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Loader, R., Hughes, J., & Furey, A. (2020). By law, custom or local atmosphere': Exploring institutional support in school-based contact programmes. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(5), 1044-1063. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3612>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

**Published in:**  
British Educational Research Journal

**Publication Status:**  
Published online: 12/03/2020

**DOI:**  
[10.1002/berj.3612](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3612)

**Document Version**  
Author Accepted version

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**‘By law, custom or local atmosphere’: Exploring institutional support in school-based contact programmes**

**Rebecca Loader \***

Queen’s University Belfast

r.loader@qub.ac.uk

**Joanne Hughes**

Queen’s University Belfast

**Andrea Furey**

Ulster University

\* School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work  
69/71 University Street  
Belfast, BT7 1HL, UK

## **‘By law, custom or local atmosphere’: Exploring institutional support in school-based contact programmes**

### **ABSTRACT**

Allport’s intergroup contact theory outlines four conditions for effective contact: equal status between participants within the contact situation, cooperation, common goals, and “institutional supports (i.e. by law, custom or local atmosphere)” for contact (Allport 1954, 281). While the literature indicates that institutional support may be a particularly important condition for effective contact (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), its role and impact remains under-researched, particularly in studies of contact within real-world contexts. This article seeks to address this gap through a study of institutional support within a school-based contact initiative operating in two countries, Northern Ireland and North Macedonia. Known as ‘shared education’, this promotes inter-school collaboration as a means of fostering contact between pupils from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Adopting a qualitative approach and using data collected through interviews with staff involved in four shared education projects, this study explores three aspects: the extent to which shared education demonstrates support for contact; the factors that encourage or impede supportive contact norms; and the relationship between the norms of the school and those of other authorities, particularly parents and the community.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In societies affected by ethnic violence, peace agreements represent only the beginning of a process of reconstruction following conflict. Among the most significant, and difficult, tasks of post-Agreement peacebuilding is tackling patterns of segregation that have become established among divided groups. One means by which this is addressed is through the promotion of intergroup contact initiatives. Often underpinned by an understanding of contact theory (Allport 1954), these bring together people from different ethnic or religious groups for activities that encourage cross-group interaction. Through such opportunities, it is hoped that contact will be normalised – both in that environment and, consequently, elsewhere – and relations improved.

Education has been a notable site for interventions of this type, particularly where social segregation is reflected in the existence of separate schooling for each group. This article explores contact through one such initiative, known as ‘shared education’. The shared education model encourages separate schools to collaborate across religious or linguistic lines to provide pupils with opportunities for regular contact, typically via mixed classes and activities. Specifically, we focus on the ‘institutional support’ (Allport 1954) provided for cross-group interaction within the programme – that is, the extent to which contact is endorsed and nurtured by staff in participating schools. One of Allport’s four facilitating conditions for prejudice-reducing contact, institutional support has received limited attention in research on shared education, but is vital if schools are to promote contact as a norm among pupils, staff and the wider community.

The shared education model was first introduced in Northern Ireland in 2007 and was subsequently implemented in North Macedonia<sup>1</sup> in 2011. Both states continue to experience inter-ethnic division<sup>2</sup>, despite two decades passing in each case since peace agreements were signed. In Northern Ireland, divisions remain between Catholics (45% of the population of 1.8 million), who typically seek the reunification of Ireland, and Protestants (48%), who have traditionally wished to maintain the union with Great Britain (NISRA 2014). This division is reflected in the parallel education system, with over 90% of pupils attending state-funded schools that are either Catholic or *de facto* Protestant in character (DENI 2018).

In North Macedonia, divisions are primarily between ethnic Albanians (25% of the population of 2.1 million) and ethnic Macedonians (64%) (CIA 2016). Albanians living in North Macedonia are overwhelmingly Muslim while the majority of Macedonians follow Orthodox Christianity. These two groups are further divided by language difference, with Albanian and Macedonian the predominant languages respectively. Tensions between the two groups over minority rights and political representation reached their height during a 9-month conflict in 2001, which was resolved with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Among the provisions of this agreement were the strengthening of language rights for minority groups, including the right to receive education in one's mother tongue. As a consequence, the vast majority of Albanian and Macedonian pupils are educated separately, either in different schools or different shifts or buildings in multi-language schools, which are state-funded and overseen by local municipalities (Lyon 2013).

In each country, the shared education model encourages collaboration across ethnic and religious boundaries – between Catholic and Protestant schools in Northern Ireland and Albanian-language and Macedonian-language schools or shifts in North Macedonia – to facilitate interaction between pupils from different backgrounds. We begin the article by outlining how shared education has developed in each country before discussing the underpinning contact theory, focusing on the role of institutional support and normative change in contact settings. Drawing on a small-scale interview study conducted across two shared education partnerships in each country, we then consider the nature of 'institutional support' within these contact initiatives. Specifically, we explore how such support is manifested (or otherwise) in the school setting, and how it shapes, or is shaped by, other norms within schools and the education system as well as those of the wider community. In doing so, we aim to bridge a gap between the theoretical literature on contact and more applied research on education, diversity and peacebuilding, by providing insight into the ways that contact principles are manifested and thwarted in real-world educational settings. We conclude with some reflection on the findings in relation to the aims of shared education and its future development.

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<sup>1</sup> The country now known as North Macedonia was, between 1991 and 2019, involved in a dispute with Greece over its former name, 'the Republic of Macedonia'. This was resolved through the adoption of the name 'the Republic of North Macedonia' from February 2019. This new nomenclature is reflected in the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Although religion is frequently cited in discussions of conflict in Northern Ireland, it is generally accepted that inter-communal divisions are primarily political and cultural rather than doctrinal. Thus, the term 'ethnicity' is commonly employed in descriptions of Catholic/Protestant identity and difference (Clayton, 1998).

**BACKGROUND**The geographical foci of this paper, Northern Ireland and North Macedonia, are selected because it is here that shared education initiatives are most long-standing. In these more established programmes, we would expect to gain the richest understanding of the outworkings of institutional support; projects in other settings are in their infancy and thus unlikely to offer the same depth of experience. Moreover, both countries have experienced inter-ethnic conflict, and have adopted similar models of shared education, North Macedonia having taken inspiration from Northern Ireland. While differences are evident, as outlined below, this provides a level of commonality that ensures meaningful comparison between and across each country and programme.

Introduced in Northern Ireland from 2007, shared education promotes school collaboration across denominational lines as a means of improving intergroup relations. School partnerships, typically comprising at least one controlled (*de facto* Protestant) school and one Catholic maintained school, cooperate to provide curriculum classes and activities in mixed groups, with pupils travelling between one another's schools to participate. The subjects and activities chosen for shared education vary, with school partnerships encouraged to build their programme around their shared priorities for development. However, monitoring data from 2017/18 indicates that the most commonly selected curricular areas are those incorporating subjects such as history and citizenship, suggesting that schools are, at least nominally, addressing those topics with the clearest relevance to peacebuilding. By building sharing around the delivery of the curriculum, the model seeks to embed reconciliation within schools' core priorities and prevent it from becoming an 'add-on' to existing work.

Initially introduced as a small-scale pilot initiative, since 2015 shared education has been implemented across Northern Ireland by the Department of Education (DE) and Education Authority (EA), with support from the Atlantic Philanthropies and the EU's 'Peace IV' programme. At the time of writing, approximately 600 schools of almost 1200 in Northern Ireland were involved in a shared education initiative (CASE 2018; Education Authority, personal correspondence, 9 August 2018). The frequency and duration of activities is left to the partnership, though DE establishes a minimal participation level in terms of hours-per-pupil, per year. Classes are typically led by the usual class teacher(s) (primary schools) or subject teacher(s) (post-primary schools), who have access to tailored training courses through EA. A network of Development Officers, employed by EA, oversees programme delivery through school visits and the collection of monitoring data, while the inspectorate considers shared education provision during routine school inspections.

Underlying shared education is the recognition that significant change to Northern Ireland's divided education system is unlikely in the short-term, due to political and religious support for the status quo and continuing parental demand for denominational education.<sup>3</sup> Within the parameters of separate education, however, the model offers regular opportunities for pupils to learn and mix with those of different religious and cultural backgrounds. This emphasis on direct encounter reflects the learning from research in social psychology, which has identified a positive association between intergroup contact, particularly via friendship, and improved attitudes towards the perceived outgroup. Consistent with this, research has found that pupils attending schools that are involved in shared education report more cross-group friendships and more favourable intergroup attitudes than their peers at non-participating schools (Hughes et al., 2010, 2012). Moreover, emerging research suggests that these effects are greatest among those with prior negative experiences of contact (Reimer, Hughes and Hewstone, unpublished).

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<sup>3</sup> While parents express support for integrated education in surveys (Hansson, O'Connor Bones and McCord 2013), most choose a denominational school in practice, and half of integrated post-primary schools continue to be under-subscribed (Torney 2012).

Although this is positive, research has also highlighted challenges around the management and negotiation of difference in shared activities (Donnelly, 2012; Loader and Hughes, 2017) and suggests that a minority of pupils report negative experiences of contact through shared education (Gallagher et al, 2010). While efforts to address these challenges continue, shared education nevertheless appears the most feasible approach to fostering integration in the current educational climate.

This pragmatic approach to integration within a separate school system has attracted interest from other conflict-affected regions. These include North Macedonia, in which a programme informed by shared education operated between 2011 and 2017. Termed the ‘Interethnic Integration in Education Programme’, this evolved from a collaboration between colleagues from the Centre for Shared Education, the Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution in Skopje, and organisations including UNICEF and USAID. Seeking to bridge social and educational divisions between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians, in particular, collaborative partnerships were created between schools of different languages of instruction, as well as across multilingual schools that operate separate shifts for different linguistic groups. Importantly, and in contrast to Northern Ireland, these activities were led by two or more teachers, one from each ethnic/linguistic group, who provided bilingual instruction. Shared education activities in North Macedonia have typically included sport, art and performance rather than the more traditional curriculum subjects adopted in Northern Ireland (Petroska-Beshka and Osmani 2016). The choice of activities reflects both the greater emphasis on reconciliation relative to educational goals in North Macedonia and the realities of the multilingual context, as these pursuits are less dependent on verbal instruction than more ‘academic’ subjects.

As the latter point illustrates, shared education has sought a pragmatic approach, encouraging greater integration while accommodating the reality of a separate education system. However, there is arguably some incongruence in attempting to change relationship patterns, and normalise intergroup interaction in an education system that remains structurally divided. In the light of contact theory, which posits that support from authorities and institutions is a key factor in effective contact, this study considers the model’s potential to effect the changes it seeks.

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND NORMATIVE SUPPORT FOR INTERGROUP CONTACT**

Attributed to Gordon Allport (1954), intergroup contact theory posits that “contact with a member of another group (or ‘outgroup’), typically one that is viewed negatively by one’s own group (or ‘ingroup’), should reduce prejudice towards the outgroup as a whole. A large body of research has tested this hypothesis, finding strong empirical support for the role of positive contact in improving attitudes (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). While a recent body of research has found that negative contact may, equally, worsen prejudice and have a more critical effect on intergroup attitudes (Barlow, 2012; Vistin et al, 2017), negative contact is also reported significantly less often than positive contact – a finding that is not limited to peaceful settings (Bagci and Turnuklu, 2019; Graf, Paolini and Rubin, 2014). Graf and colleagues (2014) suggest that the greater frequency of positive contact might compensate for the influence of negative contact, leading to small but reliable improvements in intergroup attitudes overall (Graf et al., 2014).

To reduce the likelihood of negative contact, Allport’s hypothesis outlined four ‘conditions’ of favourable contact: equal status between groups during the encounter, common goals, cooperation, and sanction from “institutional supports (i.e. by law, custom or local

atmosphere)” (Allport 1954, 281). The presence of each of these has been found to facilitate greater improvement in attitudes than occurs in their absence (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) Of these conditions, ‘institutional support’ has received the least research attention (de Tezanos Pinto, Bratt and Brown 2010), but may nevertheless be “an especially important condition for facilitating positive contact effects” (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 766).

Within contact research, institutional support has largely been conceptualised in terms of the (positive) contact norms promoted by organisations such as schools and workplaces. However, as Davies et al. (2013) note, Allport’s reference to “law, custom or local atmosphere” may also encompass the norms of other influential groups or bodies, such as family members, peers and the community. These norms provide cues as to the beliefs and actions that are endorsed or proscribed by fellow group members, and thus “guide and/or constrain social behaviour” (Cialdini and Trost 1998, 152). In intergroup settings, perceived norms may act upon the contact-prejudice relationship in four ways: as antecedents of contact, influencing its likelihood of occurring; as moderators of the strength of contact effects; as mediators of the relationship between contact and prejudice; and as outcomes of contact (Davies et al. 2013).

Exploring first the role of norms as antecedents of contact, studies have found that perceptions of positive ingroup and outgroup contact norms are associated with greater interest in interacting with the outgroup and forming cross-group friendships (Tropp and Bianchi 2006; Jugert, Noack and Rutland 2011; Al Ramiah et al. 2015). However, such studies have tended to employ generalised measures of norms (asking about the perspectives of ‘ingroup’ or ‘outgroup’) or peer norms only. Those focusing on the impact of organisational norms on contact intentions have been more equivocal, some finding a positive association (see, for example, Tropp, O’Brien and Migacheva 2014; Schachner et al. 2015) and others no relationship (Molina and Wittig 2006; Kende, Tropp and Lantos 2017).

The role of norms in moderating the effects of contact on prejudice is perhaps closest to what Allport envisaged when outlining his contact conditions (Davies et al., 2011). While recent research in this area has been sparse, Mähönen, Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind (2011) and Kende, Tropp and Lantos (2017) have reported that peer/parental and institutional norms, respectively, moderate the effect of contact on attitudes. A larger body of literature has examined the mediating role of norms, finding that perceived ingroup and outgroup norms – typically, from peers and parents – mediate the effects of direct and indirect (knowing an ingroup member who has an outgroup friend) contact on prejudice (Turner et al. 2008; Ata, Bastian and Lusher 2009; Feddes, Noack and Rutland 2009). Focusing on the school context, De Tezanos Pinto, Bratt and Brown (2010) observed that, in classes where cross-group friendships were common, pupils perceived more favourable in-group contact norms and expressed more positive intergroup attitudes. This points to a group-level effect of contact, whereby frequent exposure to a high-contact environment improves the perceptions of even those with little direct experience of contact (see also Christ et al. 2014).

Finally, studies exploring norms as an outcome variable have reported that positive contact promotes perceptions of positive ingroup and outgroup contact norms, while negative contact results in more negative perceptions (Turner et al. 2008; Mazziotta et al. 2015). These findings point to a reciprocal relationship whereby positive (or negative) experiences of contact lead to perceptions of positive (or negative) intergroup norms, and consequently to an inclination (or disinclination) to participate in future contact.

Cumulatively, this research suggests that normative or *institutional* (in the widest sense) support for contact can have a significant impact on the likelihood that cross-group encounters will occur and be effective. However, given its quantitative orientation, this literature sheds

little light on the developing *process* of contact, particularly in real-world settings – for example, the practices through which norms are challenged or maintained, the influence of the wider institutional context and potentially competing norms within it, and how institutional, peer and community norms might inform one another. In the latter case, what studies exist have suggested that an inclusive school norm can promote positive outgroup attitudes even where the peer norm is negative (McGuire, Rutland and Nesdale 2015). School and peer norms may also have differential effects, the former predicting interest in intergroup friendship and the latter improved quantity and quality of contact (McKeown and Taylor 2018; Tropp et al. 2017). How individuals themselves navigate multiple, often competing norms remains unexplored, however.

This paper seeks to address such omissions and offer qualitative insights in relation to three research questions: (1) how, if at all, do shared education partnerships promote norms supportive of contact? (2) what encourages or impedes supportive contact norms within these settings? (3) and how do school contact norms relate to the norms of other ‘authorities’, particularly those of parents and the community? In exploring these issues, the study seeks to extend our understanding of ‘institutional support’ in practice within the real-world setting of shared education, in which promoting contact and changing intergroup norms are core aims.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was adopted as most appropriate to the research purpose and questions. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 23 staff involved in the delivery of shared education in Northern Ireland and North Macedonia. Participants were selected as those with the most extensive experience of shared education in their context, typically as a principal, school-level shared education coordinator, or teacher of shared classes. All had been involved in shared education for at least one academic year. School partnerships were approached either directly (Northern Ireland) or via local academic colleagues (North Macedonia) and invited to take part. Our decision to focus on teachers and programme staff recognises that research has tended to consider the attitudes of the ‘targets’ of contact interventions only – in this case, students – and has rarely explored the perspectives of those with the greatest power to influence the norms within these institutional contexts. We acknowledge, however, that speaking to pupils might yield different perspectives from those reported here.

In Northern Ireland, the interviewees were four school principals (two from Catholic backgrounds and two Protestant), two vice principals (both Protestant) and four teachers (two Catholic and two Protestant), drawn from two shared education partnerships. These were selected as established partnerships operating in contrasting circumstances: one in an inner city area that witnessed significant violence during the conflict and continues to experience substantial intergroup division; and one in a rural area with a relatively well integrated population and amicable relations. Also important in the selection of these partnerships was the extent of shared education provision, with one offering one personal effectiveness course post-16 and the other providing an extensive shared programme. The first partnership involved three girls’ post-primary schools, two Catholic and one Protestant, each located within two miles of the others. The second partnership comprised four coeducational post-primary schools, two Catholic and two Protestant. Three of these schools were within walking distance of each other in a market town with a mixed population; the fourth was located in a predominantly Catholic area some ten miles away.



In North Macedonia, interviews were conducted with four staff from a non-governmental organisation which has assisted with the delivery of the Interethnic Integration in Education Programme (IIEP), three principals (two Albanian, one Macedonian), and six teachers (three Albanian and three Macedonian). The school staff were drawn from two partnerships and selected from among the IIEP's six 'demonstration schools', i.e. schools chosen to develop a more intensive programme of shared activity and to serve as examples for other schools in the region. The first partnership comprised two primary schools, one Albanian-language and one Macedonian-language, which were situated in neighbouring, largely homogeneous towns. Pupils and teachers at these schools met regularly for joint activities, which were held at each school alternately and included multicultural workshops and arts-based projects. The second partnership operated in a post-primary, multi-language school in a town with a mixed population but high levels of residential segregation. The school operated separate shifts in the Albanian and Macedonian languages, and scheduled shared activities at the end of the first shift. These included multicultural workshops, shared sports and drama sessions, and joint excursions.

Interviews were conducted largely by the second author, with support from colleagues within the Centre for Shared Education. In North Macedonia, an interpreter also provided assistance with interviews where translation between English and Albanian or Macedonian was required. Interviews were undertaken at the interviewee's workplace in each case. Prior to the interviews, staff were advised of the research aims and the nature of their involvement, and gave consent for their participation and for interviews to be audio-recorded. Questions explored to what extent, and how, schools promoted positive contact norms within their ethos, organisation and classroom practice. The interviews also explored other norms of relevance to shared education, such as those of pupils' families and the wider community, and considered how these influenced the delivery and outcomes of the programmes.

The interview recordings were transcribed and the data subjected to thematic analysis using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software programme, MAXQDA. This analytic approach involved an initial close reading of all transcripts followed by line-by-line analysis attaching short phrases or codes to the data that "assign[ed] a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" (Saldana 2009, 3). These codes were subsequently refined and grouped into themes and sub-themes that were verified against the dataset to ensure they represented the data appropriately (Braun and Clarke 2006). Analysis was conducted by the first author, with assistance from the second, both of whom are resident in Northern Ireland (although the first author is from another part of the UK). While our backgrounds mean that we are more familiar with the norms of Northern Ireland than those of North Macedonia, the methodical approach to analysis helped to limit the influence of this on our reading of the data.

## **FINDINGS**

In this section, we consider four main topics, which correspond to the major themes emerging in the data. We discuss the contact norms around the school and the norms within the classroom separately as the latter emerged as a distinct space with its own conventions and expectations. We also examine the relationship and interaction between the norms of the school and those outside, particularly in the wider community. We begin by considering the role of school leadership in creating institutional support for contact.

### **Institutional leadership**

Across the interviews with classroom teachers and senior staff in each setting, the leadership of the school emerged as fundamental to a supportive climate for contact. Participants highlighted, in particular, the importance of the principal's commitment to shared education and their ability to develop similar commitment among staff. This required school leaders to communicate the value and importance of shared education within the school, model relationship-building, and inspire colleagues' engagement with the initiative.

Organisational collaboration...often comes down to individuals, and it's individuals leading something and building up relationships with other organisations. (Principal, Protestant school, NI)

[Name], for example, he was a very strong leader... The school needs to have its internal commitment to the work. (NGO staff member, North Macedonia)

The importance of leadership in building support among staff was revealed particularly in examples of less effective practice, which were often reported by school leaders themselves. In Northern Ireland, for example, the principal of a rural Catholic school observed that heads within her partnership had "*not had a sufficiently good working relationship with our staff in our respective schools*", which had impeded the development of support for shared education. In North Macedonia, staff commitment to shared education had been weakened by a perceived lack of consultation over "*the space and the time*" required for shared activities, as well as a lack of recognition for the extra work this entailed. While involving staff in decisions thus appeared vital to create a climate of support for sharing, there were examples in the data of leaders marginalising those who expressed concerns or dissatisfaction with the programme. For example, in the rural partnership in Northern Ireland, one principal spoke of his approach to staff who did not share his support for shared education.

We would have staff in school...one or two people that would be very entrenched in their Prod<sup>4</sup> side... But if we give the leadership, those people, their influence is suppressed, and it has to be suppressed because they are wrong. (Principal, Protestant school, NI)

Rather than engaging with these concerns, this leader dismissed them and the individuals expressing them as 'wrong' and, by implication, sectarian (in presumed contrast to their supportive colleagues). This risked making an orthodoxy of support for shared education, which, in its failure to address misgivings, could potentially foment dissatisfaction.

An additional approach by which principals could develop and demonstrate institutional support was by modelling pro-contact behaviours. The data revealed examples of simple but symbolically important actions from principals that signalled support for contact. These included greeting pupils from partner schools in the corridor; issuing invitations for partner schools to attend performances, events and religious services at the school; attending events held at or in conjunction with other schools in the partnership; and reproaching individuals who displayed hostility to the other group. Relationships between senior staff from different schools could be significant in modelling behaviour, providing pupils and colleagues with positive examples of cross-group interaction.

[Protestant school principal] had a conference on Monday and each school invited their prefects to welcome everyone. When the kids see us mixing and they see other teachers from other schools hopping in and out, I think that's good. (Principal, Catholic school, NI)

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<sup>4</sup> 'Prod' is a colloquial term for 'Protestant' in Northern Ireland, most commonly used as a pejorative.

These examples of positive interaction between school leaders were particularly important during periods of tension in the partnership or wider community, demonstrating schools' commitment to collaboration despite internal or external pressures. These relationships faced their own challenges, however, especially where one school felt they were doing the majority of the planning and administration for the partnership. This could result in frustration and resentment that threatened to damage inter-school relationships and their potential to serve as models of contact.

One of the issues with this is that the other schools sometimes regard us as the school in charge of it all... That is the problem and the burden of work and so on falls on us. (Vice-principal, Protestant school, urban partnership)

So in the Macedonian school, the coordinator... is very, very angry because she feels that all these years, the Macedonian school put much more effort in the communication and they're taking their Albanian colleagues on their back. (NGO staff member, North Macedonia)

In summary, the data revealed that creating an institutionally supportive climate required senior staff to provide both practical and symbolic leadership for shared education; mere endorsement was not sufficient. To this end, effective leadership depended on skills in relationship-building, negotiation and empathy, and the capacity to develop these in future leaders for the programme's long-term sustainability. Furthermore, for this supportive climate to occur across the partnership, participating schools needed to demonstrate equal commitment to collaboration.

### **Contact norms within schools and school partnerships**

Because it seeks to respect school identity, shared education does not require participating schools to make fundamental changes to their ethos or policies as part of the collaborative process. Rather, it aims to promote integration and 'normalise' contact by providing opportunities to participate in or witness (positive) cross-group encounters. According to work by Hewstone and Brown (1986), the success of this approach depends on pupils' group identities being salient during interaction and visible across the different spaces of the school.

In North Macedonia, group identity was evident from pupils' use of different languages around the school and within shared classes and activities. Participants reported that the presence of linguistic difference was fundamental to the programme, which sought to promote "*the balance and the equal value of the languages*" (teacher, Albanian school) as the norm. In Northern Ireland, however, where pupils typically share a language<sup>5</sup> and identity cannot be inferred from accent or appearance, school uniform was the principal identity marker in shared settings. Staff hoped that shared education would normalise the presence of different uniforms, and consequently different religious groups, within the school.

Now if we...create an expectation for the pupils that we are more than happy to have the high school pupils coming through our door, and likewise ours in there, different uniforms become just part of the norm. It shouldn't incite any derogatory remarks or any unpleasantness, and it is about building that expectation in both our schools. (Principal, Catholic school, rural, NI)

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<sup>5</sup> Approximately 1 per cent of pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in Irish-medium schools. At the time of writing, only four of the 28 Irish-medium schools were participating in shared education.

In response to this aim, teachers commented that pupils had become “*used to*” and “*comfortable*” with moving between schools, and their presence had become “*part of the norm*” as the principal had hoped. However, there were also indications in the data that the presence of outgroup pupils within the school remained to some extent ‘abnormal’. In the urban partnership, for example, a teacher’s polite reference to incoming pupils as “*visitors to the school*”, whose uniform marked them out as requiring assistance (for example, in finding the toilets), suggested that they continued to be regarded as outsiders. Furthermore, one teacher’s efforts to create a common t-shirt for pupils to wear during shared activities indicated some discomfort with such visible difference, particularly where integration was the aim.

In both countries, efforts to create mixed environments could be stymied by financial, temporal and curricular constraints, often resulting from a lack of systemic support for shared education. In Northern Ireland, for example, staff at the most remote school in the rural partnership expressed anxieties about the travelling required by the programme. Concerned that this would reduce teaching time and affect student outcomes, they had begun to explore possibilities for online learning. Although this offered logistical benefits, it threatened to reduce pupils’ opportunities for direct and indirect contact. In North Macedonia, the long distance between schools that resulted from residential segregation also posed challenges to the normalisation of contact. Stretched school budgets and the absence of government or NGO funding for transport meant that meetings could be sporadic and were unlikely to challenge (non-) contact norms significantly. The persistence of a shift system also complicated efforts to normalise ‘mixing’ within the multilingual school in North Macedonia. The need to schedule shared sessions during the period between shifts meant that cross-group encounters were rarely visible to non-participating students. Consequently, the full potential of indirect contact was not realised.

Despite such constraints, interviewees considered shared education to have had a positive impact on contact norms, offering examples of often minor developments as indicators of important change. In Northern Ireland, staff remarked on the significance of “*the green and the black [uniforms]...mixing in the playground*” (principal, Protestant school). Similarly, in North Macedonia, a teacher at the Albanian-language school drew a contrast between the recent past, when “*it was not normal to have students that have different languages of instruction working together*”, and the present, where students “*feel comfortable and they like these opportunities to have time to spend together with students with other languages...*” However, there were suggestions, particularly from North Macedonia, that these new norms might not transfer beyond the shared activities. One interviewee commented, for example, that outside shared education, the other group’s presence in the school might remain risky:

They're sensibilised in both schools, and there is no problem for a Macedonian child to go there or Albanian to go there, but only if they're organised. I'm not sure that it's safe to go on your own (NGO staff member, North Macedonia).

Two observations may be made here. First, it is notable that the successes that teachers cite appear quite moderate – for example, pupils ‘mixing’ without conflict or ‘feeling comfortable’ in one another’s company. On one hand, this may be interpreted within a wider context of division, where ostensibly small markers of progress assume significance. On the other hand, it may be indicative of limited aspirations for shared education, which may hinder more substantial transformation. If staff are content with these outcomes, or indeed *unsupportive* of more ambitious aims such as fostering dialogue and perspective-taking, then the impact of shared education may be reduced. Second, even where changes in contact norms occur in the school, there may be a query around the programme’s potential to foster similar change outside. Interviewees suggested that in other settings where peer or parental norms had greater salience, any change might be limited. Indeed, though some teachers pointed to pupils’ social media

contact as an indicator of the ‘normalisation’ of cross-group contact, one participant in Northern Ireland described the school as a place apart, a “*cocoon*”, to which change might be confined.

### **Institutional and normative support in the classroom**

As shared education is delivered through curricular subjects or teacher-led extra-curricular activities, the classroom (or drama hall or sportsfield) is the principal site of contact. It is therefore important that the norms within these spaces are supportive of intergroup interaction. The data suggested, however, that contact norms could vary between classes and activities, and depended on the subject and course, the teachers’ willingness to promote contact, and the composition of the group – the latter influenced by each school’s criteria for selecting participants.

In the first example, different subjects often had their own norms of interaction that influenced the level of contact among pupils. Most conducive to contact were more practical subjects and activities, such as drama and personal development, to which interaction was fundamental. In academic and examination-focused subjects, by comparison, classroom norms of individual learning were commonplace and could conflict with pro-interaction norms. This tension was particularly pronounced in Northern Ireland, where the programme incorporated more traditional subjects and examination courses. Teachers in the rural partnership acknowledged this, contrasting “*dynamic*” subjects such as performing arts, where “*people have to get on*”, with “*quieter*” computer-based lessons, where “*interaction between the kids is markedly less*” (vice-principal, Protestant school). In the urban partnership, staff had sought to mitigate this by building shared education around a course that offered opportunities both to collaborate and to pursue qualifications.

Interviewer: How did you choose the courses?

Teacher: We felt that they were accessible and... something that naturally allowed a lot of integration, talking and communication. They weren’t the type of courses where you would be sitting and listening to a lecture. They were group work, activity-based courses. (Teacher, Protestant school)

As this suggests, teaching staff were important in structuring the programme to promote contact as the norm. In the classroom, they could also encourage interaction through managing group dynamics and the choice of task. Group dynamics could be influenced by regulating the group’s composition (in terms of size and the numbers from each ethnic/religious group and gender), where pupils sat and with whom they worked. In Northern Ireland, group composition depended on which pupils selected the relevant subject for their examination course, with little teacher input. In North Macedonia, however, there was more direction over group composition, particularly in the multicultural workshops. These were required to have a maximum of 24 participants, balanced in ethnicity and gender, to promote equal status and encourage interaction.

We pair with the teachers from the other school, and each of us appoints 12 students for these joint activities. And we balance them, not only that they have the same number of students from both ethnicities, but they have a balanced number of boys and girls. (Teacher, Albanian school)

In both countries, staff described efforts to influence the grouping and seating patterns of pupils in order to promote contact. Their strategies included seating pupils in mixed school groups, assigning them to teams mixed by religion or ethnicity, and pairing pupils who were considered

likely to work well together. In Northern Ireland, one teacher described adopting the second approach for the business studies element of a personal effective course:

Teacher: It might have been a bit construed and false but we made sure the finance team had a mixture. We made sure all of the different [teams] had a mixture of girls.

Interviewer: Do you think it was important to have the balance?

Teacher: I think it was, rather than having one group of maybe just one school and then they are totally in their comfort zone and wouldn't have to work with others. So, OK, it might be a forced mixing of children but I think it was the only way really. (Teacher, Catholic school)

While these strategies varied in success, they could signal to pupils that the teacher endorsed interaction, albeit within the constraints of the subject and course requirements.

With respect to the selection of tasks for shared classes, participants described attempts to build in opportunities for interaction, but expressed differences of opinion concerning the most appropriate way to do this. In Northern Ireland, interviewees diverged over whether interaction was better promoted through structured activity or a period of unstructured 'social' time within the shared class. The former was most conducive to curriculum delivery, but often limited conversation to the subject matter; the latter offered scope for more personal contact, but, in separating interaction from learning, implied that these were incompatible. In North Macedonia, in comparison, staff favoured structured activities as the vehicle for contact and appeared wary of unstructured interaction. The observation from a teacher in the multilingual school that "*all the time they are busy and there's not much room for being spontaneous and talking about different things*" suggested that conversations that ranged off task were unwelcome. This desire to control classroom interaction was indicative of a perception that contact carried a high risk of conflict, particularly where it could lead to discussions of sensitive issues such as political identity, discrimination and inequality. We have discussed this elsewhere (Loader and Hughes, 2017), but it is worth noting that teachers' preference not to engage with such topics served to uphold the norms of avoidance that were prevalent both in the schools and the wider societies.

### **The relationship between norms within and beyond the school**

As the foregoing discussion has indicated, social norms beyond the classroom could be important in shaping the contact within it. Such norms were often highly context-specific. In Northern Ireland, the area in which the urban partnership was situated remained segregated and was characterised by mutual suspicion with few opportunities to meet the other; in comparison, positive contact norms were more prevalent in the rural area and were manifest in the existence of shared venues and activities for young people. In North Macedonia, the areas surrounding the primary school partnership typified what participants described as the increasing polarisation of inter-ethnic relations. While acknowledging local pockets of integration, participants described an atmosphere of substantial and evident hostility. The setting for the multilingual partnership was acknowledged as the exception to the prevailing trend, however, with what one participant described as a "*long tradition of good relationships within the city*".

These community norms could shape the delivery of shared education, with interviewees arguing that it was less challenging to implement the programme where norms were already favourable to contact. In rural Northern Ireland, for example, one teacher acknowledged that improvements in local relations – described in terms of "*a sense that everyone has moved on*" – had been helpful in ensuring some continuity between the norms within and outside the

school partnership. In contrast, in more divided areas, community contact norms could conflict with those of shared education. In Northern Ireland, a teacher from a Catholic school in the urban partnership contrasted pupils' experiences of contact at school and segregation in the community, observing "*it's like two separate lives*". In North Macedonia, moreover, staff in the primary partnership reported that these conflicting norms had been evident in hostile incidents involving verbal abuse and stone-throwing as pupils walked between schools for shared activities. Following one such encounter, the partnership had sought alternative means of transporting pupils to avoid further negative experiences.

Beyond the local community, the impact of perceived political norms on shared education was more frequently raised by interviewees in North Macedonia than Northern Ireland, in part reflecting the former's more febrile political climate during the period prior to the fieldwork.<sup>6</sup> Greater political polarisation had created an environment that participants considered unsupportive of contact, practically and symbolically. A lack of central funding had placed the IIEP in a precarious financial situation, and this was exacerbated by the "*fear that what we have been building for years, [politicians] can diminish...in one moment*" (teacher, Macedonian school). Moreover, the highly political nature of school governance in North Macedonia had led to concerns that, during periods of intergroup tension, staff and pupils could be mobilised against the programme and the norms of integration it aimed to promote.

The students from high schools, and even from the elementary schools sometimes, are manipulated to take part in protests, in violent protests, and whatever political crisis happens, the first thing that is problematised is inter-ethnic relations (Teacher, Macedonian school)

In this context, one interviewee in North Macedonia reported that they saw the programme's role as providing alternative perspectives that would enable young people to think more critically about the norms promoted by politicians and other authorities beyond the school.

[W]e resisted the idea in the beginning because all the time we said, well, the fish stinks from the head, so the politicians are those that should change their stereotypes and prejudice and the way they guide the country. And us and the kids are helpless, we cannot change a lot. But the thing that we learnt is that the children, if they experience positive contact and are exposed in a direct communication to children from a different ethnicity, would have to choose from different resources when they make their opinions. It's not only the media or the politicians or the parents or the community, it's also their personal experience... (NGO staff member, North Macedonia)

As community norms could influence the delivery of shared education, so interviewees spoke of the potential for a reciprocal impact of shared education on community contact norms. This appeared a particular aspiration in Northern Ireland. In the urban partnership, participants described their hope that shared education would be a catalyst for change in the local community, and had invited parents to the school to learn more about programme and to meet other families. The rural partnership had gone further and positioned itself as a leader of reconciliation in the local area, organising events including an ecumenical service and performances incorporating traditions associated with each community. As the principal of one

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<sup>6</sup> During the year prior to the research, Macedonia had experienced violent inter-ethnic clashes which had led to increasing political entrenchment, while Northern Ireland had experienced a period of relative political stability. In January 2017, subsequent to the period of fieldwork, the Northern Ireland Executive collapsed and, at the time of writing devolved government had not been restored.

of the Protestant schools explained, these events were intended to “*prepare the community to accept where the school is trying to go*”.

While community impact was discussed less frequently in North Macedonia, there was evidence of a desire to influence norms beyond the school. To this end, staff had gone beyond inviting parents to events and had begun involving them in the organisation and delivery of shared activities. As in Northern Ireland, this had the advantage of providing parents with opportunities for direct interaction with the other group, rather than only indirect contact via their children. By taking shared education into the community and involving groups other than pupils and teachers, schools could also reduce the risk that changes in norms and relationship patterns within the school would not transfer beyond it.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In line with Allport’s advocacy of institutional support as a necessary condition for effective contact, research has reported an association between perceptions of positive contact norms and greater interest in cross-group interaction and friendship (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). With high-quality interaction in turn predicting more positive intergroup attitudes, schools’ support for contact appears crucial if shared education is to achieve its aim of enhancing intergroup relations. In response to the first question posed by this study, we found that levels of institutional support varied, both within and between partnerships, as schools negotiated shared education alongside other educational imperatives, such as improving exam performance and protecting schools’ individual ethos and character. While our data offers positive examples of institutional support at the school or individual level, these opposing priorities – which largely arise at the systemic level - can hinder schools’ capacity to foster the environment necessary for frequent, positive contact to occur.

To take one of these imperatives, preserving school character, shared education has been promoted on the basis that, unlike school amalgamation or transformation to integrated status, it poses no threat to schools’ identity (Hughes and Loader 2015). This means that schools are required to make few changes to their environment or working practices to accommodate students and staff from other schools and religious backgrounds. While contact interventions typically occur in a ‘neutral’ or ‘shared’ space, shared education thus occurs in a “strongly classified” space associated with “internal homogeneity and clear, strong boundaries” (Sibley 1995, 80). In effect, a non-contact environment (the separate school) is expected to become a pro-contact environment without any structural or material alteration to reduce symbolic or, indeed, practical barriers (such as shift systems in North Macedonia) to contact. In this absence, responsibility for demonstrating institutional support and creating a positive contact environment fell largely to individual teachers. There were numerous examples of staff doing this in a thoughtful and considered way, but limited guidance (Northern Ireland) and a lack of political support (North Macedonia) meant they were often left to ‘muddle along’ by themselves.

The second research question examined the influences on the development of supportive contact norms through shared education. The data highlight both school-level and classroom-level influences, the first demonstrating the importance of a whole-school approach to institutional support. From the top, leadership emerged as important in communicating the value and priority of shared education, and modelling positive contact to staff and pupils. At the same time, leaders also had to ensure that staff were involved in decision-making and communication from the early stages and that their concerns were addressed sympathetically; failure to do this could result in teachers’ disengagement from shared education and impede



the development of an environment supportive of contact. In addition to this whole-school support, effective shared education depended also on whole-partnership support. Schools' equal commitment to the programme and its organisation was vital for building trust and cooperation necessary for long-term collaboration.

The importance of supportive contact norms at the classroom level is demonstrated by research findings that high-contact environments improve group members' attitudes and perceptions of norms even when they have limited personal experience of direct contact (Christ et al. 2014; De Tezanos Pinto, Bratt and Brown 2010). This study suggests that the occurrence and nature of contact could be shaped by the norms of the subject, the class size and makeup, and teachers' willingness to promote interaction, echoing the findings of a previous study of contact in shared classes (Loader 2017). In Northern Ireland especially, where shared education had a strong curricular focus, pro-contact norms could come up against countervailing classroom norms of quiet working, stymying interaction – an effect that was particularly pronounced in more academic courses. Concerns to cover all the material in the syllabus (Northern Ireland), or to control pupils' interactions so as to prevent any negative incidents (North Macedonia), could also limit teachers' willingness to foster interaction. Moreover, the modest aspirations of most staff – that pupils would learn together in harmony – obviated, for them, the need for the dialogic approach typically advocated for social transformation (Nagda et al, 2013)

These findings highlight the need for a shared education pedagogy that can promote both interaction and progress in learning (see Galton, Hargreaves and Bell 2009; Loader 2017, for further discussion and examples). However, this tension between educational imperatives and reconciliation also raises questions about the level of institutional support for contact within the education system. In Northern Ireland, while shared education is well supported financially and in law, its adoption of educational aims is indicative of the low priority placed on reconciliation: had the programme focused solely on contact aims, it would almost certainly have attracted less support from schools and policymakers. This tension remains a threat as schools look to maximise curriculum delivery by reducing contact opportunities – for example, saving time by swapping face-to-face meetings for online contact. In North Macedonia, the absence of such a performance-orientated regime meant that schools were not under the same academic pressure, but political divisions and a corresponding lack of support for integration also resulted in a fragile institutional context for shared education. This was manifest in the risk of resistance to the programme from schools under political influence, particularly during periods of tension, and a lack of financial assistance that limited the frequency of shared activities. What institutional support was provided was thus confined largely to the school; the wider context – including political and administrative institutions – was at best ambivalent and at worst hostile to shared education.

The final question posed in this study explored the relationship between shared education and the norms of authorities beyond the school, particularly parents and the community. Research on intergroup contact has suggested, for example, that the influence of negative peer contact norms can be offset by a positive school contact norm (McGuire, Rutland and Nesdale 2015). While small-scale and qualitative, this study provided some indicative evidence of interaction between the norms of different groups. Participants in both countries argued that the promotion of contact via shared education was easier in a locality that was largely supportive of contact and provided consistency of school and community norms. In more divided settings, norms of segregation and non-contact could generate greater suspicion and impede relationship-building beyond the classroom. The data also offered examples of schools seeking to shape community norms by organising events for local residents and inviting parents into the school. While some participants suggested that this could dissolve the school-community boundary and improve

norms across different settings, others were more circumspect, arguing that normative change might be confined to the environment in which it occurred.

To conclude, shared education represents a new development in promoting contact at school-level, providing opportunities for pupils across all school types to meet, interact and learn with those of different backgrounds. The data suggests that positive outcomes are due largely to the efforts of individual teachers who have shown leadership in promoting and normalising contact, often in challenging circumstances. For the programme to be more effective, the wider educational and political systems must also demonstrate support for shared education and the contact within it. At present, the priorities within these spheres are often unsupportive of the programme's aims and the types of activity that might achieve these. This, in turn, may require some rethinking of the purpose and organisation of education, particularly in post-conflict societies. As long as securing market advantage through improved academic performance is the main imperative for schools, reconciliation will remain a marginal concern and the "especially important condition" (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 77) of institutional support will be unfulfilled.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Safet Balazhi and Filipina Negrievska for their help with the organization of interviews in North Macedonia and Professor Ruth Leitch for her assistance with data collection.

### **Ethical Guidelines**

This research was conducted in accordance with BERA Ethical Guidelines and was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors report no conflict of interest in relation to the research on which this article is based.

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