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Shared education in Northern Ireland: school collaboration in divided societies

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ABSTRACT

During the years of political violence in Northern Ireland many looked to schools to contribute to reconciliation. A variety of interventions were attempted throughout those years, but there was little evidence that any had produced systemic change. The peace process provided an opportunity for renewed efforts. This paper outlines the experience of a series of projects on 'shared education', or the establishment of collaborative networks of Protestant, Catholic and integrated schools in which teachers and pupils moved between schools to take classes and share experiences. The paper outlines the genesis of the idea and the research which helped inform the shape of the shared education project. The paper also outlines the corpus of research which has examined various aspects of shared education practice and lays out the emergent model which is helping to inform current government practice in Northern Ireland, and is being adopted in other jurisdictions. The paper concludes by looking at the prospects for real transformation of education in Northern Ireland.

KEYWORDS

Northern Ireland; shared education; integrated education; conflict; educational change; impact

Introduction

Northern Ireland is a society in which national, political and religious identity coalesce. It is also a society which recently experienced a quarter century of political violence, the legacy of which continues to influence political life. Despite the fact that schools in Northern Ireland have always been denominational, with parallel systems for Protestants and Catholics, people looked to the school system to help young people deal more positively with diversity and promote reconciliation. This paper will outline the range of interventions that were implemented during the years of violence and assess their impact, before going on to consider a new approach which has developed over the past decade. This new approach is termed 'shared education' and involves the establishment of collaborative networks of schools in local areas, with pupils and teachers moving between schools to take classes and share experience. The paper will look at the genesis of this model and the effects of its implementation, before going on to consider ways in which it is being mainstreamed within the education system in Northern Ireland, and being taken up as an approach in other divided societies. The paper will argue that the shared education model offers a novel way of addressing diversity through education by reframing the way we understand school systems to

operate. Before doing this we will outline briefly the context for schools and politics in Northern Ireland.

Schools in Northern Ireland

For centuries the island of Ireland lay within the United Kingdom, but the rise of Irish nationalism in the 19th century led to a movement for independence that was successful in the 1920s. Support for nationalism came from the majority Catholic community on the island, but in the north eastern part of the island a local Protestant majority preferred to retain the link with the UK for cultural, religious, political and economic reasons. In consequence, the island of Ireland was partitioned in 1922/23: the largest part of the island became the Irish Free State, later the Irish Republic, while the area to the north became Northern Ireland, a self-governing region within the UK. Unlike the Irish Free State, where the vast majority of the population was Catholic and nationalist, in Northern Ireland there was a significant Catholic minority who clung to the possibility of the two parts of the island being re-united in an independent Ireland. The fractious relationship between the Protestant, unionist majority and the Catholic, nationalist minority in Northern Ireland continues to shape politics to this day (Darby, 1997).

At two key moments in the history of schools on the island there was an official preference that they would be open to children from all denominations: when the National School system was established in the 1830s it was declared that preference would be given to joint applications from Catholic and Protestant clergy to establish new schools (Akenson, 1970); in a similar vein, when the new Northern Ireland government set about reorganising its schools in 1923, the official preference was that the Churches would hand control of their schools to the new local authorities, and that schools would be open to pupils from all denominations (Akenson, 1973). At both moments the official aspiration was thwarted by the combined efforts of the Churches, all of which preferred to run their own schools, for their own communities. In Northern Ireland the effect was slightly nuanced: the Catholic Church would not entertain the idea of handing control of its schools over, even at a financial cost to the community, but it emerged that the Protestant Churches were not prepared to hand over their schools either, unless they received guarantees that gave them effective control over the schools anyway, without the burden of ownership. In the post-war expansion of free secondary education the parallel denominational arrangements were maintained by treating new 'state' secondary schools as if they had once belonged to the Protestant Churches, and giving them similar rights as they had maintained for schools they had once owned (Farren, 1995).

When Northern Ireland descended into political turmoil and violence in the latter part of the 1960s many commentators assumed this was linked to, perhaps even a consequence of, separate denominational schools for Protestants and Catholics (Heskin, 1980). There was an alternative analysis which suggested that the problems in Northern Ireland were rooted in social injustice and inequality (Conway, 1970). This perspective also argued that separate schools for the Catholic minority provided some of the only public space in which their cultural and national identity could be expressed (O'Boyle, 1993) and formed an important source of high quality employment in a society where Catholics otherwise faced job discrimination (Aunger, 1983).

There was no consensus on the effects, or otherwise, of separate schools. Two major interventions were put in place over the next 30 years to address issues related to educational and societal divisions and reconciliation. The first focused on the promotion of reconciliation and tolerance and included curriculum interventions, contact programmes, and the development of new religiously integrated schools. This last option included the facility for parents to vote to transform an existing Protestant or Catholic school into an integrated school. The second strand focused on equality, and the link between differential funding levels for Protestant and Catholic schools, and the consequences for educational outcomes and labour market opportunity. We will briefly examine the evidence on each of these areas of intervention and assess their impact, before going on to outline the conditions of the peace process which allowed for a new approach based on collaboration, or shared education, to emerge.

Promoting reconciliation

Curriculum interventions have included projects on pedagogy (Malone, 1973), the teaching of History (Smith, 2005), Religious Education (Francis & Greer, 1999), early years programmes (Connolly, Fitzpatrick, Gallagher & Harris, 2006) and citizenship education (Arlow, 2004). Although there has been significant learning from these interventions the impact of these themes has been limited (Richardson & Gallagher, 2011). Schools were encouraged to run contact programmes, bringing young Protestants and Catholics together in joint projects; but here too the impact was limited as contact was generally not used to address issues related to conflict or division and often lacked any real ambition to promote change (O'Connor, Hartop & McCully, 2002). This led some to question the value of the contact hypothesis itself as a basis for addressing issues of division and equality (Connolly, 2000).

The other main approach within this strand was to establish new, religiously integrated schools, the first of which opened in 1981 (Moffat, 1993). Government committed itself to support further developments in integrated education in the 1989 Education Reform (NI) Order, and included a provision for parents to vote to transform an existing Protestant or Catholic school to Integrated status. Not surprisingly this initiative generated a lot of interest and a significant corpus of research on a range of issues. The schools do appear to be genuinely mixed (Irwin, 1993), and have shown evidence of developing innovative pedagogical and curriculum approaches (Gallagher, Osborne, Cormack, McKay & Peover, 1995). Studies which have compared outcomes for pupils in integrated, as opposed to Protestant or Catholic schools, have found them to have higher levels of contact, more moderate political views and more favourable views of the other community (Hayes, McAllister & Dowds, 2009; Stringer et al., 2010) and there is no evidence that Catholic pupils in integrated schools had weaker religious views than their peers in Catholic schools (Gallagher & Coombs, 2007).

The challenge facing the integrated schools is two-fold. First, after a period of rapid growth through the 1990s and early 2000s, the sector's expansion appears now to have stalled: currently about 7% of pupils in Northern Ireland attend integrated schools and it looks unlikely that this percentage will rise significantly in the foreseeable future. Second, the sector is facing a problem of participation: when schools vote to transform typically their minority enrolment is quite small, but the intention is that it will rise so that the Protestant and Catholic proportions of their enrolment will each be at least 30%. However, the 2014/15 school census revealed that 25 of the 42 integrated primary schools (59.5%) and 11 of the

20 post-primary schools (55%) did not meet this criterion (source: Department of Education). For both these reasons, therefore, the integrated school option has not led to the systemic transformation that some had wished, and the majority of young people in Northern Ireland continue to be educated in schools where the vast majority of their peers are drawn from the same community.

The overall assessment of these various initiatives is that they failed to make any systemic change in education, for four main reasons: first, while the ideas behind the programmes were generally quite good, the quality of their implementation was mixed, with a focus often on short term activities, rather than medium or longer-term outcomes, and there was a significant lack of thinking given to the sustainability of any activity. Second, too many projects were dependent on individual, committed teachers: there were many such teachers and the work they did was often inspirational, but they were too isolated from the mainstream culture of schools to effect systemic change. Third, while the education system, and education leaders, often identified the goal of reconciliation as a priority for schools in Northern Ireland, it was clear that it was only one among many priorities, many of which were clearly more important. And finally, the education system in Northern Ireland often demonstrates a risk-averse culture and often encourages, implicitly or explicitly, the avoidance of controversial or difficult issues.

Promoting equality

The 1960s Civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland highlighted allegations of discrimination against the Catholic minority and a series of reform measures to address the most egregious examples was implemented up to 1976. The equity issue returned to the agenda in the mid-1980s when evidence emerged about differential outcomes from schools, to the disadvantage of those leaving Catholic schools (Gallagher, Cormack & Osborne, 1994) and the link to lower levels of public funding for Catholic schools. In consequence the government, in a demonstration of its commitment to equality, agreed that Catholic schools should have access to full public funding. Since then performance patterns have changed so that now leavers from Catholic schools achieve, on average, higher performance in comparison with leavers from Protestant schools. Despite this, some criticised this policy change on funding on the grounds that it further entrenched separate schools.

Education, the peace process and shared education

Following peace talks the paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland declared ceasefires in 1994, followed by formal political talks and referendum support for the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998. The Northern Ireland Assembly was established in 2000, and although it was suspended in 2002 it was restored in 2007 and has continued through two further election cycles. In this new context there was an extensive debate on community relations policy and the extent to which government should or should not pro-actively build connections between the divided communities. Where did work in education fit within this emerging context, especially since the research considered above suggested that the impact of most of the previous interventions aimed at promoting reconciliation had been limited?

In framing an alternative intervention a number of considerations seemed to be important: there is an undeniable right to separate schools (Minority Rights Group, 1994), but they are likely to incur social and financial costs. As we have seen, past attempts to address these issues had produced little discernible systemic change in education, but there was evidence which suggested that connections which cut across social cleavages could have beneficial effects (Varshney, 2002), and the idea of porous boundaries and bridging between communities had been a feature of work on effective communities of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000). Granovetter (1973) had demonstrated the strength of weak ties, that is, that we learn more from people with whom we have weak links, as compared with people with whom we have strong ties, because we are more likely to access new information. Meanwhile, Flecha (1999) criticised postmodernist notions which cast identity as immutable and fixed, in favour of a conceptualisation which saw identity as fluid, and encouraged dialogic processes aimed at the evolution of identity and hybridity.

Gallagher (2004, 2005) developed some of these ideas through a comparative analysis of the role of education in divided societies and concluded that no single structural arrangement 'solved' the challenges of diversity. He went on to suggest that mechanisms to support participative dialogue, perhaps through school collaboration, might offer a way forward. School collaboration had been used in other jurisdictions, largely as a mechanism to support school improvement, but there was little evidence of its use to promote social cohesion (Atkinson, Springate, Johnson & Halsey, 2007). A report on the effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland (Burns Report, 2001; Gallagher & Smith, 2000) had recommended the establishment of Collegiates containing diverse schools to encourage cooperative interdependence, as compared with the competitive interdependence that was characteristic of a market system of open enrolment (Sherif, 1958). This recommendation was not implemented, but the idea of school collaboration as a way of mitigating the negative consequences of separate schools was one of a series of options put to a funding body, Atlantic Philanthropies, in unpublished briefing papers by the present author seeking to identify ways of underpinning the peace process through education. A series of studies were carried out to explore aspects of collaboration and 'joined-up' practice. This included a literature review on school collaboration in other contexts (Atkinson et al., 2007) and a survey of extant collaboration between post primary schools in Northern Ireland (Donnelly & Gallagher, 2008).

O'Sullivan, Flynn & Russell (2008) explored examples of shared practice in a number of contexts, including the co-location of denominational and local authority schools in Scotland, and joint-faith schools in England. They also explored the views of local communities in Northern Ireland on school collaboration. Their evidence suggested that, despite their different goals, the Scottish and English initiatives had been largely successful in leading to educational and social benefits, and protecting denominational ethos. In Northern Ireland O'Sullivan et al. (2008) found parents and educators willing to support collaborative initiatives, as long as these were not forced and the ethos of schools was protected. Their overall conclusion was that these initiatives would, most probably, attract support, but careful consultation and engagement with parents and teachers would be important.

Public attitudes to school collaboration had been explored in another way through the use of a 'deliberative poll' in a medium-sized market town in Northern Ireland (Fishkin et al., 2007). This study found a willingness to support school collaboration in which pupils took some of their classes in other schools and for the sharing of facilities. Parents, it seemed,

were less wedded to a plethora of school types, and more concerned with the quality of education they might reasonably expect their children to receive from the schools they attended.

A study of multiagency working in Northern Ireland, based on social activity theory and including a network of five collaborating schools as one of its research sites, concluded that while trust among school leaders was crucial to their cooperation, challenges remained in mainstreaming collaboration throughout the schools (Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher & Ludvigsen, 2009; Edwards, Daniels, Gallagher, Leadbetter & Warmington, 2009; Gallagher & Carlisle, 2009). This study also highlighted issues on the potential role of external agencies, which could act as a constraint or a support for collaboration: this role even extended to researchers as they foregrounded issues that had, up to then, been shrouded in the silence that has been used as a coping mechanism in Northern Ireland (Gallagher, 2004).

All of this work suggested that school collaboration might have value as a means of promoting greater social cohesion in Northern Ireland because it side-stepped the issue of whether there should be separate or common schools by allowing for both: collaboration between separate schools in which pupils and teachers moved between schools to take classes on a regular basis would allow for a degree of mixing and contact, while at the same time protecting the ethos and existence of separate schools. There was evidence of public support for such an initiative, as long as there was effective consultation, but it also suggested that reconciliation goals alone were unlikely to produce support for these initiatives unless they also provided access to a wider range of facilities and contributed to school improvement. All of this also implied an important role for contact, even though, as noted above, this approach had been significantly discredited. An important difference, however, was that collaboration could involve contact that was sustained, whereas one of the main problems with previous contact initiatives was that they were short-term and lacked a developmental aspect. Furthermore, significant development on work on the contact hypothesis was underway in Northern Ireland. Most of the work emanating from Allport (1954) had focused on the conditions required to produce 'effective' contact, although we have already noted the criticism that it reified group identities (Connolly, 2000). Working with Northern Ireland samples, Hewstone, Tausch, Hughes & Cairns (2008) highlighted the value of sustained, regular contact; the potential benefit of indirect contact; the role of non-contentious super-ordinate goals in contact encounters; and the facilitation of opportunities to develop 'intimate', as opposed to superficial contact. They recommended the use of long-term contact initiatives, initially addressing anxieties over contact and then seeking to build enduring relationships of trust.

Thus, the emergent corpus of research pointed to the idea of school collaboration as a means for promoting reconciliation at a systemic level without requiring a radical restructuring of the schools. It did require rethinking the way we understood school systems: schools are often seen as autonomous units, each largely in charge of its own destiny. In the new model schools were seen as part of an interdependent network within which changes in one part of the system will have consequences for other schools in the system. Building on the idea of Collegiates, which had emerged in the debate over academic selection, the new model sought to use network effects to promote positive interdependencies, directly encouraging sustained connections across the denominational divide by having students take classes in each other's schools, and teachers teaching in each other's schools.

Atlantic Philanthropies agreed to fund a project on school collaboration, involving Protestant, Catholic and Integrated schools working together, and matched funding was provided by the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). The term 'shared education' was adopted to distinguish this approach from previous interventions, and the first project was called the Sharing Education Project (SEP). Previous educational interventions in Northern Ireland had foregrounded reconciliation as the key goal, but the SEP strategy was based on a four-stage delivery model:

- (1) establish a school partnership;
- (2) establish collaborative links between the schools;
- (3) run shared classes;
- (4) promote economic, educational and reconciliation outcomes.

Funding from Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland meant that it was possible to offer schools participating in the programme development and logistical support, and access to funding for staffing, equipment and programmatic running costs. There were two main SEP cohorts run from Queen's University:

- SEP1 operated between 2007 and 2010 and involved 65 schools in 12 collaborative partnerships;
- SEP2 operated between 2010 and 2013 and involved 80 schools in an additional 11 partnerships and one carry-over partnership.

Follow-on activities continued with some of the SEP partnerships up to 2014 at which point the Shared Education Signature Project (SESP) was established by the Education Authority (further details below). Between 2011 and 2014 the project was funded by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) of the NI Assembly to run a shared education project as part of a programme of work in interface areas. This project involved collaborative work between three post-primary and five primary schools in a disadvantaged urban area, and included links with a range of statutory agencies (see Duffy & Gallagher, 2015, for further details). In addition Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland funded two parallel shared education projects, one run by a voluntary organisation and the other by a local authority.

From the start of the work there was an explicit commitment to seek to change the school system in Northern Ireland, so that if collaboration could be shown to provide economic, educational and social benefits, then all or most schools would engage in collaborative activities as a matter of course. For this reason it was important that the strategic approach to SEP should complement or accelerate existing policy directions. For SEP1 the first 12 specialist schools in Northern Ireland were invited to act as the anchors for collaborative networks. The request to the schools was that they work with the SEP support team to develop and test collaborative initiatives, allow the support team to review and evaluate what worked best, and prepare teachers to engage with diversity issues. Each school was invited to submit proposals for specific collaborative activities and was supported in trying to make these work as effectively as possible.

An independent governing body was established to oversee SEP: representatives from all the education interest groups in Northern Ireland were invited to join. The first chair was Sir George Bain, former Vice Chancellor of Queen's University, and when he stood down he was replaced by Sir Tim Brighouse. The collaborative partnerships received annual funding to support activities and could apply each year for additional funds for new developments.

Day-to-day oversight was provided by the SEP support team in Queen's University. An annual residential conference was held for teachers and CPD support was provided to individual partnerships on request. Regular seminars were held to provide evidence on the ongoing work of the partnerships and to hear presentations on relevant research and practice. In addition, a Masters programme in Collaborative leadership was established in the School of Education and bursaries were made available to teachers from SEP schools to undertake this course. A small number of bursaries were also available for teachers from SEP schools to undertake doctoral level study.

For SEP2 all schools in Northern Ireland were invited to submit proposals for collaborative networks. Of the 40 or so proposals that were submitted, 24 were shortlisted and given seed-corn funding to cover the opportunity costs of developing a more elaborate proposal. The development teams from all 24 shortlisted partnerships had an opportunity to meet and engage with the SEP1 school partnerships during a transition day between the final SEP1 residential conference and the inaugural SEP2 residential conference. A total of 12 partnerships were funded for SEP2.

Tables 1 and 2 show basic activity indicators for the SEP1 and SEP2 cohorts and include the number of pupils involved in shared classes across all the partnerships and the number of shared classes run by the schools. Overall these data point to a rising level of participation in shared education across the partnerships in each of the three years of both cohorts. Most notable, however, is the rising number of shared education classes run by the partnerships over time.

Table 3 shows the denominational patterns of participation in the SEP schools. A relative balance of participation was maintained between pupils from Protestant and Catholic schools across the SEP programme, and while this varied a little year by year the variation did not indicate any problems in participation levels. Since Integrated schools comprise about 7% of total enrolment in NI schools, Table 3 shows that these pupils were under-represented in SEP1, but over-represented in SEP2.

Table 1. Number of pupils in shared classes and the number of shared classes run by all SEP1 school partnerships by year and term (number).

All SEP1 Partnerships	Year 1 Term 1	Year 1 Term 2	Year 1 Term 3	Year 2 Term 1	Year 2 Term 2	Year 2 Term 3	Year 3 Term 1	Year 3 Term 2	Year 3 Term 3
Pupils in shared classes	1,749	2,155	2,118	3,755	3,658	3,585	2,803	3,158	3,321
Shared classes	469	469	495	736	684	648	901	1,032	1,025

Table 2. Number of pupils in shared classes and the number of shared classes run by all SEP2 school partnerships by year and term (number).

All SEP2 Partnerships	Year 1 Term 1	Year 1 Term 2	Year 1 Term 3	Year 2 Term 1	Year 2 Term 2	Year 2 Term 3	Year 3 Term 1	Year 3 Term 2	Year 3 Term 3
Pupils in shared classes	4,582	5,448	3,303	5,070	4,986	4,710	4,360	4,108	2,992
Shared classes	1,268	1,337	424	1,894	1,753	829	2,098	1,592	1,183

Table 3. School type of pupils participating in shared education classes, SEP1 and SEP2 by year (percentages).

	SEP1 Year 1	SEP1 Year 2	SEP1 Year 3	SEP2 Year 1	SEP2 Year 2	SEP2 Year 3
Protestant schools	47	50	49	40	44	41
Catholic schools	50	47	46	47	44	45
Integrated schools	3	4	5	13	13	14
All pupils	100	100	100	100	100	100

When the SEP1 partnerships began their work the project leaders did not have a template to give the schools in order to guide their collaborative activity: this was very much a context where project leaders had to trust the professional judgement of the teachers to identify the opportunities for collaboration and the potential barriers that might be faced. The SEP support team were able to help the teachers as they identified and tested potential solutions to barriers. This approach required a willingness to accept that not all attempted solutions would work, but that when they failed it was possible to learn from the experience: this is, in fact, the only way to develop innovative solutions to novel problems (Hannon, 2008). It also meant that each of the 12 partnerships in SEP1 were very different in approach and, to some extent, scale. What we learned from their experience was, first, that partnership activity was more likely to affect school culture if it was curricular, rather than extra-curricular, focused; second, small-scale initiatives would benefit the pupils directly involved, but were much less likely to have an impact across the schools in the partnership; third, partnerships were more likely to be effective in providing sustained, regular engagement if they were relatively close to one another; and finally, since the challenge facing communities varies across different parts of Northern Ireland, the scale and pace of partnership work that is possible will vary across schools as well.

On the basis of our experience of SEP1, the parameters for SEP2 schools were set a little more narrowly. Schools were encouraged to focus largely on curricular work in their proposals, and significant scale was encouraged. In addition, schools were encouraged to build in additional professional development support for teachers in their bids. By the time the SEP2 cohorts had completed their work, significant developments in mainstreaming collaboration across the system had already begun, and this is considered below.

When the SEP work began there were some who felt the initiative was taking unnecessary risks and that sectarian incidents would occur when pupils moved between schools. Some also felt that the barriers to collaboration were so extensive that they would prove insuperable. In fact there were very few incidents where sectarian issues emerged, and in the few cases that did occur, the schools normally dealt with this in an open and explicit way—the over-arching, and public, framework provided by SEP seemed to provide a context when these issues could be dealt with openly, whereas in the past the more usual response would have been to hush things up and suspend activity until things 'quietened down'. In fact the most significant challenges faced by the schools were largely logistical ones: how did the schools reorganise their timetables to ensure they were matched? How did teachers in different schools find time to plan and maintain effective communications? How did they deal with transportation of pupils and not have time spent on buses rather than in classrooms? How did teachers taking classes with pupils from two or more schools deal with their parents? And how did teachers use technology as an aide to supporting collaborative work, between themselves or between pupils? These very practical issues were the ones which largely

exercised teachers' attention: two of these, on timetabling and the use of technology, provided the basis for additional residential activities to allow schools to share practice and experience with each other.

Conclusions

A significant corpus of research has emerged on different aspects of shared education, including evaluation of the implementation of shared education through SEP (Booroah & Knox, 2013; ETINI, 2012, 2013; FGS McClure Watters, 2009, 2010; Gallagher, Stewart, Walker, Baker & Lockhart, 2010; Knox, 2010), examination of the impact of contact (Blaylock & Hughes, 2013; Hughes, 2014; Hughes, Campbell, Lolliot, Hewstone & Gallagher, 2013; Hughes, Lolliot, Hewstone, Schmid & Carlisle, 2012; Tausch et al., 2010), a consideration of its role in improving standards (Booroah & Knox, 2014, 2015a, 2015b) and in-depth analyses of the dynamics of specific partnerships (Duffy & Gallagher, 2015; Hughes & Loader, 2015; Loader, 2015; Nelson, 2013). In addition, some work has examined the sustainability of partnerships (Duffy & Gallagher, 2014), or sought to draw out a broader theoretical framework for the future of shared education and its role in promoting tolerance or reconciliation in divided societies (Gallagher, 2013; Gallagher & Duffy, 2016). There has also been a growing international interest in the shared education model with related work being undertaken in Macedonia (Leitch, 2011), Israel (Payes, 2013, 2015) and the United States (Gallagher, Duffy & Baker, 2015; Kindel, 2015), while Gallagher (2013) has tried to locate this approach within the wider conspectus of structural and curricular initiatives in divided or diverse societies.

The shared education model which developed from the SEP cohorts contains five core elements:

- First, they need to be based on bottom-up, locally tailored solutions, as each school partnership needs to address local circumstances, challenges and opportunities.
- Second, partnerships are unlikely to be successful unless they involve teacher empowerment. In SEP1 and SEP2 there was a commitment to work with the expertise of teachers, as they were best placed to understand the challenges of their own context, and identify potential solutions to overcome barriers to collaboration. We also recognised the need to encourage innovative solutions using a 'next practice' approach (Hannon, 2008, 2009) and allow for some tolerance of failure. This encouraged teachers to be creative and imaginative, and it raised their sense of ambition on what was possible.
- Third, the importance of regular, sustained contact was confirmed. In the SEP partnerships the original intention had been to create contexts where pupils with different uniforms might be seen in the corridors of schools on a routine basis to create a 'new normality' of diversity whereas previously the 'uniformity of uniforms' had highlighted the separateness of schools.
- Fourth, the importance of combining economic, education and social goals was also confirmed. Partnerships should seek to enhance social, educational and efficiency gains for the participating schools: pupils will have access to a wider range of curriculum choice and facilities; teachers will have access to a wider repertoire of practice; all members of the school community, including parents, will have opportunities to engage across the traditional religious divides in Northern Ireland.

- Fifth, our experience was that connections between people were crucial to cultural change and sustainability. Co-location of schools helps provide enhanced opportunities for partnership work, but schools need to be encouraged and supported to take advantage of these opportunities.

One of the original goals of SEP had been to mainstream shared education within the school system in Northern Ireland and considerable gains have been made. The 2011–2015 Programme for Government contained specific shared education commitments. A Ministerial Advisory Group (Connolly, Purvis & O'Grady, 2013) recommended further extension of the shared education approach. The NI Assembly has held debates on shared and integrated education, while between 2011 and 2015 the Education Committee commissioned three reports on aspects of shared education and published the results of its enquiry into shared and integrated education in 2015. The Shared Education Signature Programme (SESP) was established in 2014 with £25m to support school partnerships; £500m has been allocated over a ten-year period to support capital developments in shared education campuses; and the next phase of European Peace Funding (Peace IV) will allocate £26m to support partnership work in schools. A Shared Education Bill has been laid before the NI Assembly and it was expected to become law before the end of the current mandate in May, 2016. In a relatively short period of time shared education seems to have transformed the educational landscape in Northern Ireland.

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Notes on contributor

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