

Literature Review: Integrated Education in Northern Ireland

1.0 Introduction

The establishment of a set of schools designed specifically to facilitate the education of pupils from Roman Catholic and Protestant backgrounds side by side has been one of the major developments in Northern Irish education over the last twenty years. Not surprisingly, such a significant change has generated a considerable literature. Much of what has been written, however, is scattered in a range of reports, journals, edited collections and conference reports and some of it can be difficult to access. This review seeks to examine a cross section of issues relating to the integrated schools and how they fit into the educational structure in Northern Ireland. Whilst there was some writing on integrated education during the late 1970s and early 1980s most of the detailed analysis dates from the period since the late 1980s as it was only from that time that the number of operational schools was sufficient and individual schools had been in operation long enough to allow serious research to be undertaken. The review, therefore, focuses mainly on research carried out between 1988 and 1997.

2.0 Background to integrated education

The development of education in Ireland has, since the early nineteenth century, been closely linked to political and constitutional issues, and certainly since the inception of Northern Ireland, education has had a strong political dimension. Historical studies, such as Whyte (1990) and Farren (1995), have described how, since partition in Ireland, there has been a divided education system in which Catholic and Protestant children are educated separately. This segregated arrangement has prevailed against a backdrop of serious and long-standing conflict in Northern Ireland. The issue of education in the divided society of Northern Ireland has become, therefore, an extremely complex and controversial one, although Morgan et al. (1992) made reference to the fact that initial attempts were made, during the first few years of the existence of Northern Ireland in the early 1920s, 'to establish new structures which might serve the whole community'.

With the re-emergence of violence during the late 1960s the role of education again came under scrutiny and a number of initiatives emerged. Firstly, two approaches were developed in the existing, segregated schools in an attempt to improve community relations: that of encouraging as much contact as possible between Catholic and Protestant pupils - cross community contact - and that of introducing material related to community relations into the curriculum. Secondly, there were moves to change the actual structure of the education system in ways which would make it easier for pupils from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds to be educated together. Integrated education developed out of the latter with the setting up by parents of the first pressure group, All Children Together (ACT) in 1974 and the opening of Lagan College in 1981. The integrated schools have continued to grow in number and during the 1997-98 school year 37 were operational, of which 24 were primary and 13 post-primary.

3.0 Major issues relating to integrated education

Within the complex field of writing and research relating to policy development and implementation in Northern Ireland during the period since 1969 it is not always easy to separate out educational issues from other areas of social policy, far less to isolate integrated education from the broader field of education and social and community issues. However, in order to provide structure for this review it has been necessary to attempt to identify a number of discrete themes.

3.1 Parental choice in education

The nature of parental choice is a key underlying issue in any consideration of the development and future of integrated education in Northern Ireland. The first schools were opened as a direct result of parental action and the relationship between parents' right to choose the type of school they wish their child to attend and the obligations of the state in responding to that choice remains a crucial area of unresolved conflict. The wider question of the roles parents can/should play in education at all levels, from the formulation of national policy to the operation of the individual classroom, has been a central issue throughout the United Kingdom since the late 1970s. This has generated a large body of research literature, a considerable proportion of which is relevant to the Northern Ireland situation.

Overall the extensive literature relating to parental choice underlines the potential conflict between the freedom of choice of the individual parent and the state's interests in equality in the quality of provision and allocation of resources and in fostering social cohesion. This has been an area of controversy particularly in relation to funding the rapid expansion of integrated education since the early 1990s and both the national and international literature underline the fact that the problems are neither unique to integrated education in Northern Ireland nor open to simple solution. In almost all western developed societies parental choice is recognised as an important civil right but its operation is circumscribed (Walford, 1996; Adler, 1997).

3.2 The establishment, purpose and structure of integrated education

One of the distinctive features of integrated education has been its genesis and early evolution outside formal structures. The processes by which groups of parents came together, formulated ideas about the sorts of schools they wanted for their children and then organised and worked to establish the schools have attracted considerable attention. As a result there are a number of studies which seek to analyse the objectives of the early pressure groups, the methods they used to achieve their goals and how links with formal structures, through government ministers and the Department of Education, began to evolve.

Examination of a considerable number of studies suggests that founding groups had three fundamental aims. These were defined as religiously balanced enrolment, establishment of a distinctive ethos in which different religious and cultural traditions are equally valued and management structures which encourage active involvement of parents. A case study which illustrates aspects of the process of establishing a school and translating general objectives into reality was provided by Marriott (1989) in his examination of the complex and challenging process of setting up an integrated primary school during the late 1980s. All the literature on the 'foundation processes' emphasises the three major purposes of the initial campaigners but also draws attention to the practical problems and complexities of turning such ideals into a functioning reality.

3.3 The demand for integrated education

The supporters of integrated education have always argued strongly that the movement began and continues to grow because there is parental demand for non-denominational education in Northern Ireland. In order to facilitate planning, however, it would be very helpful to be able to gauge the extent and level of such demand. Unfortunately the level of demand for integrated education in Northern Ireland has been highly contentious and, indeed, very difficult to measure depending, as it does, on the format of the questions asked and the context.

Reviewing a range of opinion surveys, Cairns and Dunn (1992) reported that, since 1967, there has been 'a fairly consistent picture' of parental views in relation to integrated education in Northern Ireland, in that in a number of studies it has been concluded that two-thirds of parents have declared themselves to be in favour of integrated education. However, they pointed out the serious methodological problems involved in carrying out opinion surveys in Northern Ireland on issues with a community relations dimension and the further difficulty of interpreting some of the findings. They illustrated this clearly from their own study (Cairns et al, 1990) where the phrasing of questions relating to attitudes and choices brought out a

range of results. Thus although a considerable majority of mothers of pre-school children supported the concept of integrated education, a lower proportion would consider sending their child to an integrated school if one was available and an even lower proportion, faced with the reality of a school opening locally, said they were actually likely to enrol their child. To complicate the issue of measuring demand further, surveys have also shown that the integrated/non-integrated variable cannot be taken in isolation. Parents have a number of requirements when selecting a school and prioritise or balance these in a range of different ways. Their final choice will probably rest on how they believe different schools meet their whole range of criteria.

At the same time, whilst direct demand for integrated education is hard to measure, a Coopers and Lybrand report (1988) suggested a high level of acceptance of the principle that integrated education should be made available for parents who wanted it, either through the establishment of a new school or through the transformation of an existing school.

Clearly the issue of assessing demand for integrated education, both the current level and probable future trends, is of considerable concern to individuals schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the Department of Education. Unfortunately current evidence suggests that making an accurate assessment is difficult: in particular, local factors, such as the relative reputations of the various schools in an area, are likely to have a considerable impact and these may shift significantly over the medium term.

3.4 Parents' reasons for choosing integrated schools

The reasons individual parents have for choosing to send their child to an integrated school have been touched on in the previous section but there have been a considerable number of studies which have sought to provide more specific information about the factors which affect parental choice.

Since the integrated nature of the schools is their most distinctive feature it might be expected that this would be the first reason cited by parents as influencing their choice. In fact studies have indicated that the process is often considerably more complex. Morgan et al. (1992) showed that parents could have a range of quite different reasons for sending their children to integrated schools. These could be ideological, in the sense of reflecting a belief that their children should be educated alongside children from the 'other' community. Even here, though, there were differences between those who felt that the religious integration was most important whilst others were not sympathetic to religion at all and wanted a secular integration. In other cases, however, educational motives were cited as central with some parents being attracted by the 'child centred' philosophy of the integrated schools whilst others were reacting to dissatisfaction with existing institutions. For some parents it was geographical proximity or convenience which they saw as important. There was also a clear group of parents in mixed-faith marriages who saw the schools as meeting their need to have their children educated in an environment which overtly valued both traditions.

3.5 Parental involvement in integrated schools

One of the most distinctive features of the new integrated schools is the fact that they have been established by parent groups and indeed a high level of parental involvement at all stages in the school's development is regarded as one of the key principles of integrated education. Given that increased parental involvement and accountability to parents as 'consumers' has been an element of government policy since the mid 1980s, the experiences of the integrated schools in this area may provide evidence which could be of value in a wider context.

In their study of the roles of parents and teachers in integrated schooling based on three specific integrated schools, Morgan et al. (1992) discussed the contribution of parents to the development of the movement, and the extent of their motivation and commitment at different stages in a school's history. They suggested that there are considerable difficulties in defining

what 'involvement' means to different parents. Some see it as the development of a 'one-to-one' relationship with the class teacher whilst others are interested in an active role in management through the Board of Governors.

The complexities of the interactions between parents and education professionals have also been explored by Marriott (1989) who laid emphasis on the role parents can play in the actual educational work in the integrated school - for example by providing support in the classroom. He suggests that this is capable of being advanced by teachers who were prepared to extend their 'sense of professionalism' but that it could also be seen as threatening. Other facets of the parent-teacher relationship, the need for liaison between parents and teachers in integrated schools and the need for them to accept joint responsibility for issues dealing with sectarianism were emphasised by Wright (1991). Much of the work in these areas, although focused on integrated schools, is of wider application since it deals with changing relationships between professional and client groups which are affecting all aspects of education.

3.6 The role of head teachers in integrated education

Closely related to the studies of parent-teacher interactions are issues surrounding the role of the principal. The duties of school principals have been the subject of considerable study over the last decade and it is clear that legislation affecting the management, structure and curriculum of education throughout the United Kingdom has resulted in considerable changes in the demands made on principals. In a sense the principals of the integrated schools in Northern Ireland display the impact of changing demands in a heightened form. The developing role of head teachers in the integrated schools was examined by Morgan et al. (1992), in relation to the curriculum, management and relationships with parents and parent governors. Whilst it was acknowledged that all head teachers experience pressure from different quarters, it was shown that there were high levels of stress amongst the head teachers interviewed, partly due to the need for unfamiliar skills (such as financial planning and fund-raising during the early phases of development and direct negotiations with the Department of Education for Northern Ireland).

3.7 Teachers and the curriculum in integrated schools

An area which has proved elusive in research terms has been that of defining the ways in which the classroom experience in integrated schools differs from that in the controlled and maintained sectors. There have been few studies which have attempted to address this question. A range of methodological, ethical, professional and cost issues probably explain the lack of concrete evidence and certainly extensive classroom based studies would face considerable difficulties.

The evidence which is available is mainly 'indirect' in the sense of relying on discussions with teachers or analysis of documentation. The meaning of a multicultural curriculum in the new integrated schools was investigated by Dunn et al. (1990) and the findings showed that teachers were anxious to develop ways of enabling pupils to 'see the worth of other cultures'. This they believed required a 'common core' curriculum in, say, Religious Education or History, which the integrated schools would share with other schools supported by added components incorporating dimensions specific to each denomination.

As part of a larger study on the roles of parents and teachers in integrated education, Morgan et al. (1994) considered the changing nature of teaching for those who taught in integrated schools and examined their motives for working in this sector. Their experiences had many similar characteristics to those of teachers in denominational schools in Northern Ireland, but the teachers interviewed were particularly aware of the need for sensitivity in relation to the different cultural traditions and for this to be reflected in the curriculum.

3.8 Pupil relationships in the integrated schools and their impact on pupil attitudes

This is an area where research evidence would be of particular direct interest since there is a clear demand for information about what impact attending an integrated school has on the development of attitudes to 'the other community' and about whether people who have been to integrated schools differ from those whose education has been in the controlled or maintained sectors in terms of their views on religious, political, constitutional and community relations issues.

Perhaps not unexpectedly the evidence to date is limited and fragmentary since research in this area faces very considerable methodological, logistic and ethical problems. The material which is available, therefore, tends to be the result of small scale case studies. For example, Irwin (1991) analysed the friendship choices of Catholic and Protestant pupils in an integrated secondary school, taking into consideration the effects of social class and sex on sectarian integration, and of primary school attended on social integration. Whilst the evidence was limited in extent, the author's conclusions were that integrated secondary education could improve inter-community relations in Northern Ireland and that segregated schools added to the polarisation of that society.

In a somewhat more extensive investigation McClenahan et al. (1996) suggested that the relationship between school type and the development of attitudes is complex and affected by a number of socio-economic and psychological factors. Thus it was suggested that Catholic and Protestant children in segregated schools develop 'relatively negative inter-group attitudes', whereas inter-group contact in the integrated schools 'under supportive conditions' was a central objective. In her doctoral thesis, McClenahan (1997) explored these issues further and used both quantitative and qualitative methods to study the national/socio-political identities, friendship preferences and cultural values of pupils in integrated schools. Again the findings indicated that simplistic patterns and explanations were of limited value.

3.9 Patterns of pupil recruitment in integrated schools

The question of who attends integrated schools has been extremely contentious with accusations from those critical of the movement that it caters mainly for pupils from middle class backgrounds who live in areas where there has been little unrest and who already have extensive cross-community contacts. Again empirical data is lacking to support or refute anecdotal evidence although supporters claim that the increasing number of schools and their wide geographical spread means that the socio-economic spread has inevitably broadened in comparison to that found in the mid 1980s.

Other issues relating to recruitment concern the suggestions that Protestants are less likely to wish to send their children to integrated schools than Catholics, that there are more boys than girls amongst applicants and that secondary level applicants come mainly from those unable to secure a grammar school place. In an initial attempt to examine some of these issues Warm et al. (1994) undertook research in an integrated college to discover the reasons for differential recruitment (that is, the lack of Protestant and female applications). However, the results were inconclusive.

3.10 Integrated nursery education

A number of the integrated primary schools have linked nursery classes, and an emphasis on the importance of early education in shaping children's attitudes was a feature of the thinking of the pioneers of integrated education. At the same time the nursery classes were seen as an unfair recruiting ground by opponents and there have been major disputes about the funding of integrated nursery provision. In a study of the integrated nursery sector Stephen (1990) drew attention to the major objective of developing a model of integrated nursery education which could be used elsewhere. But again there are no clear data about the long term impact of attending an integrated nursery class.

4.0 Related research on community relations and conflict resolution in non-integrated schools in Northern Ireland

Although the focus of this survey is material relating to integrated education, the development of integrated schools has to be seen in the wider context of the range of educational initiatives with a community relations dimension which have been undertaken in Northern Ireland since the early 1970s. Clearly there is a very considerable literature relating to education and community relations, inter school contacts and the history and development of Education for Mutual Understanding but a number of key developments were identified:-

Because of the lack of contact between the two existing school systems in Northern Ireland since 1922 and their 'complete and unbroken' separateness (Dunn et al., 1990), a number of community projects were set up in the years following the outbreak of renewed violence to '[ameliorate] the problems raised by the absence of any provision for cross-cultural understanding in what children were taught in their separate schools' (Dunn et al., *ibid*). The first of these were The Schools Curriculum Project founded in 1973 by John Malone of the Queen's University of Belfast, the Schools Cultural Studies Project established by Malcolm Skilbeck in 1974, and John Greer's Religion in Ireland Project set up in 1976, both based at the New University of Ulster at Coleraine.

In 1982, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland published "The Improvement of Community Relations: the Contribution of Schools" which introduced into the system a policy of using education to improve community relations. Two cross-curricular themes were developed: Education for Mutual Understanding which was intended to 'overcome the mutual ignorance and stereotyping which each community expresses of the other' (Dunn et al., 1990), and Cultural Heritage which was designed to foster a greater understanding of culture in the curriculum. A further means of promoting reconciliation within education was started in 1987. The Cross-Community Contact Scheme aimed to encourage trust between young people from the two main cultural traditions in Northern Ireland through on-going contact and collaborative activities.

The impact of these developments was examined by Dunn & Smith (1989) who reported an examination of co-operation between a number of Catholic and Protestant schools. The results suggested that, with support and planning, the schools could develop close relationships. The authors evaluated some of the subsequent initiatives in their later study (1990) by reviewing the range and type of activity associated with Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), the impact of a history programme for 12-year-olds, teachers' and parents' perceptions of EMU and the long-term prospects for this type of contact between schools.

Whitehouse (1990) also reviewed the document "Education for Mutual Understanding: A Guide" and questioned the activities of EMU suggesting that some might even prove to be counter-productive.

In a study to understand better how those in a support and advisory capacity - for example Area Board advisers and school based co-ordinators - perceived Education for Mutual Understanding and its implementation, Smith & Robinson (1992) also focused on how the impact of EMU could be evaluated. It was suggested that, for example, there was a need for a clearer conceptual framework for EMU and better training and in-service education for teachers who were being asked to undertake work in areas where they felt unsure of their expertise.

5.0 Evidence from comparative international studies

It is useful to consider comparative data in order to set the experience of education in the divided society of Northern Ireland in the wider, international arena for, as Morgan (1996) said:

Almost all countries, including almost all the member states of the European Union, include a number of distinct 'ethnic' minorities within their populations.

She pointed out that the provision of frameworks which 'facilitate the development of a set of 'inclusive identities' is a major policy objective in many parts of the world', and the education system is seen as a vehicle for 'structures which both respect the differing traditions of minorities and promote peaceful collaboration between groups'.

Whilst many comparative studies have linked the experience of Northern Ireland since 1969 with the recent history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or developments in South Africa, these were not found to be very productive areas of comparison in terms of educational literature and research. In both cases the differences in the educational structures and the culture of education are so great that valuable transfer of ideas is difficult. On the other hand the other societies where the nature of conflict is different but there are greater similarities in the education systems did appear to provide valuable material. In particular Canadian studies, especially those relating to educational issues in Quebec provided some of the most helpful insights and more detailed analysis of the range of available literature might prove worthwhile (McAndrew, 1996).

6.0 Gaps in the current research evidence - areas for further investigation.

Whilst the literature on integrated education is extensive there are a number of areas where evidence remains limited. These are listed in paragraphs 6.1 - 6.5 below.

6.1 Effectiveness - Impact on community relations, community attitudes

A major gap in the existing research is the lack of evidence on the effectiveness of integrated education. Clearly the term 'effectiveness' itself is problematic since there are so many facets of education which could be included in such an evaluation. In this context, however, the impact in terms of having a beneficial effect on community relations is probably crucial. Future studies, therefore, could focus on the experiences and attitudes to community relations issues of pupils who attended an integrated primary school and proceeded to an integrated secondary school, those from an integrated primary school who subsequently attended a (largely) denominational post-primary school, and those who went to a denominational primary school and an integrated post-primary school. The attitudes of pupils from each of these educational backgrounds could then be compared with those of pupils who went to segregated schools throughout their primary and secondary years.

The only major pieces of work which have attempted to measure the impact of integrated education on pupils were Irwin (1991) on social integration and Cairns et al., (1992) on cultural values and social identity (see also McClenahan et al., 1995). Both of these studies were relatively small, and so cannot be used as a basis for firm conclusions.

6.2 Demand, recruitment, further expansion

An area of considerable current controversy relates to funding integrated schools. This is clearly linked to a range of issues around current levels of demand and potential future demand. Here again current evidence is limited and there is scope for research on why parents chose to send their children to integrated schools, how they prioritise integration amongst other factors in choosing a school. Regional, community and social class differences in these priorities and preferences could also be usefully investigated.

6.3 Transformation

There is currently extensive debate about the relative merits and advantages of founding 'green field site' integrated schools and 'transforming' existing controlled or maintained schools. However, there has been little investigation of the reasons some schools decide to transform, the attitudes of all those involved and the issues which arise during the actual process.

6.4 Curriculum

Earlier investigations have provided only fragmentary evidence about whether there are features of classroom activity and interaction which are distinctive in integrated schools. Classroom based investigation would be expensive, time consuming and methodologically complex. On the other hand it would be helpful to teachers both in the integrated schools and across the rest of the system to have empirically based information about approaches which contribute positively or negatively to cross-community contact and understanding.

6.5 Comparative Studies

A rather more detailed look at the experiences of other societies where there has been deep seated community division and this has impacted significantly on the education system could be valuable. Simple comparisons and suggestions of direct transfer of policies are unlikely to prove useful but for example the literature relating to anglophone/francophone education in Quebec does appear to provide interesting and valuable insights.

7.0 The Project

The project was undertaken for DENI by the Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster. The cost was £6,500.

7.1 Full report

The full report entitled "Integrated education in Northern Ireland: an analytical literature review", DENI Research Report Series No.15, by Lesley Abbott, Seamus Dunn and Valerie Morgan, is available from DENI, price £5.

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views it contains are not necessarily those of DENI.

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