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Submission to the Committee of Education

Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education

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Introduction

Northern Ireland remains a society emerging from conflict. While a peace agreement has been made, aspects of Northern Ireland society remain deeply divided. It is my view—based on over two and a half decades of experience working in societies emerging from conflict around the world and in Northern Ireland for nearly 15 years—that segregated education is a driver of division and needs to be addressed urgently.

There is of course sensitivity around the language used to describe Northern Ireland's education system. I will not review these debates here for two reasons. Firstly, others have already dealt with this issue comprehensively (Hansson et al., 2013), but secondly, because in many ways, the language is not what is important. What is important is that in 2014, almost 90% of children are educated in a school which is predominantly Protestant, or predominantly Catholic. DE figures show that almost half of Northern Ireland's school children are still being taught in schools where 95% or more of the pupils are of the same religion (Hansson et al., 2013).

When I share this fact with politicians, peacebuilders and academics around the world, they are astounded by it and specifically how little progress Northern Ireland has made with regard to integrated education which is considered internationally as a fundamental building block of sustained peace. Integrated education in this context is understood to be at a minimum, in divided societies, a schooling system that is dominated by schools with significant proportions of children of diverse traditions and backgrounds attending together.

That is not to say that segregated schools are inherently bad schools—many serve their children well, with an excellent academic education. However, it is questionable whether they are able to supply the core skills which a child needs in today's society: the ability to exist, work and play alongside children from other backgrounds within an explicit ethos that names, respects and celebrates diversity of background and belief. As the world globalises this is not only important locally but internationally—segregation is arguably failing our young children in terms of equipping them at an early age with the skills needed to maximise global opportunity. There is growing international research that shows that diversity increases productivity on a number of levels (Page, 2007).

Although those that run segregated schools would probably disagree, and separate or faith schools are not necessarily divisive (Hughes et al., 2013), research has found that segregating children on grounds of religion in a way that limits contact between them and other children generally promotes less positive attitudes of others. Globally, the United States Institute of Peace, one of the largest state funded peace building organisations in the world, concludes

that ethnic segregation or integration of schools is an important structural aspect of education, and when ethnic groups are educated separately within the national education system important overt or hidden messages to students are inevitably conveyed about other groups in society (Cole and Barsalou, 2006). In Northern Ireland, research has convincingly confirmed that separate schooling on grounds of religion can create negative social attitudes of those perceived as the “other” (for example, and among others, Hughes, 2011, Hayes and McAllister, 2009, Niens and Cairns, 2005).

Reasons to Promote and Encourage Integrated Education

Statutory Duty

A recent judicial review (Drumrath judgement May 2014) has reaffirmed the statutory duty of government (Article 64 of the ERO (NI) 1989) to promote and facilitate integrated education. The judge stated the Department needs to “be alive to the A64 duty at all levels”.

Peace and Reconciliation

The linking of integrated education to creating, sustaining and building peace has been ubiquitously asserted over the years. A few examples include:

The Belfast Agreement of 1998:

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.

The Consultative Group on the Past:

The arguments about the ethos or quality of education provided in the faith based sectors have to be balanced against the reality that reconciliation may never be achieved if our children continue to attend separated schools (p.77).

The Peace Monitoring Report (2014) states that “the peace process has lost the power to inspire...without a vision of shared society to sustain it”. President Obama on his last visit to Belfast stated “...issues like segregated schools and housing...symbols of history that are a source of pride for some and pain for others...these are not tangential to peace, they are essential to it...”.

In addition to the broad statements, there is now a plethora of research that shows the benefits of integrated education in terms of attitudes towards those perceived as the “other”, as noted above (for example, Hughes, 2011, Hayes and McAllister, 2009, Niens and Cairns, 2005).

Outside of this sound academic research, what is interesting is that the vast majority of citizens also recognise the value of integrated education in terms of long-term peace. It has been found in a Millward Brown Ulster survey that 8 in 10 respondents (83%) perceived integrated education to be important for the promotion of mutual respect and understanding within a post conflict society (Hansson et al., 2013). It has been concluded that:

Data consistently reports that public support for formally integrated schools remains very high in terms of its contribution to peace and reconciliation, promoting a shared future, and promoting mutual respect and understanding (Hansson et al., 2013, pp.4-5).

In the extensive consultation carried out by the Consultative Group on Past they noted that “many emphasised the importance of education in building a better future and suggested that there should be more opportunities for integration” (Consultative Group on the Past, 2009, p.73).

In other words, hard facts and research aside, the general populace, having grown up in a divided society and using the intuitive wisdom that such struggles often imparts, recognise that integration is needed for ensuring a more peaceful future. Despite this, structurally and politically Northern Ireland is making little or no progress in that regard. This suggests that the key factors holding back integration are at the political level, and within the education system itself. This is of grave concern, but also means that if the right steps are taken at these levels integration would not be something that the majority of the society would resist from the perspective of the peace process. In fact the opposite is likely, there is a general acceptance that integrated education is key to lasting peace.

Parental Choice and Equality of Provision

Many parents want integrated education. Research undertaken by both NICIE and IEF shows a high level of desire for integrated education. A recent report concludes after reviewing a range of attitudinal data, based on surveys such as Millward Brown Ulster (2008, 2003); Ipsos MORI (2011); Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) (2003-2011); and Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (NILT) (1999-2010), that support for integrated schools remains high (Hansson et al., 2013). A recent Millward Brown survey found that almost 70% of those questioned were of the view that an integrated school was the best preparation for living in a diverse society. If data is aggregated from Ipsos MORI (2011) with the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT 1999 and 2001) the support for “mixed schooling” has increased from 74% in 1999 to 81% in 2011 (Hansson et al., 2013).

Yet the provision—and therefore the choice—is simply not available to many parents. Indeed there is an inequality of provision. Comprehensive research on the subject has concluded that the main reason for preferences for integrated education not being met is insufficient numbers of shared spaces to accommodate demand (Hansson et al., 2013).

I have heard it said that the fact that integrated schools only make up 7% of the school population, about 22,000 children, is evidence in itself that there is no desire for integration. Those who say this are simply casting aside the number of available places and geographical availability of integrated schools, as well as historical realities. As has been pointed out, any level of integration was “a considerable achievement in the midst of conflict and within a divided society” (Hansson et al., 2013, p.3). The merits of the integrated movement in Northern Ireland have been studied and lauded the world over, but strangely they go underappreciated in Northern Ireland.

Parents who want an integrated education for their children do not currently have equality of access as compared to those who want to send their children to Catholic or Protestant dominated schools. Globally there is a move to recognise the right of minorities to send their

children to schools of their choice, normally as an alternative to a secular state sector. This, of course, should be supported. In Northern Ireland, however, the situation is reversed where parents who want to avail of integration, which is generally the norm in other societies, have to argue for the right to integration.

In other words, there is a serious inequality in terms of the rights of parents who want integrated education. As with most inequalities, the context can work in such a way that some parents do not even know their rights are being violated when they are forced to choose a school based on a limited number of options in a context where this has become normative. In this context, the argument that parents' "choice" is evidence of a desire for segregation, and when seen in the light of research evidence in favour of integrated schooling, is illogical and based on a set of limited premises. It is unlikely that "choice" for integration will take place if the system and structure do not change, and the inequality in the rights afforded to those who want integrated education will endure.

I will now say something about the distinction between "Integration" and "Sharing".

Integrated Education

An integrated school brings together children from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. Some non-integrated schools say that they are integrated, because they have a mixed school population often with a small minority of children from one background or another. This is a positive development. But limited desegregation is not the same as integration. Integrated schools are integrated not only in terms of significant numbers of pupils from different backgrounds, but also in terms of ethos. Integrated schools have an explicit ethos to recognise and celebrate diversity. Integration means that children learn about each other's backgrounds and cultures in a spirit of equality within the school, the best environment to offer the opportunity for lasting and significant contact. In a truly integrated school, there should be no dominant ethos to either assimilate or "accommodate" children from other backgrounds. For example, while some Catholic schools claim to be "integrated", the reality is that the dominant ideology of the school, its iconography, its celebrations, its culture, are by definition, Catholic. This makes it extremely difficult for children from other backgrounds to feel that they or their beliefs and culture have equality of position within the culture of the school.

As with building peace in any society, Northern Ireland requires children to be brought together from the earliest possible age, not just for occasional contact, but in order to build meaningful and deep friendships with those from other backgrounds which can last into adulthood, forming a generation with a higher degree of mutual understanding and respect than current generations. Other divided societies continue to learn from the work of the Integrated Education movement in Northern Ireland, yet within Northern Ireland, there appears to be little political will to support this ground-breaking and internationally recognised movement.

Shared Education

Shared education—that is, separate schools with some shared resources, pupil contact and collaboration between them (Hansson et al., 2013)—has a benign ring to it. At face value, sharing and contact between groups is, of course, positive. The research in the area is promising showing, among other benefits, that the type of intergroup contact shared

education offers can lead to more positive relationships and perceptions of others, and build inter-school collaboration (Blaylock and Hughes, 2013, Duffy and Gallagher, 2014). If the logical outworking of shared education is that there should be a focus on how all schools can be made more inclusive (Hughes et al., 2013) this is a step in the right direction.

In many senses, however, the move to shared education merely proves the obvious and what has been well-established in international research for decades, that is under certain conditions contact between groups can promote positive views of the other (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Of course, any increased contact between school-age children and schools representing different traditions is to be welcomed. But as a recent research on shared education notes, an environment that seemingly reinforces a mono-cultural order can limit the potential of such programmes (Hughes, 2013). It is added “it is hardly surprising that pupils, who meet with peers from the ‘other’ community for short periods (albeit sustained over time) and in a highly structured setting, struggle to develop friendships that can be maintained outside of the school setting” (Hughes, 2013, p.206).

In other words, contact programmes taking place within an overall segregated context are—despite their positive indicators—essentially a sticking plaster on a system that is largely not conducive to creating positive attitudes between groups. It is possible to argue that shared education might incrementally change the system, and result in cross-community activities taking place at the heart of the community over time (Borooah and Knox, 2013). But equally, questions have been raised as to whether the initial experiments will continue to be supported once philanthropic sources of funding sources dry up (Hansson et al., 2013), and what the future is for shared education making a real and lasting impact within a segregated system that it tacitly endorses.

It is, from a policy perspective, counter-intuitive to set up a range of new programmes to bring children into meaningful contact with one another through various collaborative ventures—at great expense financially and in terms of resources (e.g. timetabling, travel time, busing children)—when the context itself is going to continually undermine any potential achievements, unless this is part of a wider strategy to fundamentally change the context.

Of course, there are many reasons as to why the context cannot be changed instantly, and we must foster contact where we can, but to lose sight of the fact that the most logical place to foster contact is in the classroom on a day-to-day basis is missing the most obvious long-term and sustainable solution.

The Ministerial Advisory Group’s Report on Shared Education was a missed opportunity to name the fact that while sharing might be encouraged, integrated education is the logical pinnacle of shared education. The resultant proposal of 10 shared education campuses will mean children going to school in the same place, but remaining separate, in separate uniforms. The message this gives to children is a dangerous one as the extract from the United States Institute of Peace quoted above conveys—that is, it is a step too far to allow children to be educated together in all subjects every day as a unit. While shared education projects are a necessary starting point for many schools, shared education should not be considered the end point for education in Northern Ireland. The ultimate goal must be to break the stranglehold of the major sectors who have vested interests in keeping education segregated, and to move to a position whereby the default setting for education in Northern Ireland is that children go to schools that are integrated in number and in ethos.

Recommendations

The Department of Education should find ways to promote and encourage the provision of more integrated places in Northern Ireland by:

1. Supporting the expansion and development of existing integrated schools;
2. Actively pursuing ways to enable schools to transform to integrated status. This will require schools to be supported, in some cases for a number of years;
3. Ensuring that schools embarking on shared education projects are supported and enabled to understand the option of progressing to pursue integrated status, and supported to do so;
4. Ensuring that as part of the shared education agenda, resources are in place to promote and facilitate integrated education as the most intensive and sustainable form of sharing;
5. Ensuring that integrated education representatives have a place at Area Based Planning bodies, and other decision making bodies, so that each area can be required to make fair and equal provision to meet parental demand for an integrated school;
6. Enacting the recommendations in the International Review Panel on Teacher Education in Northern Ireland, which points to the need for a desegregated approach to teacher training;
7. Planning ahead for the transformation of the education system to become fully integrated by the year 2024. This would include making clear commitments and plans for the expansion of integrated education in future Programmes for Government and strategies such as Together Building a United Community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I welcome shared education only as a series of steps towards achieving a fully integrated education system in Northern Ireland. I would urge the Committee to attend to local and international research which shows clearly how essential this is to long term reconciliation and stability, and to note the evidence on parental choice which shows that, despite the strength of sectoral interests, there is a growing appetite and readiness for fully integrated education. Integration should be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat, and a key building block to sustainable peace. This is how it is viewed the world over by experts working on peacebuilding in range of societies.

I urge the Committee to be bold in its recommendations and set a timetable for full integration. This will truly offer children the best opportunity for the future locally and globally, and give Northern Ireland a rightful place as an exemplary peace process rather than one that is viewed internationally as having made significant steps but is still hampered by sectoral interests that maintain divisions that have fuelled the conflict over the years and continue to do so. Without this the society will constantly remain at risk of ongoing and future conflict.

About the Author

Professor Brandon Hamber is Director of the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE), an associate site of the United Nations University based at the Ulster University. He is also an Associate of the Transitional Justice Institute at the university. He has recently finished a term as a Mellon Distinguished Visiting Scholar in the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (2010-2013). He was born in South Africa and currently lives in Belfast, where he has been working since 1996. In South Africa he trained as a Clinical Psychologist at the University of the Witwatersrand and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Ulster. Prior to moving to Northern Ireland, he co-ordinated the Transition and Reconciliation Unit at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg. He co-ordinated the Centre's work focusing on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He was a visiting Tip O'Neill Fellow in Peace Studies at INCORE in 1997/1998. He was also the recipient of the Rockefeller Resident Fellowship (1996) and was a visiting fellow at the Centre for the Study of Violence in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He has consulted to a range of community groups, policy initiatives and government bodies in Northern Ireland and South Africa. He has undertaken consulting and research work, and participated in various peace and reconciliation initiatives in Liberia, Mozambique, Bosnia, the Basque Country and Sierra Leone, among others. He has written extensively on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the psychological implications of political violence, and the process of transition and reconciliation in South Africa, Northern Ireland and abroad. He has published some 40 book chapters and scientific journal articles. He is the author of "Transforming Societies after Political Violence: Truth, Reconciliation, and Mental Health" published by Springer in 2009, and published in 2011 in Spanish by Ediciones Bellaterra. His most recent book, edited with Ingrid Palmay and Lorena Nunez, is entitled "Healing and Change in the City of Gold: Case Studies of Coping and Support in Johannesburg" and was published by Springer in October 2014.

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