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Recommended Citation

VanHuis, Emily Grace, "Peacebuilding through Education - The Shared Education Program: The Current Key to Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland Schools and Societies" (2021). *Global Studies*. 2.
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Peacebuilding through Education:

The Shared Education Program: The Current Key to Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland

Schools and Societies

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ITS 480: International Studies Capstone

November 24, 2020

Why do we pursue peacebuilding? What is so singular and significant about this cause? Perhaps we don't know how to answer this question other than by addressing the apparent reality that living in a divided world compels us to desire restoration. Conflict yearns for resolution. However, although a few would argue against peacebuilding and reconciliation, the conversation surrounding how it should be achieved is widely contested—especially when considering strategy and context.

One very important player in this work is education, a core building block of society. Its generationally-spanning impact provides a broad societal and foundational reach for peacebuilding. This paper seeks to answer the question: how should education systems operate in conflict societies as specific mechanisms for administering peace? To do so, Northern Ireland will be the primary focus, showcasing how her history and trials with education as a post-conflict society can serve as an example for the international community.

Northern Ireland has dealt with the ramifications of conflict for decades. Unavoidably so, every part of life has been affected, including the school systems. Although initiatives have been implemented to foster a progressive peace process in the schools since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, much of the education system remains sectarian as students remain separate and thus mostly self-contained ideologically and relationally. Browne and Dwyer affirm this reality, by stating that, “[i]t is apparent that growing up in a post-conflict society continues to have a significant impact on the lives of young people, particularly in regard to their well-being, lifetime opportunities, and mental health.”¹

When younger generations have both limited opportunity and poor relational and mental

1. Brendan Browne and Clare Dwyer, “Navigating Risk: Understanding the Impact of the Conflict on Children and Young People in Northern Ireland,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37 (2014), 793.

health, the potential for them to build foundational peace is slim. Thus, various in-depth studies have recently been performed in Northern Ireland demonstrating that schools are crucial in this peacebuilding process. And there is indeed statistically supported proof that perceptions and assumptions are shifting due to “Peace Processes” already in place.² Of course, only some of Ireland’s initiatives have proven to be successful. No system is perfect.³

The focus of this paper will thus be on the Shared Education Programme (SEP) initiative, an approach that attempts to build partnerships between schools and communities with proven, data-backed success.⁴ This collaboration operates as a network of Protestant, Catholic, and integrated (a mixture of both) schools in which teachers and students step outside of their own borders and share classes and experiences—breaking down stereotypes, assumptions, and prejudice. The SEP holds the key to addressing the issue of religious segregation in Northern Ireland’s society. Although fully integrated schools should be the end-all goal for Northern Ireland, the SEP is the most feasible, quick-acting program for the present time. However, the SEP is not merely a temporary fix; this program does address large-scale community structure problems from the top down with immediate effectiveness and long-term results.

Northern Ireland’s experience with the SEP is still in process, and there are gains and improvements to be made. Most crucially, divisive issues and differences must be addressed in the schools, not avoided or dismissed. It is not enough for teachers and students to witness the lives of the “other” and experience some academics together; discussion must be had about

2. Maurice Stringer, P. Irwing, M. Giles, C. McClenahan, R. Wilson, and J. A. Hunter. “Intergroup Contact, Friendship Quality and Political Attitudes in Integrated and Segregated Schools in Northern Ireland.” *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 79 (2009), 58.

3. For example, integrated education has not taken root as much as desired. More information on this can be found on pp. 7-11.

4. See pp. 11-20 for the background information of the SEP.

similarities and distinctions. Studies show that the only real negatives about this program are logistical—involving transport and scheduling. However, solving these logistical puzzles seems like a minor concern when considering the long-term benefits of the SEP for Northern Ireland.

With this considered, the SEP model, including all its failures and successes apparent over years of attempts, serves as a resourceful example for the broader international community. It is clear that doing education right is an unavoidably crucial mechanism for peacebuilding in war-torn, divided communities and thus must be considered by peacebuilders on an international level.

Northern Ireland's History & Background

To understand the SEP, it is crucial to first gain a contextual understanding of Northern Ireland's history. Claire McGlynn, a professor of law at Durham University, asserts that, “[b]ecause of Northern Ireland's divided nature and history, education's role in peacebuilding has to be carefully contextualized through various lenses.”⁵ Since the beginning, sectarianism and conflict have infiltrated Northern Ireland's borders. Rooted in a long history of British colonialism, heated divisions grew up, resulting in terrorism and increasingly escalating violence. The two most dominant ethnic groups that stemmed from these conflicts are the Nationalists (or Catholics) and the Protestants (or Unionists).⁶ In simplest terms, the conflict surrounded a Protestant (loyalist) desire to have Northern Ireland remain within the United Kingdom, while the Catholic (republican) majority desired Northern Ireland to remain a part of

5. Claire McGlynn, “The Contribution of Integrated Schools to Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland,” in *Building Peace in Northern Ireland* (Maria Power: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 54.

6. Gavan Rafferty, “Embracing the Creation of Shared Space: Considering the Potential Intersection between Community Planning and Peace-building,” *Space and Polity* 16, no. 2 (August 2012), 198.

the larger independent republic of Ireland. As a result, intense terrorist activity and paramilitary presence marked this period. Activity from groups such as the Irish Republican Army triggered an official War of Independence in 1919. IRA attacks continued throughout the twentieth century, coinciding with political movements in the government, finally causing Britain to abolish Belfast's parliament at Stormont and institute direct rule from London in 1972. In that same year, the infamous Bloody Sunday massacre occurred in which British soldiers shot twenty-six unarmed civilians in a protest march.⁷ These years during 1968-1998 became known as the Troubles.⁸

Perhaps one of the most damaging results of this time was the range of structures and barricades created mostly between the working-class Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland. Although these were intended to be makeshift, many of these barriers became permanent, highlighting the already apparent divisions reinforced through flags, wall murals and symbols, parades and festivals. These divisions highlight territorial boundaries, but more significantly, they showcase the complexly interwoven local, national, religious, and ethnic contentions between identities in Northern Ireland. Today these "peace walls" still illustrate the apparent "culture wars" that have infiltrated Irish history for centuries.⁹ McKnight notes that, "the 30 years of 'The Troubles' solidified and extended already existent residential and social segregation, bolstered sectarianism and increased attachment to or

7. Hume, John. "A Brief History of Northern Ireland 1919-1999," Northern Ireland, *The Guardian*, January 27, 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/jan/28/northernireland1>.

8. Jeff Wallenfeldt, "The Troubles," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/The-Troubles-Northern-Ireland-history>.

9. Martina McKnight, and Dirk Schubotz, "Shared future - shared values? Taking stock of the peace process in Northern Ireland: teenager's perspectives," *Cultural Trends* 26, no. 3 (2017), 218.

abhorrence of particular neighbourhoods, cultural traditions and symbols.”¹⁰

The Troubles politically came to a close with the infamous Belfast or Good Friday Agreement of 1998 in which a power-sharing arrangement in the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont was reached. Since this agreement, the peace process in Northern Ireland has progressed extremely precariously since these times. Even though the Good Friday Agreement served as a victorious settlement, some scholars believe that this only further institutionalized sectarianism because of its purposeful acknowledgement of differences.¹¹

Although this context is grossly simplified, it is enough to know that Northern Ireland’s history has indeed been tumultuous. In turn then, this conflict has undoubtedly created difficulties for the education system, and especially its role in the peacebuilding process.

How History Connects to Educational Difficulties

Historian Thomas Bartlett writes that although healthy integrated education has been historically seen as a way to “smooth away the rough edges of confessional enmity among the young,” numerous attempts to instill integration in Northern Ireland have failed.¹² Even with good intentions, the education system simply continued to fall back into sectarianism.

Before partition in 1922, Northern Ireland shared a general Irish education system that was based on the National School system. Although there were attempts to provide free elementary education for both Protestant and Catholic students, schools that were independent and church-controlled became more of the norm. Controversies were merely exasperated, and

10. McKnight and Schubotz, “Shared future - shared values?,” 218.

11. Ibid., 216.

12. Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), 274.

separatism raged on. The 1947 Education Act and the 1967 Amendment Act created a further impact on funding, curriculum, and resources. Schools that were independent received very limited financial assistance while schools with more direct governmental support were considered “maintained.” Eventually after further acts passed in 1977 and 1991, funding issues were mostly resolved, and the government provided fair funding for both Catholic and Protestant schools.¹³ However, education continued to remain mostly separate. As McGlynn states, “[a]lthough denominational segregation was largely inherited at the partition of Ireland in 1920, it was not until the 1970s that educational researchers began to consider potential links between segregated schools and societal conflict.”¹⁴ With this consideration in mind, peacebuilding processes in schools somewhat progressed and shifted to promote more integration. Change takes time though. Even still, there is certainly room to grow as there remains a marked hopelessness about the progress made, or lack thereof, in certain communities.

Northern Ireland’s Forms of Education

Currently, Northern Ireland’s education system operates in three main sectors. According to the Northern Ireland Department of Education website, these different types of schools are under the control of management committees who also work as the teachers’ employers.¹⁵ The first are Controlled Schools, which are under the management of the schools’ Board of Governors and whose employing authority is the Education Authority (EA). The Controlled

13. Claire McGlynn, “Education for Peace in Integrated Schools: A Priority in Northern Ireland?” *Child Care in Practice* 10, no. 2 (2004), 86.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Department of Education. “Information on School Types in Northern Ireland.” <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/information-school-types-northern-ireland>.

Schools' Support Council (CSSC) provides support and representation services for these schools. Next are the Maintained Schools, also under management of the schools' Board of Governors and under authority of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). Finally, there are Voluntary (grammar) and Integrated Schools, also under management of the schools' Board of Governors. The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) services these schools. Simply put, there are schools for Catholic communities (Maintained), Protestant communities (Controlled), and schools that attempt to integrate both.¹⁶

Integrated Education

Once researchers started to notice the possible correlation of these segregated schools and societal conflict, "it became increasingly evident to educators that strategies to promote cross-community understanding and contact could be beneficial."¹⁷

Thus, the promotion of integrated schools began. This overview of the Bain Report, an independent review of education in 2006, well encapsulates the motivations behind integrated education:

The review argued that the rationale for integrating education, improved collaborating and sharing rested on three fundamental and inter-related factors: pupils would have access to wider curriculum choices, high quality specialist teaching and facilities; the promotion of tolerance, mutual understanding and interrelationship through regular engagement amongst pupils; and, cost-effective provision-educational, social and economic arguments, respectively.¹⁸

16. The Good Schools Guide. "Northern Ireland education system."
<https://www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk/choosing-a-school/northern-ireland-education-system>.

17. McGlynn, "Education for Peace," 86.

18. Vani K. Borooh, and Colin Knox, "The contribution of 'shared education' to Catholic-Protestant reconciliation in Northern Ireland: a third way?" *British Educational Research Journal* 39, no. 5 (October 2013), 926.

McGlynn, one of the primary scholars on this topic, writes that integrated education provides formal and informal settings and interactions to develop tolerance and critical thinking.¹⁹ She doubts the potential of single identity schools to do the same, especially because opportunities for building reconciliation in childhood may be irreparable later in life. Quoting Judge, she notes that “[f]aith-based schooling [in Northern Ireland] did not of itself manufacture the tragic divisions of that society; but nobody has yet argued that it has in any sense helped or is helping to heal them.”²⁰ McGlynn references Montgomery’s work to encapsulate the three main models of integrated education that teachers describe: passive, in which integration occurs naturally; reactive, in which there exists a pattern of reacting to emerging current events; and proactive, where issues related to diversity are more directly addressed. Within integrated schools, these models are either all present or one or two are preferentially displayed. This favoring of the passive, reactive, or proactive models might be a key issue with integrated education, because with little consensus on lack of “ideal ethos,” it is hard to move forward and to also inspire support from parents.²¹

The research behind integrated education largely discusses two major themes: the *contact theory* and *shared space*. Firstly: the contact theory, most commonly attributed to American psychologist Gordon Allport, roughly states that:

Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e. by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads

19. McGlynn, “Education for Peace,” 91.

20. Harry Judge, “Faith-based schools and state funding: a partial agreement,” *Oxford Review of Education* 27, no. 4 (2001): 471, quoted in Claire McGlynn, “Education for Peace in Integrated Schools: A Priority in Northern Ireland?” *Child Care in Practice* 10, no. 2 (2004), 91.

21. *Ibid.*, 92.

to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups).²²

Allport proposed four relative “optimal” conditions: equal status between group members, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support.²³ With these in place, he argues that this positive contact will indeed raise opportunity for questions and understanding.

This is paired well with the second core element of the integration model: shared space. McKnight and Schubotz propose that: “At one level, shared space may be understood as neutral space devoid of markers of identity, while, at another level, it may be seen as space where people can actively engage with each other and recognise and respect difference. The idea of shared space, is, thus, tied to dismantling territorial, emotional and symbolic barriers.”²⁴

The argument for the creation of such shared spaces is the logical assumption that if the children of Catholic, Protestants, and others are in places where they are able to experience opportunities for reconciliation, then there is greater potential that they will indeed harmoniously coexist.²⁵ In short, “sharing facilities and spaces, and higher levels of contact and mixing are crucial factors for improved community relations.”²⁶ However, with this being said, shared spaces are not simply stepped into without intentionality. The data provided from tests performed by McKnight and Schubotz show that although large proportions of the tested population prefer these religiously mixed settings, they experience them far less often in daily life than they say

22. Rebecca Loader, and Joanne Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart? Building relationships and exploring difference through shared education in Northern Ireland.” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 47, no. 1 (2015), 120.

23. Loader and Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart?,” 120.

24. McKnight and Schubotz, “Shared future - shared values?,” 225.

25. McGlynn, “Education for Peace,” 87.

26. McKnight and Schubotz, “Shared future - shared values?,” 227.

they prefer.²⁷

However, although the integrated model sounds particularly appealing on paper and the theories behind it are exceedingly sensible, the practical application of this system has not been easy. In 1981, the first integrated school, Lagan College, was established in Belfast. Although support was promised by the Education Reform Order of 1989, there are currently only 62 integrated schools in Northern Ireland, less than 10% of all schools.²⁸

Researchers have found that integrated education would be more effective if certain qualifications were met. They found that classes with more group work created more opportunities for relationship building, due to their collaborative nature. Although contact theory goals could be met simply through these shared spaces in the classroom, students tended to say that this didn't necessarily mean that healthy relationships would be created. McKnight and Schubotz affirm this, stating that "[t]his was due partly (at least) to the lack of opportunities for participants in many classes to engage in social interaction - with inhibiting factors including an unsympathetic classroom design, didactic teaching style, or large class size - and has implications for the potential of shared education to effect changes in intergroup relations."²⁹

Shared Education Programme

Although integrated education has a lot of potential, the amount of sacrifice and personal humility required for it to actually be effective is not readily achievable and likely would still take decades to achieve. Historically, integrated education never fully flourished to create

27. McKnight and Schubotz, "Shared future - shared values?," 228.

28. Department of Education. "Integrated Schools." <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/integrated-schools>.

29. McKnight and Schubotz, "Shared future - shared values?," 228.

systematic change. The simple reality was that most young people continued “to be educated in schools where the vast majority of their peers are drawn from the same community.”³⁰ Research also showed that “no single structural arrangement ‘solved’ the challenges of diversity.”³¹ The set patterns of diversity that had been created demanded transformation. Gallagher and other scholars thus suggested that participative dialogue and school collaboration might be the best way forward. Borooah affirmed this, stating that “shared education could provide a ‘third way’ to the well-trodden paths of the two separate education systems.”³²

The main distinction of the SEP and integrated education is that the SEP allows schools to retain their identities as “Catholic” or “Protestant,” uniting across differences instead of trying to remove them entirely. Because parents were failing to accept integrated schools, wanting to choose where their children would be educated and how they would be introduced to religion, the SEP seemed like a very practical next option.

The Shared Education System

After decades of continued tension and systemic failings in Northern Ireland’s education system, “the emergent corpus of research pointed to the idea of school collaboration as a means for promoting reconciliation at a systemic level without requiring a radical restructuring of the schools.”³³ The idea of the SEP was thus born, first supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies, who agreed to fund three main projects on school collaboration. Matched funding was then

30. Tony Gallagher, “Shared education in Northern Ireland: school collaboration in divided societies,” *Oxford Review of Education* 42, no. 3 (2016), 366.

31. Ibid.

32. Borooah and Knox, “The contribution of ‘shared education’,” 927.

33. Tony Gallagher, “Shared education in Northern Ireland,” 367.

provided by the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). With funding came program development and logistical support that allowed general fiscal support, staff, and equipment provisions. These projects were the Primary Integrating and Enriching Education Project (PIEE), from the North Eastern Education and Library Board; the Shared Education Programme, coordinated by the Fermanagh Trust for primary and post-primary schools; and the Sharing Education Project (SEP), managed by Queen's University.³⁴ As an example of main goals for these projects, the SEP was based on this 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 outcomes³⁵

A few major trials were run at the birth of this project (including a large project involving more than 100 schools across two cohorts in 2007-2010 and 2010-2013), and the data strongly indicated a correlated rising level of participation in shared education and a balance across the religious partnerships between Protestant and Catholic schools.³⁶ Loader and Hughes stress that from the beginning, SEP partnerships were encouraged to develop priority-based programming for individual communities. They say that “[t]he only stipulation has been that these classes and activities should promote ‘sustainable, high quality engagement by young people from different backgrounds’ (SEP, 2008), enabling pupils to build positive relationships.”³⁷ Although some felt this project took unnecessary risks and promoted the potential for further sectarian incidents, data showed that the largest challenges were logistical.

34. Loader and Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart?,” 119.

35. Ibid.

36. Loader and Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart?,” 119.

37. Ibid.

Perhaps the best way to frame the SEP is to include a brief description of the five main elements of the SEP model that Gallagher addresses to prove how this system works.³⁸ Firstly, he states that schools involved in this program need to be based on “bottom-up, locally tailored solutions,” focused and specifically addressing local circumstances. Secondly, he highlights the significance of teacher empowerment in order to promote creativity, imagination, and ambition. When teachers are recognized as the most understanding of their context and corresponding challenges, they are best set up to explore innovative solutions and accept that failure will be a part of this process. Thirdly, he stresses the necessity for regular, sustained contact. This fits the original intention to create places where “a ‘new normality’ of diversity” would be regularized (even, for example, in students interacting who wear different uniforms).³⁹ Next, Gallagher confirms the importance of “combining economic, education, and social goals,” to provide a wider spectrum of opportunity and practice for both students, teachers, parents, and whole communities.⁴⁰ Fifth, he finishes by stating that in their experience, connections between people were the most critical aspect of sustainable cultural change. Co-location of schools at a systemic level is practically useless without relational involvement. Here is a helpful image of the model’s proposed progression:⁴¹

38. Tony Gallagher, “Shared education in Northern Ireland,” 371-372.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Borooah and Knox, “The contribution of ‘shared education’,” 927.

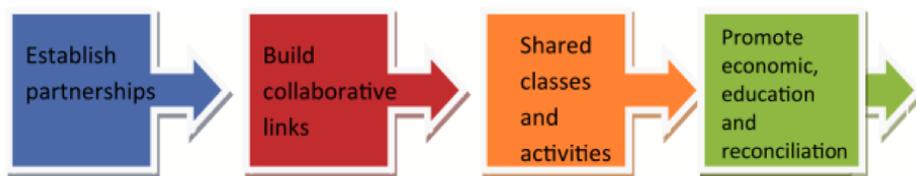


Figure 1. Shared Education Model

Why the SEP is Effective

Borooah and Knox categorize the SEP's benefits in two main sectors: education enhancement and education extension. For education enhancement, students' educational experience is improved simply by the more extensive study of subjects they otherwise might not have taken.⁴² Because of the nature of combined schools, there may be more specialist teaching and superior facilities in the host schools for students that they may otherwise not have access to. Also, simply because there are more students with which to interact, students can find pupils with similar levels of academic achievement for better healthy competition and collaboration. Under extension, the SEP simply offers a lot more courses that their parent schools may not have been able to offer.

Loader and Hughes pinpoint the SEP's benefits, such as enhancement and extension, to the influential contact theory.⁴³ The contact that the SEP encourages promotes development of relationships and high-quality engagement, addressing differences through shared classrooms but still allowing schools to retain their identities as different. They assert:

Research shows that an increase such as this in the opportunity for contact is associated with a higher number of outgroup friendships, and, via this mechanism, lower levels of

42. Borooah and Knox, "The contribution of 'shared education'," 927.

43. As discussed earlier in this paper – it is a basis for integrated education.

prejudice, with contact effects most substantial among those with limited prior experience of the outgroup.⁴⁴

Shared Education stands out because of its emphasis on identity retention verses the identity surrender that is required for integrated education. Pupils are not required to submit to an overarching integrated identity that characterizes the whole group; they are allowed to still be identified by the things that make them different from each other.⁴⁵ According to research publications from the SEP itself, the contact of students who are retaining their unique identities should thus facilitate intercultural dialogue that will consequently instill ‘thick’ reconciliation.⁴⁶ Of course, how this may be done depends on individual context; topics of forgiveness, justice, and social relations can either be expected to arise naturally among pupils or within the classroom curriculum itself.

However, the SEP would be of little value if it did not have an external effect. One of the main reasons why the SEP is so crucial is because of its holistic developmental reach in the peacebuilding process. It does not just affect individual institutions but instead shapes entire communities. McGlynn says that:

Conflict such as that experienced in Northern Ireland damages social capital... interpersonal and communal trust... If the primary reproductive function of education is political... [then the] vital purpose of education in Northern Ireland should be the rebuilding of positive social capital and the promotion of social cohesion. Colletta and Cullen (2000) stress the need to build this “brick by brick, from the bottom up” (p. 121). There is arguably no better place to start this process than with young people in their formative years at school.⁴⁷

Already, the SEP is making considerable gains in mainstreaming the educational

44. Loader and Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart?,” 120.

45. Borooah and Knox, “The contribution of ‘shared education’,” 930.

46. Loader and Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart?,” 121.

47. McGlynn, “Education for Peace,” 87.

landscape in Northern Ireland.⁴⁸ One teacher expressed that, “the impact of SEP is that it gives our kids an ongoing cross-community opportunity... I am convinced that those involved... will be more likely to challenge prejudices either in their homes or beyond.”⁴⁹ Another school principal argued that eventually, “so many classes [will be] collaborative that people... will have gone to school with each other regardless of their religion.”⁵⁰ McGlynn argues that daily Catholic and Protestant student contact logically grants opportunities for reconciliation, which in turn “holds great potential for building social cohesion and, hence, for promoting reconciliation.”⁵¹ As the SEP logistically brings children from these different sectors together every day, collaborative opportunities are rampant.

Boorah provides four specific case studies that showcase the span of these collaborative programs and all of their variables. Each provides different proofs for the potential of the SEP, but each school’s achievement varied depending on where they started from. How much parents’ support and political support was gathered also depended on the current strains of conflict in each context and the available finances to implement changes. But for example, for 88 pupils from four primary schools, it provided them an opportunity to take enhanced classes in biology/chemistry and physics in mixed groups. For 83 other post-primary students, it allowed them to study engineering and astronomy, subjects that weren’t otherwise offered. For 450 students in the Belfast High School partnership, their STEM subjects were enhanced. Further analyses have even quantified benefits by noting the educational returns in higher GCSEs scores

48. Tony Gallagher, “Shared education in Northern Ireland,” 364.

49. Borooah and Knox, “The contribution of ‘shared education’,” 930.

50. Ibid.

51. McGlynn, “Education for Peace,” 87.

for SEP students.⁵²

Statistical Support

These case studies are further backed with various and extensive statistics. Queen's University Belfast is performing an ongoing longitudinal survey that shows that for children involved in the SEP, there is a statistical increase in the number of friends participants have made with students from their partner school.⁵³ Another survey done in 2017 by the *Kids Life and Times* shows that those who had taken part in the SEP when compared to those who had not were generally more positive towards people of difference by between 2-5%.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the Department of Education's report in May of 2018 states that from May of 2016 to late 2017, there has been an increase (in this positivity toward difference) of 86% for schools and 248% for pupils involved in the SEP, and this is only expected to increase.⁵⁵

McKnight and Schubotz's individual research and further analysis of the *Young Life and Times* survey data shows how shared spaces are certainly crucial factors for improving community relations and attitudes. Since 2003, the proportion of 16-year-olds with no friends from other communities dropped from 33% to 12%, and those who said that all of their friends had the same ethnic background as themselves dropped from 50% to 25%.⁵⁶ Thus, the statistics

52. Boroovah and Knox, "The contribution of 'shared education'," 937.

53. Department of Education, *Advancing Shared Education: Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly* (May 2018): 40-41, https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Shared%20Education%20-%20Report%20to%20Assembly%20May%202018_2.pdf.

54. *Ibid.*, 41-42.

55. *Ibid.*, 46.

56. McKnight and Schubotz, "Shared future - shared values?," 220.

even back the broader community implications. Programs like the SEP are indeed creating change and will continue to do so, all the better with improvements considered.

Improvements for Effectivity

There are certain practical improvements that would greatly benefit the SEP if implemented. Rebecca Loader and Joanne Hughes have produced specific guidance toward this end, determining that variation in subjects and class contexts consequences in different experiences for students in this program.⁵⁷ Results show that classes with significant group work (such as drama or physical education) have “appeared more favourable to relationship-building, as they required pupils to work collaboratively and interact extensively.”⁵⁸ Without this type of constructive attention to building lasting relationships between students of difference, attitudes and patterns cannot be expected to shift. Loader and Hughes also noted that these relationships will not grow when inhibited by factors such as “unsympathetic classroom design, didactic teaching style, or large class size.”⁵⁹ To them, non-attention to these factors mean that “the potential of shared education is not being fully exploited.”⁶⁰ The best response they recommend is to ensure that those in authority are finding ways to explore differences, thus enhancing friendship potential instead of forcing awkward intermingling. These researchers are not the only ones who believe this must be done for the SEP to work. One teacher says, “when the opportunities arise to talk about differences, we shouldn’t avoid it - create an awareness of

57. Loader and Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart?,” 125.

58. Ibid., 124.

59. Loader and Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart?,” 128.

60. Ibid.

difference and celebrate, let's not pretend it doesn't exist."⁶¹ Addressing the truth of difference is the first step to creating vulnerability—the cornerstone for friendships across sectarian divides. Attention must be paid to the simple things of how classrooms are designed, the size of the class, and the expectations for teaching style.

Addressing the Negatives

It would be amiss to not mention that there are indeed complaints regarding the SEP, of which the largest is logistical. As Borooah has remarked: “[n]egative views about the SEP centred exclusively on the logistics of implementation, specifically problems of timetabling and busing arrangements needed.⁶² Teachers and educational boards have faced challenges such as how schools should reorganize their timetables for effective coordination, how teachers should find time to plan and maintain effective communication, how teachers and students should implement technology, and how higher ups should interact with parents from all sides.

The other main push-back against the SEP is that it creates more divisions than resolutions by placing students who already differ into close environments. Those who argue this “contend that separate education is a manifestation, not a cause, of wider social division and hostility... with faith schools providing an environment in which the traditions and cultures of threatened minorities can be protected and nurtured.”⁶³ Perhaps it is fair that separate education for the main two religious groups does mean that students will be more likely to follow the traditions of their consecutive schools, and thus crossing the divide creates some tempestuous

61. Borooah and Knox, “The contribution of ‘shared education’,” 942.

62. *Ibid.*, 943.

63. Loader and Hughes, “Joining together or pushing apart?,” 118.

dynamics that might otherwise be avoided in the schools. However, potential tension is certainly worthwhile if most students are learning how to respectfully and maturely handle those of difference. Additionally, avoiding tension in the schools does not guarantee peace outside of school; if anything, not addressing difference and allowing for separation only creates further problems down the line. Plus, stating that faith schools are the problem in of themselves is logically fallible – the problem is that students in faith schools are more often to be segregated, which is where the SEP steps in to break down these barriers. But other than these mostly non-grounded concerns, there is no research stating that the SEP is causing damage or in some way not helping Northern Ireland.

Full Integration as the End Goal

Remember, though, that full integration should be the end-all goal. Even more so than the SEP, full integration provides intense daily opportunities to learn about differences and become friends with children across boundaries. McGlynn asserts that “[o]penness to diversity is enhanced by the conviction that interaction with children from diverse cultural backgrounds provides a valuable opportunity to learn from each other, both for the pupils and for the adults involved.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, it promotes intercultural dialogue and the integration of minorities. It enables comfortability with differences, which statistically creates better employees. And it allows students to explore and solidify their identity with a greater knowledge of who they are in comparison to who they could be.

Despite all of these clear benefits, opinions do vary regarding how religious identity should be discussed and promoted in integrated schools, and debates do occur regarding how this

64. Claire McGlynn, “The Contribution of Integrated Schools to Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland,” in *Building Peace in Northern Ireland*, ed. Marie Power (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), 67.

generally should be done.⁶⁵ McGlynn asserts that although full integration is a beautiful thing and is fundamentally crucial for building unifying peace, further research is needed to determine the best way to go about this in Northern Ireland. Loader and Hughes agree, demonstrating that effective integration would require a proactivity and a willingness to engage with differences that may currently be unrealistic for Northern Ireland.⁶⁶ Thus, in the meantime, seeing integration as an end goal does not mean that practical actions cannot be taken now. Truly, the Shared Education Programme is the best way to address social and religious divides in the schools. But this does not mean that the SEP is a temporary fix, as the statistics and research shows; it does indeed create lasting, top-down impacts on society. As Loader and Hughes write:

While recognising that, due to parental preference, residential segregation and political and religious interests, a significant expansion in the formally integrated sector is unlikely in the short term, shared education also reflects a view that this should not preclude pupils at separate schools from meeting and learning alongside those from the other religious tradition.⁶⁷

International Application

Northern Ireland's progress serves as an invaluable example for the international community and especially for other countries that also are or have been involved in conflict. What a waste if the lessons gleaned from the SEP are not also helpfully conducive to peace through education systems around the globe.

Obviously the first and most crucial step to any further-reaching application is further-reaching research. Northern Ireland's peace processes have progressed immensely because of years of researchers and social scientists and humanitarians performing many surveys

65. McGlynn, "Education for Peace," 88, 90.

66. Loader and Hughes, "Joining together or pushing apart?," 130.

67. *Ibid.*, 119.

and tests, studying histories of conflict, and implementing various programs—many of which taught more through failures than successes. Research for the SEP has been mostly centralized to Northern Ireland’s context, so more could be done specific to the contexts of other nations. Gallagher references that there is indeed a growing interest in the shared education model in nations such as Macedonia, Israel, and the United States. He has furthermore “tried to locate this approach within the wider conspectus of structural and curricular initiatives in divided and diverse societies.”⁶⁸ This is a positive first step.

Examples of International Interest and Application

In her book, *Education Policy and Power-Sharing in Post-Conflict Societies: Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Macedonia*, researcher Giuditta Fontana presents these three nations as comparable case studies. Although the conflicts in these nations were all different in scale and duration, they are considered:

comparable as identity-based conflicts that set local religious, national and ethnic groups in competition for recognition and influence over the borders and institutions of contested states. [This is also why] formal education was at the heart of each violent conflict: for decades, schools legitimized and reproduced the prevailing power hierarchies and identity-forming narratives.⁶⁹

Fontana’s assertion that mishandled education actually plays a role in exasperating the conflicts begs the question of how this is being implemented from the top down. She provides some helpful insights and examples for each nation, suggesting that the principles and practices of the political system of each nation have actually had a large impact on history education

68. Tony Gallagher, “Shared education in Northern Ireland,” 371.

69. Giuditta Fontana, and King's College London, “Separate to Unite : The Paradox of Education in Deeply Divided Societies,” *Department of Middle East & Mediterranean Studies*, 2014, 14.

specifically, only furthering tensions.⁷⁰ For example, in Lebanon, politician involvement from every community in the drafting of curriculum limited the ability to draft a unified, homogenous history textbook. In Macedonia, their age-old principle of proportionality seeped into the curriculum so that certain ethnic communities were more or less emphasized in history classes corresponding to their demographic weight. Finally, in Northern Ireland, because teachers focused on historical skills rather than narratives, students were unable to decouple history and national.⁷¹

Fontana's research into these notable comparisons has been backed by a generated international interest in the Shared Education model. In Israel, there have been some tentative experiments in Shared Education collaborations such as with the Center for Educational Technology in Tel Aviv with Christian, Jewish, and Arab schools. According to their main Shared Education web source, four main places in Israel have already practically implemented this program: Ramla, Jerusalem, the Sharon area/Southern Triangle, and Negev. According to the Salomon-Issawi report in 2009, there are "several beautiful 'islands' of high-quality shared education efforts, but these are the exception to the rule."⁷² There is still a lot of work to be done.

Other places such as South Africa and the southern states of the USA have faced many challenges surrounding identity-recognition and cohesion in attempts to overcome the historically trapping models of enforced segregation. These societies may have made improvements on their own, but implementing a model like the SEP might be a better answer to

70. Guiditta Fontana, and King's College London, "Separate to Unite," 14.

71. Ibid., 14.

72. Education Minister Yuli Tamir, *Education for Shared Life between Arabs and Jews*, (Salomon-Issawi Report, January 2009), quoted in מהו-לימוד-משותף, "What is Shared Education," <https://www.together.cet.ac.il/en/מהו-לימוד-משותף/>.

achieve healthy and holistic integration.⁷³ These examples provide a window into the comparable research that is being done and should even be further applied to other nations with similar conflict histories.

How Government Policy should be Applied

McGlynn stresses that as further research is compiled, public policy must also back the research, providing a platform for action to be taken.

What is clear is that further research into the impact of integrated education is needed, along with wider dissemination of its benefits. There is a demonstrated demand for further integrated school places (O'Connor, 2002; Morgan & Fraser, 1999) that must be responded to, if not by the opening of more new integrated schools by parents, then by the development of creative new modes of multicultural co-education in Northern Ireland. As the evidence of the contribution of integrated education to the rebuilding of social capital grows, so does the need to empower those who participate in this process: 'If individuals... are willing to use education as a means to peace-making, then public policy must provide them with every possible opportunity to do so.'⁷⁴

So how should government and policy provide these individuals and institutions with opportunities? This discussion of how policy should implement change has been an emerging debate as peace processes have progressed. In Northern Ireland, the Minister of Education released a paper in September 2011 entitled, *Putting pupils first: Shaping our future-the next steps for education*, that noted how partnerships should be promoted across religious boundaries. He furthermore commissioned the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to perform audits and reviews. Policy commitments in following

73. Tony Gallagher, "Lessons for Israel on how shared education can bridge communities," The Conversation, December 4, 2014. <https://theconversation.com/lessons-for-israel-on-how-shared-education-can-bridge-divided-communities-35005>.

74. Colin Irwin, "Social conflict and the failure of education policies in two deeply divided societies: Northern Ireland and Israel" (1997): 112, quoted in H. Donnan and G. McFarlane (eds.), *Culture and Policy in Northern Ireland: anthropology in the public arena* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University), quoted in McGlynn, "Education for Peace", 92.

drafts included incentives such as establishing ministerial advisory groups for the Minister of Education and continuing to increase the number of schools in shared education programs.

Because of these developments, Borooah and other scholars believe that there does now exist a substantial policy window in Northern Ireland for shared education to truly take off.⁷⁵

Northern Ireland's successful model now can also serve as an example for other nations' policy. Of course, how funding is provided for educational institutions, how the private and public spheres are separated, and how decisions are implemented will look different across the board, but it is clear that in order for any kind of successful educational transformation, financial support must be provided from the government. Economics can't be left out of this discussion.⁷⁶

In Israel, the main Shared Education online source affirms this need for policy involvement in its maintenance of Allport's four conditions for positive intergroup interaction during conflict: support from authorities, equal status between groups, common goals, and close and ongoing relations.⁷⁷ They first stress that shared classes cannot be left solely to the responsibility of teachers, but they must be backed by school management, faculty, and furthermore by program partners who are working to get support from local authorities and the Education Ministry.

Since Northern Ireland's success with the SEP is markedly unignorable, the obvious consequent question is: how can what is working there be furthermore applied to other societies? The simple foundations of the SEP are greatly applicable for any context. Especially for cultures in which conflict surrounds identity confusion and displacement, the education system plays a

75. Borooah and Knox, "The contribution of 'shared education'," 944.

76. Scholars such as Gallagher and Borooah and Knox all provide substantial proofs and further research which shows the societal and economic benefits of restructuring.

77. מהו-לימוד-משותף. "What is Shared Education." <https://www.together.cet.ac.il/en/מהו-לימוד-משותף/>.

crucial role in teaching students how to retain their personality and history without surrendering their own essence in an attempt for peace. The SEP stands out as an avenue for young students of any culture to learn that they can indeed hold on to personal values while still heeding those of others - a form of thick reconciliation with the facilitation of intercultural dialogue. It also is an extremely practical way to get students of difference into shared spaces.⁷⁸ No matter the political party at the head, these opportunities to interact are crucial for developments to be made naturally. Furthermore, because such positive research has been found regarding the contact theory, any society that takes steps to create these contact scenarios is on the right path forward.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Ireland's past has not been an easy one; sectarianism and conflict have infiltrated her boundaries from her beginnings. And over and over again, peace processes have fallen flat, with conflict overwhelming attempts to repair divides. History has showcased a cycle of the education system continuing to fall back into sectarianism.⁸⁰ Even today, certain peace-building processes in schools feel no different. It's easy to be frustrated with a seeming lack of progress in certain communities. McKnight and Shubotz agree, affirming that "while often regarded as a 'post-conflict' generation, segregation and polarization remain features of teenagers' everyday lives and the political landscape [in Northern Ireland]."⁸¹ However, there is not a lack of hope. It

78. McKnight and Schubotz, "Shared future - shared values?," 226.

79. Loader and Hughes, "Joining together or pushing apart?," 120.

80. Bartlett, *Ireland: A History*, 274.

81. McKnight and Schubotz, "Shared future - shared values?," 216.

should be clear that the Shared Education Programme and associated initiatives have made significant ground in building peace from the bottom up, actually repairing inbred identity-based divisions for generationally-spanning peacebuilding. McKnight and Shubotz continue:

Children and young people are one of the four key strategic priorities in the latest government strategies to build united communities and achieve change and are embedded in the Programme for Government 2016-2021. If these government commitments are to be realised, the voices of young people must become central rather than peripheral. It is important, therefore, that their opinions are not only sought, but also interrogated and fed into policy.⁸²

As this process continues to evolve, integration must remain the final goal. For a unified society where natural integration exists as a normal aspect of childhood, promoting development and friendship must come as an expectation, not a privilege. But seeing full integration as the end destination, a desired light at the end of the tunnel, should not prevent practical action steps from being taken now. Programs like the SEP should be practically considered and implemented as possible where applicable. If Northern Ireland's experience and history prove the worthiness of this cause, this is surely enough of a reason to advocate for it.

82. McKnight and Schubotz, "Shared future - shared values?," 216.

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