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Adolescents' and teachers' experience of shared education: a small-scale qualitative study in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article explores adolescents' and teachers' interpretations of shared education through interviews with participating teachers and pupils in one school partnership in Northern Ireland. As an initiative explicitly designed to bring pupils from Catholic and majority Protestant schools together, shared education offers potential for building intergroup relations in Northern Ireland where, despite a peace agreement in 1998, life continues to be characterised by deep political and cultural division. Drawing on the qualitative data from the two participating schools, the research reveals the complexities of contact amongst adolescents in divided contexts so that, although some students frame shared education experiences in positive terms, others are discomfited by the process and report negative experiences. It argues that as adolescents' tendency towards self-consciousness and social unease may be intensified in shared education programmes, more attention might be placed on their unique characteristics when designing and planning shared classes.

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Introduction

Attempts to promote better intergroup relations through the school system have been made in Northern Ireland (NI) since at least the 1980s. Although these initiatives have had varying degrees of success and longevity (Gallagher, 2016; Smith & Robinson, 1996), the theory of contact that underpins them – that is, that bringing groups in conflict together will improve relationships – has endured. However, despite the prevalence of contact initiatives in education, evidence of the value of contact in promoting better relationships is not conclusive and questions remain as to the lived experiences of those involved (Dixon et al., 2005; Dixon & McKeown, 2021). Researchers interested in examining the effects of contact initiatives have typically focused on integrated schools, which welcome both Protestant and Catholic pupils, as it is here that intergroup contact is most readily observed. However, as the numbers of integrated schools have largely plateaued in recent years, and as policy incentivises collaboration between majority

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Protestant and Catholic schools as a means of building better relationships, attention has turned to how relationships progress within these ‘shared education’ (SE) sites. Despite growing research in the field of SE (e.g. Gallagher, 2016; Hughes & Loader, 2023), gaps persist regarding how early adolescents experience SE. It is generally accepted that contact interventions tend to be most effective when intergroup anxiety is low (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006); hence, understanding how adolescents – who often experience heightened self-consciousness in social situations due to their developmental stage (Blakemore & Mills, 2014) – navigate contact experiences in SE warrants further analysis. In SE schools, students from historically divided communities typically come together and learn about controversial intergroup issues. Additionally, how educators introduce sensitive topics in both SE classrooms, and how this curricular content interacts with the contact experience, remains unclear. Elucidating the relationship between contact and curriculum integration therefore constitutes an important research priority, as this association may have important implications for how contact unfolds in schools.

The paper will therefore examine how adolescents (aged 12–15) in one SE partnership negotiate intergroup relationships. Findings from group interviews with adolescents are analysed alongside data from interviews with teachers, whose decisions are crucial in shaping the contact experience. The paper is organised into four main sections. The first examines SE as a key policy imperative in NI, whilst the second examines the concept of early adolescent identity and intergroup contact. The qualitative methods are explained and justified before the data is analysed.

The emergence of SE in NI – what is it and why now?

NI remains a deeply divided society still grappling with the legacy of its violent past. While the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement largely ended three decades of conflict, sectarian divisions between Catholic and Protestant communities persist. As Coulter and Shirlow aptly observe, NI ‘remains very firmly in the shadow of its own dark recent history’ (2023, pp. 4–5). Division characterises almost every facet of social life, but it is perhaps in the education system that it is most stark. Catholics and Protestants typically attend separate schools which reflect and reinforce their cultural, political and religious infrastructure (Barton & McCully, 2012; Gallagher, 2016). The extent of separation has prompted successive governments since the 1980s to look to contact initiatives as a means of building bridges between the communities. A series of curricular and structural changes were introduced to schools to effect change: the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 provided for compulsory cross-curricular themes, Education for Mutual Understanding [EMU] and Cultural Heritage, with the aim of building students’ knowledge of diversity through the curriculum. Although the expectation has since been that all teachers regardless of their subject specialism engage with diversity, the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum, introduced in 2007, ensured that certain subjects such as history and religious education included specific elements to address societal division (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA], 2007). For example, by age 14 all students of history should have an opportunity to learn about the causes and consequences of the partition of Ireland, and in religious studies learning about prejudice, sectarianism and reconciliation is noted. The introduction to the statutory curriculum of Local and Global Citizenship, also in 2007, provided

all students with an opportunity to ‘investigate ways of managing conflict and promoting community relations and reconciliation’ (CCEA, 2007). Ensuring that schools provide a space to encourage positive intergroup relations is not, however, confined to the curriculum. Integrated education was introduced to NI in the 1980s. The schools have a broadly Christian ethos but welcome all religious and cultural groups, representing a departure from the faith-based system in NI where hitherto the only choice for parents was a school managed by Catholic or Protestant authorities (O’Connor, 2002). Framed as a beacon of hope in a society characterised by division, conflict and despair, integrated schools attracted a flurry of media attention and scholarly interest for their commitment to ‘bring[ing] children and staff from Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as those of other beliefs, cultures and communities together in one school’ (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, 2022).

Despite the optimism, the integrated sector has not grown to the extent originally envisaged in 1989 when new integrated schools were first granted legal status. Hence, although the number of schools increased steadily through the 1990s, since 2007 the pace has slowed. There were 67 grant-aided integrated schools in Northern Ireland in 2021/2022 with a total enrolment of approximately 25,000, comprising almost 8% of the school population (Department of Education [DE], 2022b, 2022c). Their limited growth prompted researchers to consider alternative ways of promoting contact between students at separate schools (Gallagher, 2016). The potential of school collaboration to offer a space to forge intergroup relations between pupils began to gain traction in the mid-2000s. In 2007 the Atlantic Philanthropies and the International Fund for Ireland allocated funding to schools, proposing a partnership with a school in a different sector to co-teach an aspect of the curriculum. Hence, students would now have an opportunity to take classes with peers from another school sector; the nature and scope of the class would be agreed by leaders in each school. Initially designated as ‘SEP’ – the Sharing Education Programme – and later referred to as ‘shared education’ (SE), the programme was different from previous community relations initiatives insofar as attaining reconciliation objectives was not completely overt:

[T]he 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. (Gallagher, 2016, p. 7)

The first SEP projects ran from 2007 to 2013 in 2 separate 3-year phases, and a total of 80 primary and secondary schools participated. The Ministerial Advisory Group, established to review the evidence on SE, affirmed its potential (Connolly et al., 2013) and led to SE becoming a key part of the Education Authority’s (EA) remit. Hence, the SE Signature Project (SESP) was established by the EA in 2014, and statutory support and financial incentives ensured SE became more widely embedded (EA, 2022). The SE Act (2016) further strengthened the commitment by placing a duty on the Department of Education to encourage, facilitate and promote SE. To date, over 60,000 pupils have participated and a programme of ‘teacher professional learning’, which has been provided by the EA in concert with the Higher Education Institutions, has educated teachers to teach in these new shared spaces (EA, 2022).

Importantly, research has pointed to the value of SE in promoting better intergroup relationships (Hughes et al., 2012; Reimer et al., 2022). A recent Young Life

and Times Survey (YLT) (DE, 2022a) shows that two-thirds of respondents (66%) either strongly agreed or agreed that they were better able to respect the views of other people as a consequence of their participation. Yet it is equally notable that just 36% of YLT respondents (aged 16) reported that they had made at least one close friend from a different religion during SE. This is compared to over 55% of 10–11-year-olds (DE, 2022a). Since contact theory advises that ‘cross-group friendships provide multiple opportunities for positive intergroup encounters which are long-lasting and stable over time’ (Bagci et al., 2018, p. 3), it seems important to examine more fully what happens when adolescents from different backgrounds in NI meet each other in SE settings. Recognising the value of qualitative research to reveal the deeper facets of relationship-building and its particular potential in research on intergroup contact (Dixon & McKeown, 2021), this research will examine the lived experience of young people during an SE project in NI. It is particularly focused on how adolescents negotiate cross-community relationships when they are brought together for shared classes. The paper begins with a review of contact theory and its implications for adolescents before providing an explanation of the research methods. The qualitative findings from interviews with the pupils and teachers are discussed before setting out the conclusions and implications for further research.

Contact and the adolescent

SE, like other contact-based initiatives in NI, is underpinned by Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis. This proposes that contact with a member of another group (typically, a group towards whom there is animosity) should reduce prejudice towards the group as a whole, in the presence of four conditions: equal status between interactants, common goals, intergroup cooperation and institutional support for contact. A large body of work over the past six decades has provided empirical support for Allport’s premise, across multiple countries, settings and age groups, and for the role of his four ‘facilitating’ (though non-essential) conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This research has also highlighted friendship as the most effective form of contact for improving attitudes, providing the conditions for reduced intergroup anxiety and increased empathy, self-disclosure and trust, each of which has been found to mediate the relationship between contact and improved attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Turner et al., 2007).

Hence, while quantitative research shows contact to be effective across the life-course, an appraisal of school-based contact, particularly in second-level schooling, seems to indicate that certain age groups may be more susceptible to the effects of contact than others. Of particular interest is the need for sensitivity to the distinctive ways that developments in adolescence can shape encounters. Seminal research on identity development, for example, positions the adolescent stage as an especially formative period in which there occurs a psychosocial crisis of ‘identity vs role confusion’ (Erikson, 1963). Adolescents are motivated to find self-definition as well as a sense of meaning and purpose that will guide decisions as they transition into adulthood (Newman & Newman, 2020), and, as Blakemore (2012, p. 2) notes, this life-stage is defined by distinct social and psychological change:

Adolescence is characterized by psychological changes in terms of identity, self-consciousness and relationships with others. Compared with children, adolescents are more sociable, form more complex and hierarchical peer relationships, and are more sensitive to acceptance and rejection by peers.

Adolescents' specific characteristics mean that the experience of contact during this developmental phase is likely to differ from that which occurs during childhood and adulthood (Brizio et al., 2015; van Zalk et al., 2021). Tarrant et al. have shown that adolescents may 'strive to distinguish between their peer groups by perceiving their own group more positively than an outgroup, and this differentiation might be a valuable means by which adolescents secure social identity and self-esteem' (Tarrant et al., 2001, p. 598). However, interventions designed to promote better relations may challenge any inclination towards negativity. Indeed, Wölfer et al. (2016) have argued that intergroup contact interventions during adolescence are important for the development of more favourable intergroup attitudes as young people move to adulthood (Study 2), a point further demonstrated by Reimer et al. (2022). Given the sensitivity of this period for sociocultural processing, and the impressionable stage of development, the diverse school environments and structured contact experience offered by SE seem to offer an important opportunity for adolescents to foster positive intergroup relations that may have long-term positive effects (Aboud et al., 2003; Birtel et al., 2020; Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

Yet, as with contact research in general, much of what is known about how adolescents interact during contact is generated by quantitative research methods; hence, large-scale surveys of young people, where the focus is often on measuring changes in attitude or psychological states, have predominated the research landscape (Reimer et al., 2022; Wölfer et al., 2016). Yet evidence shows that employing mixed or qualitative methods can yield quite different impressions of how contact works. This is exemplified in NI where quantitative studies show that contact in schools improves attitudes and facilitates cross-group friendships (see Blaylock et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2013; Stringer et al., 2010). Yet a somewhat contrastive insight is offered by qualitative research which reveals the complex processes of intergroup relations during contact. Focusing less on attitudes and prejudice reduction and more on patterns of interaction and relationships, it has been shown that cross-group interaction may tend towards the superficial where the avoidance of sensitive, divisive issues are normalised. It is argued that the absence of such discussion in schools can allow inequitable institutional norms to persist (Donnelly, 2004; Donnelly et al., 2016). Yet despite the existence of qualitative research, long-standing calls for more qualitative and mixed methods research (Connolly, 2000; Dixon et al., 2005) have not been fully heeded. This has led Dixon and McKeown (2021, p. 249) to state that 'we need to think beyond the self-report surveys and experimental methods to which we have become accustomed' to fully understand how contact works. They argue for 'methods that are able to capture its situated meanings in their own terms. In our view, that means conducting qualitative research in which the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of ordinary participants are captured and analysed in context' (p. 245).

This has implications for investigating contact in SE settings, where participants are required to traverse the contours and cultures of different schools. To understand SE, it seems important to move beyond measures of attitude change to explore the nature of

relations as they are constructed, experienced and lived out as students move between the school contexts (Dixon & McKeown, 2021). Exploring how adolescents negotiate relationships and the ways in which they make sense of their differences is important if we are to understand whether SE offers a context conducive to the emergence of positive intergroup relations. Moreover, as contact works best if it has ‘institutional support’, capturing the views of teachers seems equally important. As Karatas et al. argue, ‘Teachers can promote intergroup relationships among students by expressing their own beliefs and institutional policies toward cultural diversity and acting accordingly’ (2023, p. 237). Exploring teacher beliefs and policies will offer further insights into how contact during SE works.

Methods

Underpinned by interpretivist perspectives which lend emphasis to meaning and subjective experience (Chowdhury, 2014), this research aimed to offer a detailed insight into how contact was experienced in a SE setting. The partnership was comprised of two non-selective post-primary schools (one Catholic and one majority Protestant) of comparable size and located in a rural area. The partnership was well established and was comparable to other projects in so far as it involved partner schools working together to co-deliver the curriculum. As The Education and Training Inspectorate [ETI] (2018) note, however, the particular format that SE assumes will vary according to the particular characteristics of the schools involved. For this reason, and due to its small scale, there are no claims to generalisability; instead the aim was to examine how adolescents and their teachers interpret and experience contact in an SE partnership (Merriam, 2016).

Given their tendency towards self-consciousness and motivation to fit in with peers, it was presumed that interviewing students in friendship groups would be more beneficial than single interviews (Adler et al., 2019). All interviews were conducted in the summer term in 2018. Students were purposively selected by the SE coordinator in each school and three group interviews were undertaken with pupils: two groups were from the majority Protestant school comprising nine and five pupils each, and one was from the Catholic school with seven participants. The Catholic school was a single-sex girls’ school. The Protestant school was co-educational, and eight boys and six girls took part. The age range of pupils was 12 to 15 years. Each group interview lasted around one hour. Interviews ranged across a series of themes including understanding of SE; preparation for SE; experiences of being taught in the shared setting; and how relations were formed with students from the other school.

The original research design intended for teachers to be interviewed alone; however, initial informal discussions with the SE leaders suggested that teachers would prefer group interviews. It was therefore decided that teachers could choose whether to be interviewed in a group or single format. All classroom teachers chose to be interviewed in groups; one group interview was undertaken with three teachers in each school who had direct experience of teaching shared classes. The group format offered the researchers an insight into the shared assumptions that underpin SE – something that may have been difficult to access with single interviews (Flick, 2009). Single interviews were, however, held with the SE leader in each school. All interviews with teachers lasted between 1 hour and 1 hour 15 minutes.

The interviews covered a range of issues relating to teachers' perceptions of SE, preparation for teaching mixed groups and teaching contentious issues in mixed settings. The majority of teachers in each school who were directly involved in teaching SE classes and/or co-ordinating the programme participated in the research, ensuring a detailed understanding of staff perspectives within the partnership. However, this research makes no claim to generalisability to other partnerships.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded with permission and data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using manual methods. Consistent with the process described by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), which integrates theory-driven and data-driven analysis, the literature offered the initial frame for analysis and we searched for consistent themes around the extent and depth of contact and experiences of teaching and learning about the past. All authors were involved in the collection and/or analysis of the data. Each of the authors has a different experience of NI (two were brought up in NI during the conflict, another was brought up in the Republic of Ireland and another was brought up in England). These differences offered a fertile basis for debate and discussion during data analysis.

Ethics

The research was approved by the University Department's Ethics Committee. Participants were provided with information sheets and a consent form outlining all details of the study. Although they were free to withdraw at any point until data was anonymised, no one chose to do so.

The data

The SE programme

Although subject to approval by the EA, school leaders have considerable scope to decide the nature of the activity, its frequency and its duration. In this partnership, the SE programme was planned for students in years 9–11 (age 12–15) and it ran over 2 years and comprised 3 full days of shared classes, one during each term of the school year and 2 school trips. The students met alternately in each other's schools in the assembly hall. In mixed groups, they rotated between teachers of English/drama, religious studies and Learning for Life and Work (LLW)' the last of these is the area of learning in Northern Ireland that encompasses citizenship education. Teachers from each school team-taught a lesson in each subject area. On the third day, the focus was on physical education and the students attended one school for sports. The trips took place in year 2. A final annual event to celebrate the SE experience completed the programme. The format depicted here is unlikely to represent arrangements in all SE schools; in SE, leaders and teachers have discretion over how the programme activity

is organised (ETI, 2018). The format described was designed to accommodate the large student cohort.

SE in practice

Preparation for and perceptions of SE

Preparation for contact has been shown to reduce potential stress or anxiety about the prospect of meeting those from another background (Turner & Cameron, 2016). It can also offer participants the confidence in and structural validation of their own identity before contact, enhancing their capacity to reach out to others (Church et al., 2004). Teachers explained that they had worked together to plan the classes; they had met their counterpart in the other school to discuss how they would teach the particular subject on SE days. The English teachers had jointly selected a novel about the conflict, which was taught separately in English classes as a way of building students' knowledge of NI. In addition, teachers explained that at the beginning of term there was a joint excursion to introduce pupils and teachers intending to take part in the SE programme. However, somewhat counterintuitively, two of the Catholic teachers noted that the aims and intended outcomes of SE were not fully explained during this meeting.

In terms of their perceptions of SE and teaching mixed groups, there were notable differences between the classroom teachers. For those in the majority Protestant school who taught religious studies and LLW, there was a sense of optimism. They reported feeling energised and engaged with teaching the mixed groups and were particularly keen on team-teaching with teachers in the Catholic school. They noted that the SE programme was prioritised by school leaders and they were encouraged to attend staff training to enable them to develop pedagogical strategies and skills. They focused on supporting students before and during contact, employing active strategies which they had learned about during training to generate reflection:

I feel that you need to build that relationship with them before you can bounce into a controversial issue. It is important that they feel safe when they're with you. So when they are talking about certain subjects with you, or topics, that they do feel safe. And we would do, maybe, class charters and stuff, and they make up their own rules: value everyone's opinion . . . some of them don't know what sectarianism is so we get their definition and examine that.

These experiences, however, did not align with data from the Catholic school where a sense of apathy seemed to prevail. This was especially clear when teachers discussed opportunities for professional learning to prepare for shared classes. As noted earlier, the EA provide training for teachers to support the delivery of SE, but the SE leader explained that teachers were not permitted to attend. All teachers that we interviewed supported the approach:

Why have you not attended training for SE?

The demands on teachers' time . . . Because you have to come out of class for the whole day. And I know one of my problems is my timetable is mainly exam classes between A-level students, two different GCSE subjects. So I have very little junior contact

time, and if you leave them, you're having a detrimental effect because, actually, there's a big course content.

And then also with the weaker children as well, I really, really dislike being pulled out of a class where people think, 'Oh, well, sure, anybody can take them over', but you can't.

As interviews progressed it was clear that some classroom teachers were critical of SE as a mechanism to promote better relations. Two referred to its 'contrived' nature and questioned the lack of coherence in the SE process between the different phases of schooling. Compared to the majority Protestant school, and perhaps because they were less likely to participate in training, there seemed to be less understanding of and investment in the programme:

I've found it a wee bit contrived, just the two days, you know? 'Let's all go over to [Protestant school]'. And our girls are very good, they're generally very well behaved, but I don't think they mix that well. I really, genuinely don't think they mixed as well as I think they should, if you know what I mean.

Coming back to what you were saying . . . and I think you made a really good point there about the fact that it is quite contrived. I mean, if we're landing kids at the age of 13, 14 with this, with no experience of it before . . . I don't know, is this not something that needs to be rolled out younger?

Sensing their limited commitment, the SE leader in the majority Protestant school expressed some frustration at the lack of mutual commitment. In overseeing and planning the programme they had more direct responsibility than the other teachers for ensuring that the partnership developed effectively. These responsibilities may have afforded a different perspective and heightened their awareness of problems in delivering on SE objectives, in the co-design and delivery of the curriculum and in assuring equal workloads across the schools:

I think overall, though, there was some concern about how the project was working from our point of view. I think it was being driven by one school, not equally driven. Supported in [Catholic school] without a doubt, but their staff weren't aware of it being launched until the day before, three years ago. So there's legacy issues in terms of curriculum content being matched together, which wasn't, and hasn't been. We made some attempts in various places to do a bit, but it hasn't really been [working]. And then also, there's no doubt, to some degree, [we] the [Protestant school] staff felt that they were having to do the heavy lifting in terms of the teaching. That there wasn't the same [priority] – And that came back in evaluative comments.

Collaborative working is core to SE; its success depends on participating institutions investing equally in the endeavour (Atkinson et al., 2007). Equality of commitment takes on even greater significance in a collaborative programme that also aims to improve intergroup relations through contact. As noted earlier, institutional support is regarded as a key facilitating condition of contact and, whilst ambiguous, such support is often construed as a general discourse amongst teachers and leaders to promote the value of intergroup encounter (Connolly, 2000). Given the centrality of teachers to intergroup contact (Karatas et al., 2023), the somewhat ambivalent discourse around the programme in the Catholic school and the lack of synergy between the schools in respect of their commitment to SE may not be wholly conducive to the development of positive relations between the students Yet

ambivalence with respect to the SE project may not equate to outright opposition to cross-community interaction. Instead, Catholic teachers' perspectives may be better understood as motivated by a broader critical discourse which questions the framing of communal division as chiefly a problem of intergroup intolerance that can be 'solved' through contact. For example, McEvoy et al. (2006) cast doubt on contact serving as the primary solution to division, instead advocating for schools to focus more on building students' critical capacities to engage with the rights of communities. Similar arguments appear in multicultural education literature in the USA (see Sleeter & Zavala, 2020), which caution against presenting racism in terms of tensions between groups because such framing negates its institutionalised and systemic dimensions. Further research on SE may then need to probe not only how relationships evolve, but perhaps the perceptions of the contact initiative itself to capture how it might be framed and supported within the institution.

Adolescents and contact

For some students the SE programme was perceived to have an enlivening effect on school life, although, as above, these positive assessments were more pronounced in the majority Protestant school. Students referred to building new cross-group friendships, being pushed beyond their comfort zone and becoming more broadminded, despite the fact that they were initially fearful that SE might be a negative experience:

It's better than making just friends from one school, making friends with kids from different backgrounds and different personalities and stuff from a different school.

Yeah. I think that it's helped us to have a more open mind, even like when we're out in public.

I think it has helped us become a lot more open-minded.

[I]t pushes you out of your comfort zone for the good as well because, like, if we didn't do this, I feel like we would all still be in that small mind-set. But because we have, it actually has broadened our mind-set to really think about, like, others' apart from our own.

Comparisons were drawn with peers who did not have the opportunity to engage in shared school projects, and aligning with the YLT survey data cited earlier, students believed that the contact had made them more respectful of those from another community background:

I know that friends of mine who aren't at this school and haven't done the programme are still stuck in that mind-set and they'll be like, 'I'm not going near a Catholic.'

They'll be a bit, like, put off by the fact that we have made that connection. But I don't see that it's been anything wrong. Like, I've been brought up that way, that they're all the same.

That students believed SE to have prompted them to become more 'open minded' attests to its benefits. In line with its objectives, the comments suggest that SE created opportunities for students to meet and positively interact with those from the outgroup and that this positive interaction created new opportunities for building friendships that foster positive outgroup attitudes. Hence, contact afforded by SE 'worked' to the extent that these young people were more comfortable about interacting with members of the

'outgroup' than they might otherwise have been. Moreover, the fact that they reported positive experiences at a formative and impressionable stage in their lives, as discussed earlier, has the potential to exert longer-term effects on intergroup relations (Aboud & Levy, 2000; Aboud et al., 2003; Reimer et al., 2022; Wölfer et al., 2016).

Yet even when opportunities for intergroup contact arise in shared spaces, prior research has shown that participants may avoid interaction and instead spend their time with those who are similar to themselves (Dixon & McKeown, 2021). This was also apparent in the data from students in the Catholic school, where there seemed to be a reluctance to cross the group boundary during breaks from teaching to initiate social interaction with those from the other school:

You sort of just went, yeah, went to our friendship groups and then just walked around with your friends.

Well, it wasn't really in the classes. It was more around lunchtime. I was the only one who went and sat with them. Everyone else was in a wee corner.

Their reticence was also acknowledged by the teachers in the Catholic school, who confirmed that there was a discernible reserve amongst students with respect to SE, although this was more pronounced amongst some student groups than others:

You would automatically think that it would be the confident kids that would easily move into the other school. And that doesn't seem to be the case. It's something we've picked up before, that, actually, there are a lot of children that find it quite anxiety-provoking to move to another school. Not necessarily because it's another community or identity – it's just because it's another school. And it's trying to go beneath that to see, well, who are the children who are more likely to benefit or are more open to that kind of movement, and who are closed off to it?

As the teacher implies, their reticence might be understood as characteristic of adolescent behaviour noted earlier. Blakemore (2012) argues that adolescents often experience heightened levels of self-consciousness; hence, instigating an interaction with those outside their immediate social circle and school might exacerbate uneasiness and may be avoided so as to preserve feelings of calm in an unfamiliar setting. Yet avoidance or only superficial interaction with the outgroup in mixed-group settings is generally perceived to have negative consequences for relations. Importantly, Tarrant et al. (2001) suggest these consequences are potentially more intense for adolescents, who are often strongly affiliated with their peer groups and identity category and may strive to maintain group boundaries to preserve self-esteem. Whilst it was argued earlier that contact interventions can yield positive effects (Wölfer et al., 2016), the data below suggest that contact interventions might also offer a space for the release of tensions between groups:

Pupil: I think when we first started SE, it was a bit of a tension.

Pupil: Yeah, it affected us. So, it took a little bit of time just to get used to it.

Pupil: And you have to be careful what you say, as well.

Pupil: Like, when we went on the SE to their school – I think it was our first time – they threw bottles and all at us and started calling us names.

Pupil: Yeah. And they threw Fanta bottles and all at us.

Pupil: Well, I just want to say if our ancestors did something bad to them, like the Troubles, they seem to think that the rotten apple doesn't fall too far from the tree and that if one person in our family is bad, then they're all bad. So they grow against Catholics because they think we're all bad.

Interviewer: Do you think pupils from this school think that as well? Or not as much?

Similar experiences were reported when students discussed an activity that had been explicitly designed to foster understanding between the groups:

Similar experiences were reported when students discussed an activity that had been explicitly designed to foster understanding between the groups:

Pupil: Like, we done this thing in LLW, like, and it's an English flag and then the Republic of Ireland flag, and you had to go round and say what you thought of it and what does this mean to you. And people are saying really rude things underneath the Republic flag and some of us then got really annoyed, so we started saying things on their flag.

Interviewer: Right, so what sort of things were they saying?

Pupil: There was, like, 'Fenians'¹ and there was, like, 'eurgrh', and then there was like different things like that.

Interviewer: And have there been any other incidents like that?

Pupil: I feel like they kind of looked down on us because they thought they were more superior. And they thought they were better than us.

Sherif (1961) argue that when divided groups are brought together in competitive rather than cooperative conditions, even the mere presence of the outgroup is often sufficient to prompt exclusionary attitudes. The activities described by students were clearly not designed to prompt rivalry, yet in encouraging students to openly lay claim to an identity they seemed, at least for some, to create and reinforce a sense of 'them and us' that brought tensions to the fore.

However, similar experiences were not referenced by any students in the majority Protestant school. Whilst the reasons were not immediately clear, it is possible that the students had implicitly absorbed and were modelling the views of teachers in their respective schools (Bain, 1985). Hence, the more critical stance adopted by teachers in the Catholic school may have created a space for students to report unfavourable experiences of SE, whereas the more positive disposition of some teachers in the majority Protestant school may have encouraged students to rehearse positive accounts. Yet most teachers in the Catholic school and two in the majority Protestant school explained that they too had observed negativity between the groups during planned SE activities over a number of years:

There have been a few incidents where things have been said that are quite sectarian between the pupils.

We had one incident with a [sectarian] song.

The SE co-ordinator in the majority Protestant school offered a fulsome account of the tensions. The emotive comments below reveal the seemingly intractable dilemmas that contact programmes can prompt for school leaders and teachers:

I think the biggest challenge is managing the sectarian currents that flow and sometimes come to the top amongst the kids. For me ... the biggest challenge in my head is that we might be creating more problems than we're actually solving. That we're giving people the chance to be sectarian.

They went on to explain how teachers responded to a recent sectarian incident between groups of pupils:

[W]e 'dealt with it' – we didn't deal with it, because no one's got the skills to deal with that. In Northern Ireland, I would say [anyone] would have struggled with even beginning to deal with that. And I don't [know how to deal with it], and your average teacher sure as hell doesn't.

Although a cause of discomfort, sectarian behaviour is inevitable in a society transitioning from a prolonged conflict. Indeed, it might be argued that an effective intergroup encounter is one which enables participants to express their views, however contentious. The alternative – tensions festering unaddressed beneath surface-level politeness – is unlikely to constitute meaningful reconciliation. Accepting the inevitability of sectarianism in SE has, however, implications for teacher education and practice. Preparing teachers to address sectarianism abstractly through the curriculum is one aspect of such education; however, building their capacity to confidently address the casual and deliberate sectarian incidents that may emerge just by being in the presence of the 'other' community seems equally, if not more, important.

As the SE coordinator seems to recognise, there is a notable lack of consensus in the literature to guide teachers as to the 'best' approach to teaching divisive issues. While McEvoy (2007) argues that teachers might be provided with a framework for addressing the past and its legacy at both individual *and* structural levels, and that issues ought to be framed as political and rights-based as opposed to individual and personal, others suggest that teachers should develop strategies to manage emotion (Roberts & Iyall Smith, 2002). Perhaps, though, it is, as Pace (2019) and Emerson (2023) explain, the need to contain risk that must be the overriding concern when discussing issues that prompt tension between the groups in SE. Instead of designing activities that encourage students who are not familiar with each other to immediately explore controversial issues, as described, teachers might adopt a phased and reflective approach whereby they constantly review and gauge student readiness to discuss 'hot issues' before incrementally introducing their discussion (Emerson et al., 2014). Emerson (2012) advises teachers to assess threat and attend to the pacing of discussion whilst framing issues as structural rather than personal. This 'means that you can discuss an issue without making either you or students vulnerable or put them under pressure to reveal their personal views, especially when doing so could expose them to strong reactions from others' (p. 28). Whilst such framing encourages a more cognitive rather than emotional engagement with the controversial issue, it does not remove the affective aspect altogether (McCully & Emerson, 2014). Rather, it provides a space for 'safer' engagement with emotive issues (Emerson, 2012).

The need to attend to how young people interpret issues related to the conflict seems also important. As noted earlier, the SE activity required the students to read a novel about the conflict in their own school before meeting. The data above imply some of the challenges that such preparation may prompt and might be explained by Church et al. (2004), who have argued that although single identity work can yield positive outcomes, it can also deepen long-standing feelings of enmity. The tendency for post-primary pupils to interpret historical and political events through their own community narrative potentially strengthens these feelings (Barton & McCully, 2012). Young people who may already be prone to ingroup bias and outgroup discrimination may have interpreted the novel through this prism, potentially weakening their ability to form positive relations.

Conclusion

Although the data reported here is from one school partnership in NI, the findings may extend beyond NI and SE. The rise of global and local conflicts continues to create challenges for school systems worldwide, where societal tensions around race and religious difference inevitably assert themselves within school communities (Banks, 2015). Understanding how schools respond to group tension is therefore of relevance. Contact is often presented as an obvious solution and has influenced policy in NI, the USA and the UK, where bringing young people together in schools or other contexts has been promoted as a resolution (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The intuitive appeal of contact is clear, and difficult to dispute. However, this research has shown that while contact initiatives such as those offered by SE can provide an opportunity to challenge barriers between deeply divided groups, they continue to require refinement and careful crafting if they are to realise reconciliation benefits in schools. The small scale nature of this research means that there is no claim to generalisability, yet the paper offers insights into several aspects of contact that may have implications for other contexts.

Firstly, the paper reveals how contact unfolds amongst adolescents in mixed school settings. Contact theory advises that when divided groups meet and get to know each other, they will be better able to challenge prejudice and stereotypes and this, in turn, will lead to more positive relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The data appear to indicate that SE may offer such an opportunity. Some of the adolescents embraced the prospect of contact and framed it in largely positive terms. Their readiness for and openness to contact underlines the potential of SE to break down barriers in a society where there continue to be significant spatial, cultural and social constraints on intergroup mixing. Yet the data suggests caution too. It shows that just being in the presence of the other can prompt discomfort amongst adolescents, who are already prone to self-consciousness in social situations. Reflecting arguments cited earlier, it suggests that an opportunity to make contact does not of necessity mean that participants will interact (Dixon & McKeown, 2021). Instead, sharing a physical space might intensify the normal feelings of social unease already experienced by adolescents. As anxiety is linked inversely to positive contact outcomes, attending to the unique characteristics of adolescents during school-based contact projects seems important. Accepting that adolescents may feel discomforted in unfamiliar social

situations can allow teachers to develop strategies that foster confidence and self-belief.

Secondly, the paper has suggested the importance of harnessing students' skills in dialogue and building intergroup relationships before exploring controversial or divisive topics in schools. The curriculum is obviously central to SE, yet determining content, particularly related to contentious issues, as students traverse between mixed and separate settings requires careful deliberation. As argued, safety is paramount and framing controversial issues as rights-based matters rather than a consequence of personal prejudice has been shown to allow students and teachers to feel less vulnerable during such discussions (Emerson, 2012, 2023). However, what should be taught in mixed and separate settings requires further analysis. Barton and McCully (2012) have argued that students tend to interpret divisive issues through the lens of their own community narrative. This can strengthen a sense of 'them versus us' – something that was evident in the data. Therefore, developing students' skills in dialogue, perspective-taking and critical thinking in separate and mixed settings seems key before jointly tackling highly controversial topics. The SE setting might focus first on relationship-building and fostering strong intergroup connections. Once this foundation is established, controversial issues may be introduced incrementally, in a scaffolded way that supports constructive discussion.

Finally, the paper cautions against assumptions that contact is universally accepted as a solution to division even amongst those charged with facilitating it. That SE was not universally supported by teachers alludes to concerns about its perceived value as a mechanism to build reconciliation in education. This aligns with critical scholarship which suggests that contact alone cannot singularly 'resolve' conflict without accompanying efforts to facilitate controversial issue dialogue, mobilise around inequality and explicitly transform systemic inequity (McEvoy et al., 2006; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Further research might explore how teachers and leaders view the premise of contact interventions to heal divisions. Unpacking any scepticism and ambivalence seems to be a necessary first step to building shared schools. Without supportive institutions, student gains risk remaining surface-level or ephemeral.

Limitations

As with any research, there are limitations to this study; principally, that the small sample inevitably limits this paper's generalisability. The data prompts further questions for study around teaching controversial issues in SE and the potential for negative contact, drawing on data from a wider range of partnerships to allow for generalisation.

Note

1. 'Fenian' refers to 19th-century Irish and Irish-American revolutionaries dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland. Today it is more frequently employed as a term of abuse directed at Catholics in NI.

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