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Segregation, inequality, and educational performance in Northern Ireland: Problems and solutions

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ABSTRACT

Some 16 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland is most clearly evident in the delivery of key public services. The focus of this paper is the highly segregated and unequal system of education provision and the attempts made to tackle these problems at the post-primary level. First, in terms of performance, post-primary educational outcomes are hugely variable: this is the problem of *performance inequality*. Second, pupils from deprived backgrounds – pupils entitled to free school meals and those with special educational needs are grossly under-represented in Northern Ireland's top-performing (grammar) schools: this is the problem of *access inequality*. Third, as a corollary of two separate systems of education – Protestant and Catholic – there is 'segregation' of pupils by school type: Catholic pupils attend *maintained* schools and Protestant pupils attend *controlled* schools and, in consequence, rarely have the opportunity to meet and interact in a school setting. In the face of these problems, this paper proposes a novel approach entitled *shared education*. Under this scheme, schools of different religious backgrounds will enter into 'partnerships for excellence' to promote good educational outcomes through a sharing of resources and pooling of expertise and, by doing so, help to dismantle the boundaries which separate Northern Ireland's pupils.

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1. Introduction

Some 16 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland is most clearly evident in the delivery of key public services. The focus of this paper is the highly segregated and unequal system of education provision and the attempts made to tackle these problems at the post-primary level. The system of post-primary education in Northern Ireland is undergoing a radical review both in terms of its structural configuration and in an effort to improve the quality of education outcomes. In structural terms, the post primary school population of approximately 147,000 pupils has a bewildering array of schools, influenced by the role played by churches in the management and delivery of education (Department of Education, 2013). The post-primary pupil cohort is disaggregated according to a number of variables: selective and non-selective schools (respectively, grammar and secondary schools); co-education and single sex schools; controlled (*de facto* Protestant) state schools, and Catholic maintained schools; integrated schools

comprising Catholic and Protestant children, those of other faiths or none; and, Irish medium schools where the curriculum is taught through the Irish language. This complex fragmentation is also reflected in a range of school management structures. Controlled schools are under the management of the schools' board of governors and the employing authorities are five Education and Library Boards. Maintained schools are under the management of the board of governors and the employing authority is the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). Each voluntary grammar school and integrated school is under the management of a board of governors. Aside from this structural morass, there are three key weaknesses facing the education system: pupil segregation, performance and access inequalities.

Pupil segregation: There is a high level of segregation at a time when the Northern Ireland Executive is promoting *Together: Building and United Community* as a strategic policy aimed at creating a shared society (Northern Ireland Executive, 2013). Education provision demonstrates the extent of division between the communities. As the Department of Education statistics (2012/2013) show:

- In the primary sector: 5.4% of Catholics attend controlled primary schools; 1% of Protestants attend maintained primary schools; and 5.5% of primary school children attend integrated schools.

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- In the secondary (non-grammar) sector: 2.1% of Catholics attend controlled secondary schools; 0.8% of Protestants attend maintained secondary schools; and 14.4% of secondary (non-grammar) pupils attend integrated schools.
- In the secondary (grammar) sector: 7.7% of Catholics attend controlled grammar schools; and 0.9% of Protestants attend voluntary Catholic grammar schools.
- Overall, 6.9% of primary and post-primary pupils attend integrated schools.

Catholics are therefore much more willing to go to schools in the controlled sector than Protestants are to attend maintained schools. The greatest movement by Catholics is into controlled grammar schools. Many young people in Northern Ireland never experience cross community education until they attend university. The segregated school system has resulted in ethno-religious isolation which reinforces 'intra-sectoral bias, stereotyping and prejudice' (Hughes, 2010:829).

The First Minister¹ referred to the current education system as 'a benign form of apartheid which is fundamentally damaging to our society' (Robinson, 2010). In recognition of current divisions, the Department of Education's policy *Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education* (CRED, 2011a:25) makes clear a commitment to shared education through encouraging 'greater sharing and collaboration across and between all educational settings on a cross community basis'.

Performance inequalities: In terms of performance, post-primary educational outcomes are hugely variable. In 2012/2013, for example, 60.1% of year 12 pupils achieved 5 or more GCSEs (including equivalents) at grades A*-C, including English and Mathematics. When this figure is analysed by school type, 36.4% of non-grammar schools (hereafter, secondary schools) and 93.9% of grammar schools achieved this standard. This represents a performance gap of 57.5 percentage points between the two school types (Guyon et al., 2012; see also Machin et al., 2013). More worryingly, this gap has not changed to any significant extent since 2008 when the information was first collected in this format (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2012).

Access inequalities: The third aspect of inequality in Northern Ireland's post primary schools is access inequality whereby pupils from deprived backgrounds (pupils entitled to free school meals, FSM) and pupils with special educational needs (SEN pupils) are grossly under-represented in grammar schools. On average, grammar schools had 61 FSM pupils and 61 SEN pupils with each group comprising, on average, only 7% of the total number of pupils in grammar schools. On the other hand, secondary schools averaged 150 FSM pupils and 138 SEN pupils with each group comprising, respectively, on average, 26% and 24% of the total number of pupils in secondary schools. So, half of the total number of secondary school pupils – compared to only 14% of grammar school pupils – came from deprived backgrounds (FSM pupils) or had special educational needs (SEN). There is also a high level of educational underachievement amongst the Protestant population validated by a study which noted that 'there appears to be a tendency towards elitism, and socially imbalanced pupil intakes within schools predominantly attended by Protestants' (Purvis, 2011:4).

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the extent of segregation and the degree of inequality in Northern

Ireland's post-primary schooling system that generate the weaknesses noted above, and to examine alternative policy proposals to tackle these systemic failures. The paper therefore breaks down into three parts:

- (a) We analyse in much greater detail the three factors introduced above (segregation, performance inequality, and access inequality) which characterise post-primary education in Northern Ireland.
- (b) We consider the current education policies in place to address these problems and their lack of success.
- (c) We propose an alternative model in the form of 'shared education' which we suggest offers the potential to address the systemic weaknesses identified through this research.

To provide a specific focus for the analysis we pose the research question: is there an alternative way of tackling religious segregation and systemic inequalities which characterise Northern Ireland's schools?

The data used to analyse segregation and inequalities are drawn from viability audits conducted by the 5 education and library boards who were charged by the Minister of Education to collect information for all schools in Northern Ireland on enrolments levels, quality of education and financial viability (Department of Education NI, 2012a).

2. Analysing segregation in schools

Although Northern Ireland has a highly segregated schooling system there has been no detailed analysis of segregation of pupils by type of school. Indeed, the discussion of school segregation proceeds entirely in terms of the binary divide between Protestant and Catholic pupils even though of Northern Ireland's 146,747 post primary pupils in 2012–2013: 75,977 (52%) were Catholic; 56,621 (38%) were Protestant, and 14,149 (10%) were of 'other religions'.² The existence of this third group of 'other pupils' is almost always ignored in discussions of schooling segregation. So, while it is well known that 89% of Catholic pupils in Northern Ireland attended 'Catholic' schools (secondary or grammar) and 89% of Protestant pupils attended 'Protestant' schools (secondary or grammar), it is not so well known that 81% of 'other' pupils attended 'Protestant' schools and only 5% attended 'Catholic' schools (secondary or grammar), with 14% in Integrated schools (Department of Education School Statistics 2012/2013).

The mirror image of this finding is that several Catholic schools are homogenous in terms of their pupils' religion: 93 out of 101 Catholic schools had fewer than 5% of pupils who were non-Catholic while only five Protestant schools had fewer than 5% of pupils who were non-Protestant. From this analysis, it would appear that while Catholic schools in Northern Ireland catered almost exclusively to Catholic pupils, Protestant schools in Northern Ireland catered for both Protestant pupils and pupils from 'other' religious backgrounds. Table 1 compares pupil numbers in Northern Ireland's post-primary schools, by management of school (Catholic/Protestant/Integrated) and by the type of school (Grammar/Secondary) alongside the religion of the pupils, for two years: 1997–1998 and, 16 years later, 2012–2013.

The most significant change over this period was the steep fall in pupil numbers in Protestant schools and the more moderate fall in pupil numbers in Catholic schools, accompanied by a sharp rise in pupil numbers in integrated schools. The result of these changes is that the total post primary pupil numbers in Northern Ireland fell by 6347 between 1997/1998 and 2012/2013. The other interesting

² Other religions include: other Christian category (e.g. Jehovah's Witness), non-Christian and religion unknown or unstated.

¹ The Northern Ireland Act 2006 (Section 20) of the Act provides that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister shall be chairmen of the Executive Committee. Under the Belfast Agreement (1998) their duties include dealing with and co-ordinating the work of the Executive Committee and the response of the Northern Ireland administration to external relationships. For all meetings of the Executive Committee the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be co-chairmen.

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