

Briefing paper: Northern Ireland

Introduction

The history of education in Northern Ireland is characterised by its sectarian divisions. Whilst there is a dominant strain of Celtic exceptionalism in the history of Welsh and Scottish education, the political struggle between Unionists and Nationalists has obscured investigation into the cultural distinctiveness of education in Northern Ireland in the context of the United Kingdom. For the entirety of our period, all schooling in Northern Ireland has been denominational. The Protestant and Catholic churches have been formidable forces in educational practice and policy, both through the ownership and management of schools and in extra-parliamentary agitation for reform and/or the defence of the status quo.

A central question for sociologists has been whether segregated education (denominational schooling) causes or reflects community division in Northern Ireland? This focus has spilled over and largely characterised the little historical enquiry into education in Northern Ireland that exists. The consensus is that educational segregation is not the cause of sectarian division, but that division has been reinforced and amplified by schools upholding ‘two distinct cultural and political identities’ (Daly and Simpson, 2004). With this context in mind, it is worth asking if it is possible to write the history of secondary education in the UK since 1945 as one single, experiential story? There is almost no literature on secondary education in the UK since 1945 that includes Northern Ireland, thus we might choose to focus on the interaction between segregation and other factors that define educational experiences, including age and class. There are important methodological questions to ponder here, if our source material is separated by region. Do we ‘test’ our conclusions about the rest of UK against experiences in Northern Ireland, first bearing in mind the unique context? Or do we write about Northern Ireland separately altogether and draw overall comparisons (perhaps between comparable regions, e.g. deindustrialising areas in the North of England and Scotland)? Furthermore, how far should we take into account the history of education in the Republic of Ireland in this period, or are England, Wales, and Scotland the only suitable comparators?

Education in Northern Ireland, 1921-44

In 1921 Ireland was partitioned into the Irish Free State (a Commonwealth dominion) and Northern Ireland. The new state of Northern Ireland was part of the UK with its own devolved parliament and government. The best history of education in this early period is Donald Akenson Education and enmity: the control of schooling in Northern Ireland 1921-50 (1973). Writing during the early years of The Troubles, Akenson argued that the absence of mechanisms for local ‘democratic’ control of education from the beginning was at the root of subsequent problems. Prior to partition, Ireland had not undergone the same reforms as England and Wales had, such as the 1870 and 1902 Education Acts, which had made the nineteenth-century education system more answerable to the state and thus more secular.



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Instead, nearly all schools remained owned and run by the local churches (Protestant and Catholic). The only civically-controlled schools were the technical schools, created in 1899, they received grants based on pupil numbers and had curricula adapted to local circumstances. In the early twentieth century mass education was provided by the National (elementary) schools. These were mostly small, 60% were single-teacher schools with very poor regular pupil attendance. In 1921 there were 75 secondary schools in Northern Ireland, which were almost all grammar schools (Akenson, 1973). A 1920 Educational Commissioners' report had stated that 'the whole edifice of secondary education in Ireland is toppling to destruction' (quoted in Akenson, 1973).

A major problem for the new government was that each level of the education system that it inherited operated in a self-contained way and was not designed to feed into another. For example, primary school education ended at age 11, but the technical schools did not accept pupils until age 14 (Akenson, 1973). The government commissioned the Lynn Report in 1922 to look into educational reform. The committee was chaired by a Unionist with no Catholic representation (the Catholic Church declined invitations to participate). The Lynn Report suggested the formation of 4-and-2 schools, whereby two public representatives sat on the committees of voluntary schools in exchange for more state funding. The Catholic Church rejected this proposal, whilst the Protestants opposed Lynn's proposals for religious instruction to be taken off the statutory curriculum. The 1923 Education Act, based on the Lynn Report, failed to create a unified national system of education in the face of Catholic and Protestant opposition, and segregation persisted. The 1923 Act *did* prohibit religious instruction during school hours, but Unionists campaigned against this throughout the 1920s. Eventually a series of amendments in 1925 and the 1930 Education Act made Bible teaching in county schools compulsory (Protestant demand), as well as extending capital grants to all voluntary schools (Catholic demand).

Many commentators have regarded the dismantling of the (already feeble) 1923 Act as sealing the fate of education in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century, because it made county schools de facto Protestant and funded voluntary schools enough to allow a parallel Catholic system to thrive (Farren, 1992). In the end, most Protestant churches transferred their schools to state control in exchange for full (Unionist) state funding (recurrent and capital costs). The Protestant churches still retained some management power through representation on school committees. These became known as county (controlled) schools. Conversely, the Catholic Church retained total management power over its schools. These schools had their recurrent costs paid by the state and received a 50% government grant towards their capital costs. These became known as maintained (voluntary) schools (O'Callaghan and Lundy, 2013).

Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1947

As in England and Wales, educational reform after the Second World War in Northern Ireland was not enacted on a clean slate. A lot of debate around the new Education Bill



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focused on the 1923 Education Act, 1925 amendments, and 1930 Education Act, and the same sticking points emerged for both Catholics and Protestants. Both churches publically voiced anxieties about declining standards of religious instruction in schools in the mid-1940s. The Protestant churches continued to argue for Bible teaching, which they deemed non-denominational, whilst the Catholic Church did not consider this to be religious instruction at all. The two major Protestant concerns were the conscience clause on offer to teachers in county schools (they were anxious that it could result in Catholic teachers teaching religion in schools attended by majority Protestant pupils (Farren, 1992)) and the proposed increase in the 50% state capital costs grant to voluntary schools. The Catholic Churches also objected to the funding proposals in the Bill, because it would still leave them with large costs to bear. The Catholic Bishops simply proposed that the government covered 100% of their costs, the same as they did for the de facto Protestant schools (Akenson, 1973). Because of this context, the 1944 Butler Act was often used as a yardstick by Unionists once distinctive Northern Irish policies had been formulated, to argue for further concessions in the name of equity between countries.

The Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1947 made secondary education universal and stipulated that transfer to secondary school would happen at the age of 11. The number of education authorities was reduced to eight; one for each of the six counties of Northern Ireland and one each for Londonderry and Belfast (Akenson, 1973). The Act created two types of school: controlled and voluntary, and three types of secondary school: intermediate, grammar, and technical. This really meant the creation of only one *new* type of secondary school, the intermediate school, correspondent to the secondary modern school in England and Wales. The existing National schools had to decide if they were to convert to primary school status or into 11-15 intermediate schools. The Protestant churches were granted some representation on the committees of the controlled intermediate schools, as they argued that they were the ‘spiritual leaders’ of the pupils attending them (Farren, 1992). Grants for capital costs to voluntary schools were raised from 50% to 65% (but the Catholics were *not* compelled to adopt the 4-and-2 committee structure in exchange for this increase in funding). The voluntary grammar schools were entitled to stay under their existing (Catholic) management and were eligible for this 65%, if they allotted 85% of their places to local authority (non fee-paying) pupils. Akenson described the financial terms of the Act as ‘so complex as almost to preclude description’ (Akenson, 1973). The controversial teachers’ conscience clause was retained (as well as a parental conscience clause as per the Butler Act). Bible teaching was no longer statutory, instead it was ‘undenominational religious instruction’ and a daily act of collective worship. ROSLA to 15 was set with the deadline of 1 April 1951, but, after delays, did not come into action until 1 April 1957 (Akenson, 1973).

Education in Northern Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s

The period between the 1947 Act and the 1970s saw continued campaigns by both the Protestant Unionists and the Catholic Church to make gains relating to aspects of the Act that they regarded as objectionable. Particularly notable was the Unionist campaign against the



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teachers' conscience clause and for the reduction in capital costs grants made to voluntary schools. Sean Farren argued that the two decades after 1947 were a period of 'lost opportunities' for improving community relations through education (Farren, 1992). But we should also be wary of the historiographical tendency to read the roots of The Troubles back into all postwar events in Northern Ireland.

Reorganisation according to the terms of the 1947 Act was slow. By 1950-51 there were still only 10 county intermediate and 2 voluntary intermediate schools in existence, by 1955-6 this had increased to 43 and 7 respectively (Akenson, 1973, Farren, 1992). This may have been because of anti-Catholic action that prohibited Catholic authorities (who had all submitted reorganisation plans by mid-1950) from obtaining sites upon which to build their new schools (Farren, 1992). Meanwhile, as in England and Wales, the grammar schools had to expand in response to increased parental demand. It is important to note that the grammar schools in Northern Ireland were still allowed to admit a minority of fee-paying pupils, and local authority scholarships were still means-tested (i.e. the interwar system) until the end of 1949. After some local campaigns this was reformed, so that local authorities had to cover 100% of fees to scholarship pupils. As part of this reform every grammar school in Northern Ireland was given an option as to what kind of financial settlement it would take, as it was deemed essential that any new arrangements did not undermine the existing capital grants arrangements for voluntary schools set out in the 1947 Act (Akenson, 1973).

In 1950 the Unionist Minister for Education, Samuel Hall-Thompson, was forced to resign over his suggestion that the state should pay National Insurance contributions for voluntary school teachers' salaries. This was closely followed by another controversy over travel payments for Catholic pupils who had to journey a long way to attend Catholic grammar schools (Farren, 1992). Both instances highlighted the precariousness of the 1947 voluntary school settlement, and sensitives surrounding what some Unionists regarded as state subsidies for Catholic education. In response, the Catholic Church pointed out that it still raised 35% of its school funding from within the Catholic community, and that Catholic taxpayers were indeed subsidising Protestant education. The 1968 Education Act returned to the issue of capital costs grants to voluntary schools, raising the grant from 65% to 80%, after a long-running campaign by the Catholic Church (Daly and Simpson, 2004).

Education during direct rule, 1972-99

By the late 1960s in Northern Ireland poverty was increasingly apparent, attempts to bring the Catholic community into the state's postwar project had apparently failed, and there were signs of community unrest between Protestants and Catholics in Belfast. The Social Democratic and Labour Party was formed in 1970 to represent Catholics in Northern Ireland, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army was formed in 1970-1, with the aim of uniting Ireland into a Republic separate from the UK. In 1972 direct rule from the British government in Westminster was introduced. The Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DENI) was run by a British minister who answered to the Secretary of State for Northern



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Ireland. DENI covered training, employment, leisure and heritage, as well as education. It has been argued that education policy in Northern Ireland stagnated in this period due to this overburdened portfolio and the distraction of civil unrest (O’Callaghan and Lundy, 2013). On the other hand, the emergent literature on integrated schooling suggests that the period from the 1970s can be seen as one of progressive reform, when viewed from the bottom up and not confined to the framework of The Troubles.

Financial debates around schooling rumbled on during this period. It was argued by the British government that if the voluntary schools accepted the 4-and-2 committee structure, then more state funding could be granted. ROSLA to 16 was achieved in Northern Ireland in 1972, with the caveat that pupils who had secured apprenticeship courses could leave school at 15 to embark upon their training.¹ In this period, probably as a result of increased sociological enquiry into the day to day life of schools precipitated by the broader social and political context, curriculum issues came to the fore. Symbols such as flags were signs of cultural divergence in the classroom (Daly and Simpson, 2004) and there were Unionist attempts to introduce progressive education, arguably a peculiarly English trend, into primary schools in Northern Ireland (Farren, 1992). A study of GCSE subjects undertaken in the early 1990s found that Protestant and Catholic schools had the largest divergence in ‘culturally specific’ subjects such as religion and history (Gallagher, 1995). In the latter, Protestants had long typically studied British history, whilst Catholics studied Irish history (Hayes and McAllister, 2015). But, as was the case in England and Wales throughout the 1970s in response to comprehensivisation, there were attempts to cultivate new pedagogies for the teaching of history, notably through the work of the Schools Council History Project in Northern Ireland (Smith, 2005).

From the mid-1970s there was a parent-led campaign for integrated education in Northern Ireland. Whilst secular parental agitation against selection was arguably stifled by confessional divisions in the postwar period, integration proved to be an area where democratic educational demands could be successfully articulated as a demand for placing more power in the hands of parents (Smith, 2001). In 1974 the lobby group All Children Together (ACT) was formed by a group of Catholic parents. ACT soon became interdenominational and formulated proposals for the management and curriculum of integrated schools. Crucially, integrated schools were not secular schools, they were based on a shared Christian ethos.

With the support of ACT, in 1981 the first integrated school, Lagan College, opened in south Belfast. It was initially run entirely on private and charitable funding, occupying buildings loaned successively by the Scouts and the Ulster Folk Museum, but in 1984 it became a grant-maintained secondary school (Hayes and McAllister, 2015). The Ulster Folk Museum also ran integrated education programmes throughout the 1980s that emphasized shared local

¹ I have not been able to look at Wilson/NICER et al (1977) on early leaving in Northern Ireland, and the corresponding UKDS material, for this briefing paper. This topic therefore merits much further consideration

histories (Thompson, 1985). In 1987 the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education was established as an umbrella for the ten, parent-started integrated schools that existed by that point. During the same period the Northern Ireland government had made little headway in bringing Protestant and Catholic churches together on educational issues, illustrated by the failure of a 'Shared School Plan' proposed by Minister for Education Basil McIvor in 1974 (Hayes and McAllister, 2015). The success of ACT suggests that community demand for parental control of schooling, however insurmountable the policy issues appeared, was extremely strong in Northern Ireland by the 1970s.

Research by Bernadette Hayes and Ian McAllister using public opinion surveys on the perception and impact of integrated schooling since the 1980s is instructive. They make a distinction between formal and informal integration, where informal integration relates to pupils crossing the religious divide to attend a school still officially deemed Catholic or Protestant. Catholics are more likely to cross over into Protestant schools than vice versa, it remains very unusual for non-Catholic children to attend Catholic schools in Northern Ireland (O'Callaghan and Lundy, 2013). They note that there is more integration of both types at secondary than at primary level. There are no formally integrated grammar schools in Northern Ireland, but informal integration through crossover is more marked in grammar schools, suggesting that school quality trumps religion in some instances. They have found that public support for integrated schooling has gradually increased since the 1980s, with overwhelming support in 2011, but that Catholic support for both types of integration has declined since 2008. Although there is little research assessing the impact of integrated schooling on today's adult population in Northern Ireland, early evidence suggests that integration does help to break down community divides, whilst still recognising that 'for the vast majority of the adult population religious affiliation and school experience remain strongly linked' (Hayes and McAllister, 2015).

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 was the correspondent piece of legislation to the Conservative government's 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales. As in the 1988 Act, the Northern Ireland Order introduced a common curriculum, attainment targets, and programmes of study. Moreover, it created a statutory body, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, to streamline the administration of all Catholic maintained schools (O'Callaghan and Lundy, 2013). The Order also introduced a new category of school, the grant-maintained integrated school, defined as a school with a minimum 30% enrolment from the minority community. This was the official realisation of integrated education, giving the schools full grants and making the government responsible for promoting these religiously mixed environments. Religious education and history must be interdenominational and teachers are drawn from both communities.

Education since the Belfast Agreement, 1998

In December 1999 education in Northern Ireland was devolved to the Stormont Assembly and was thereafter run by a minister elected in Northern Ireland. Since devolution, integrated



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schooling has continued to be positively promoted by the state, but the reform agenda in secondary education turned decidedly towards ending selection at age 11. Although an ‘official’ line of reform has only emerged since 1997, research into the effects of selection had been occurring since the 1960s (as in the rest of the UK). In 1969 an experiment in ‘delayed selection’ was undertaken in Craigavon, although the results do not appear to have been written up until the 1990s (Alexander et al 1998). An official report on secondary selection published in 2000 found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that grammar school intakes typically contained pupils from higher-skilled families, that pupils not selected had a ‘sense of failure’, and that the intermediate schools became the Cinderellas of the local system. The report also made the following observation on pupil attitudes, highlighting the parochial nature of everyday school experience: ‘There are few differences between the attitudes to school of grammar and secondary pupils. Also, there are few differences between pupils in Northern Ireland and pupils in Scotland on these attitudinal measures. Overall pupils view their own school in positive terms and focus on it rather than comparing it with others.’ (Smith and Gallagher 2000).

Following this research and further consultation, the decision to end selection in Northern Irish schools was taken in 2004, and the 11-plus test was abolished in 2008. The grammar schools were not abolished. Since 2008, despite promises that transfer would be based on parental choice and pupil profiles, a variety of different school transfer tests have been used to select pupils for grammar schools at age 10 or 11, although pupils can choose not to take them. In 2008-2009 there were 69 grammar schools and 154 non-grammar (intermediate) secondary schools in Northern Ireland, plus 42 special schools and 2 hospital schools. The number of independent schools in Northern Ireland has been in decline since 2000-2001, when it was 27, down to 16 in 2008-2009 (the sector had previously grown from 19 schools in 1996-1997) (Department of Education, Statistics and Research Branch Compendium).

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