that almost a third of children residing along the border are living in poverty. It concludes that “promoting social inclusion on a cross border basis is imperative to improve quality of life and the economic and social development of communities” (McAvoy and Meehan, 2008)

### **9000 Years on an Island**

One example of a project aimed at addressing the above challenges was “9000 Years on an Island,” which was delivered by the Peace and Reconciliation Group (PRG), in partnership with the Donegal Education Centre. The project was funded by the Special European Union Programmes Body’s Peace III funding stream, a grant scheme which was administered by the Donegal County Council.

The delivery organisations are very different. The PRG are a registered charity in Northern Ireland, who have been in existence for 36 years and are a community development organisation in the classic sense. Originally run by a group of volunteers in reaction to the conflict and violence that was taking place across Northern Ireland, the organisation has developed into a strategic group, with five full time staff



members working in targeted areas of need and delivering training programmes, a mediation service and a range of tailored community relations and development programmes. By contrast, the Donegal Education Centre is a statutory body established by the Irish Education Act 1997 and is tasked with providing continuous professional development for all primary and post-primary teachers in County Donegal.

In addition to dealing with the legacy of institutional silence on the topic of the past, “9000 Years on an Island” also aimed to address some of the post conflict issues which are specific to the areas along the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as considering some of the wider themes of division, cultural identity and heritage. During the 30 years of conflict which have passed, the border areas have experienced specific difficulties. Increased security presence, road closures and a higher than usual number of violent incidents. Sharp divisions still remain visible in the area, both in the form of the physical border, but also socially, culturally and economically. The project aimed to develop the concept of a shared heritage and promote the idea of a shared future by allowing participants to feel part of a wider community without the barrier of the border.

The project recruited eight primary schools from both sides of the border in counties Derry/Londonderry and Donegal. In consultation with the Peace III funding officer, the decision was made to target rural area schools; County Donegal is mainly a rural area and there was a concern that the rural and urban students would struggle to find common ground. Another contributing factor in this decision was, that while the need for this type of work is well documented, certain areas, particularly in larger towns and cities, are almost oversubscribed with opportunities to engage, while rural areas remain unaddressed. This decision presented a new set of challenges, as the comparatively low student numbers and limited funding available for rural primary schools means that several classes are usually taught simultaneously in the same classroom, by a single teacher, as “composite” classes. In this manner, the number of participants can become quite large, and the age range within the group could be between seven and eleven years old. The project content needed to be tailored both to suit these varied age ranges and abilities, as well as being able to be delivered effectively and meaningfully to groups of up to 60 participants.

Once eight schools had committed to participating in the project, they were paired cross border as well as cross community. Two participating schools were Protestant schools in the Republic of Ireland, a community which is often overlooked in the context, history and dialogue that takes place on the subject of Northern Ireland and “the Troubles”. Each group chose a specific heritage related theme to collaborate on over the course of an academic year – in this instance two schools selected “Famine & Emigration”, one chose “Plantation” and the final schools worked on “Traditional Music & Dance”. The paired groups met six times in total, collaborating on tailored community relations workshops, site visits, and drama, music and art workshops. Through various exercises and discussion activities, the groups explored diverse issues such as the meaning of heritage, life in the border area and the impact of the border, and the meaning of various political and cultural symbols, specifically their use, impact and messages in society.

A key element of this work was the active participation of the teachers involved. All participating teachers incorporated elements of the project into their curriculum and contributed with suggestions and input. Throughout the duration of the first year, all participating teachers met on three occasions. These meetings had always been part of the original project plan, but as soon as the project was initiated, an obstacle was identified. With school budgets slashed, funding was not available to provide substitute

teacher cover to allow teachers to attend the meetings. In spite of the meetings only lasting a few hours, the substitute system is based on full days only and with the limited resources available to them, schools choose to reserve this cover for the case of illness and other emergencies. Our ability to provide substitution costs, which range from £100 to £160 per day, became a requirement for schools to commit to participating and resulted in a drain of the overall project budget.

Other challenges were of a more practical nature, such as the long distances that group had to travel to get to workshops. If they shared a bus, the costs were lower. However, the time spent in the bus was longer, thus impacting on the time available at the venue. This was overcome to some extent by spending the time on the bus meaningfully, but this was very tiring for some of the students.

The second year saw phase two of the project completed, with the creation of learning resource packs. These were created to collate all the learning outcomes and experience of the project in one pack to allow others to deliver similar programmes independently. Following the final meeting of teachers and project delivery partners and an evaluation review of the past year, it was agreed by all that the strength of the programme lay in the diversity of activities, ensuring that in spite of the very wide range of ages and abilities of participants, all were engaged by different elements.

Having said that, everyone noted that the interactive drama workshops were particularly effective. These workshops took the form of specially written performances, designed to address the specific theme or issues which were being studied at the time. One of these involved a young female actor in period costume who shared her experience of the “Plantation of Ulster,” the large scale colonisation which took place in the mid 1600’s, from the perspective of a native Irish inhabitant by the name of Neave. She then quickly changed her head-wear and apron, and in a very different accent, shared her story from the viewpoint of a young girl called Elizabeth, who was a member of the settler or planter community. The success of these workshops was very dependent of the creativity, talent and knowledge of the actors who wrote, designed and delivered the workshops.

To incorporate the drama element in the resource packs, a 50 minute interactive DVD was specially written and produced, depicting various key aspects of Irish and Northern Irish history up to the present day, shown in a sometimes serious, sometimes irreverent and sometimes alternative format. The DVD’s were accompanied by almost 40 loose leafed information and worksheets sheets as well as a 20 page teacher’s pack with guidelines and suggestions for delivery. In order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, the packs do not specifically consider the history of the northwest or the border area, but rather the entire island of Ireland. Ideally the resources would be used in a partnership setting; however, with some creativity they could also work as a stand-alone programme.

It is important to recognise, in an echo of the comments made by teachers participating in the INCORE research on the lack of a single version of the truth in Northern Ireland, that the packs are not a definitive version of the past. They contain facts and information sheets, but are solely intended for use as a platform for discussion and exploration of the users own culture, of other cultures and of shared cultural elements, and never as an ultimate truth.

Operating within the limitations of the programme budget, 1000 packs were printed and distributed to schools, libraries, museums and youth workers throughout Co. Donegal and Co. Derry / Londonderry. The project was subsequently identified as a “model of excellence and good practice” by the SEUPB and presented at a showcase event held in Co. Donegal in 2010.

In the original project proposal, it was the intention to further develop this project by designing a follow up programme for an older age group, either with new partnerships or by seeking to collaborate with secondary and grammar schools in the same geographical areas, thereby hopefully including some of the students who were participants on the first project. Undertaking this would assist with a long term evaluation and possible amendments or changes to the resource packs as well as providing a basis for the design of an entirely new resource pack, still addressing the same issues of coming to terms with the past, but tailored and aimed at older students.

Plans were also made to develop a teacher training programme to accompany the resource packs. A range of options for this were considered, including developing the training in partnership with a teacher training institution, or ideally two, one from each side of the border. It was envisaged that the training programme would be delivered over a two day period, which would include a residential element in order to bring individual educators together to share learning, discuss concerns and develop networks and relationships to facilitate future partnerships.

Due to financial constraints, these plans were not realised and remain postponed indefinitely, as it has become increasingly difficult to secure funding to deliver this work. In particular the costs associated with the training element would have been very high, as the training provider would be required to provide substitution costs as well as training costs.

The participating schools were very pleased with the outcomes and the overall experience. However, only one of the original four groups has maintained any contact since the project ended. The two schools in question had many similarities: they were both very small schools in rural areas, the students were of the same ages and the teachers were both very committed and spent time preparing the students for each meeting, ensuring everyone was able to participate fully. The students made strong inter personal connections and since the conclusion of the project the two schools have continued to take schools trips together and maintain contact via a secure social networking site. This partnership is solely at the initiative of the two teachers involved, and not a policy of the schools. Were one of the teachers to seek employment elsewhere, for example, it would not be at all a certainty that the relationship would continue.

### **Recommendations for the future**

There has been no lack of proposals or commitments to a reform of the education system, from academics as well as policy makers. Alan Smith (1999) proposed a series of policy changes to support the success of integrated education. They include introducing citizenship and democracy based themes more explicitly into the formal curriculum, encouraging the development of a multicultural curriculum that is inclusive of many types of diversity, providing more training and support for teachers, encouraging heightened school

ownership of programmes that incorporate their values, and overall bettering the understanding of the ways by which schools become more inclusive (Smith, 1999). The Good Friday Agreement states that “an essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing” (GFA, Rights, Safeguards... sec. 13).

The Shared Future document, which was published in 2005 by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, sets out a policy and strategic framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland. It includes five pages dedicated to the role of the education system in this context and includes a wide range of thoughtful and insightful comments as well as action points such as a commitment to “ensure that the challenges of diversity and tolerance are consciously integrated into the development curriculum of each child in all school sectors, so that every child leaves school with a direct and sustained engagement with the challenges of being an adult in a shared society”. The follow up implementation document, published a year later, promises to “ensure that A Shared Future is a central strand of the proposed 10 year strategy for children and young people”. In spite of these commitments, the Programme for Government for 2008 - 2011 does not make any mention of the Shared Future strategy but instead promises “we will bring forward a programme of cohesion and integration for this shared and better future to address the divisions within our society and achieve measurable reductions in sectarianism, racism and hate crime”.

The subsequent consultation document made no mention of educational initiative or firm commitments to implement change or reform within this area, other than a commitment to promote integrated education. Overall the two strategies offer very welcome visions of the future and they address a wide range of significant and complex issues, but they are vague on the exact methods, policies and commitments that will achieve these outcomes (OFMDFM, 2010).

In the long term, it seems that the Northern Irish education system would benefit from a complete and comprehensive restructuring, possibly based on other international models rather than looking inwardly. There are issues of ownership which would cause obstacles to such plans, as many buildings and land are owned by the churches, rather than the government. However, these schools are in receipt of government funding and are unable to operate without it. In this co dependent structure there is little room for movement without the full buy in from all parties.

A strong consensus within the government will be a vital element of achieving this vision, coupled with the creation of real shared public spaces as well as confidence building and capacity building within and between communities. In spite of numerous success stories, to date there has been little evidence of this taking place in a comprehensive and sustained fashion. The wheels of government move slowly -- this discussion is almost ten years old -- with little real change happening in practice, as the segregation statistics remain unchanged. In the meantime, parents will continue to strive for the best possible outcomes for their children and their future, which often means securing a place at a prestigious grammar school.

As outlined, a large amount of this work is delivered by voluntary agencies in the absence of a comprehensive long term policy, so in the short term there are a number of measures which could be put in place for maximum impact.

The current funding structure for community relations programmes in and outside of schools, as well as for organisations, is piecemeal and temporary, sourced from a range of funding bodies and subject to various requirements, scrutiny and agendas. Most organisations exist on the receipt of three year funding cycles. Project costs can be secured for three year cycles, or on rare occasions five year cycles, but is much more common and accessible as one-off single amounts to be spent within a 12 month time frame. Securing funding, as well as maintaining all the required reporting, procurement and other administration is heavily time consuming, resulting in staff dedicating a large percentage of time to these tasks rather than actual project delivery and often without the desired outcomes. Mechanisms set in place to ensure value for money become frustrating and time wasting exercises and the retrospective funding systems means organisations often carry large overdrafts and accrue losses in banking charges as there is a lag in expenditure and recouping the costs.

Because of the the time limits imposed and relatively small amounts of funding available, it is difficult to develop and deliver projects that can be long term and comprehensive. While short term work is valuable, it works best when delivered alongside and complimentary to other long term programmes.

A long term funding option, for example, over a five year period, would allow the delivery organisation to focus exclusively on the task in hand. With variable outputs tailored to each project, this option would prove more effective overall than the current system. Such a proposal requires a certain degree of trust to be in place between the funder and delivery agent, but it should be feasible to put checks in place and agree outputs and outcomes without applying a one size fits all standard to everyone. The large number of high quality educational projects currently being delivered in Northern Ireland by various service providers are examples of innovation, willingness to address difficult issues and creativity. Any effort to deliver this in a more sustainable and comprehensive fashion can only add value to the education system and ultimately Northern Irish society as a whole.

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