



# 6

## Education in Northern Ireland: A House Divided

Mary Gethins

### Preface

The author of this chapter, though of Northern Irish birth and upbringing, spent almost 30 years of the twentieth century outside the province. Over 80% of those years were spent in England and the remainder in the Republic of Ireland. Having been a consumer and provider of education until the 1970s, she became an observer from outside of changes in the Northern Ireland system and context during a very significant period. What follows, therefore, results from combining personal recollections and paper research. Opinions expressed and conclusions reached, while inevitably influenced by those of others, are sincerely held by the author. Assistance given by McStravick, Ms L and Mr V is gratefully acknowledged. Special expression of appreciation is due to the seminal research done and published by (i) Farren and (ii) Birrell and Hayes from the University of Ulster. Warm thanks are

---

M. Gethins (✉)  
Northern Ireland, UK

offered to a couple of patient friends who read and commented on this piece of work in draft form.

The chapter is structured on a slightly different pattern to that announced by McCloy in Chapter 1. Since the story of education in Northern Ireland is so different from those in the three other parts of the UK, this chapter has four sections. The addition, one trusts, is excused on the grounds that the Belfast Agreement was the most profound event to take place on the island of Ireland since Partition and introduced a form of devolved government untried and unknown in the other countries of the UK. An experiment on which judgment must be reserved for commentators in the future.

## Introduction

It is generally accepted in Great Britain, even by those who do not know much about Northern Ireland, that this small region about the size of Greater Manchester with a population of approximately 1.86 million people is 'different'. Its education system differs from England, Scotland and Wales in a number of ways. Not surprising, given the fraught historical three-cornered relationship between them and the Stormont government, the Catholic and Protestant Churches continue to exercise considerable influence on the management of schools in the province. There are currently two parallel systems: (i) controlled schools which are owned and run by the state, but are, in fact, Protestant in that school populations are drawn almost predominantly from Protestant families and taught by Protestant teachers; (ii) a sizeable voluntary maintained sector (including selective grammar schools) owned and governed mainly by Catholic Church trustees or their representatives, though there are some separate voluntary selective grammar schools run by Protestant trustees. Both categories cater for children until the statutory school leaving age of 16 years and grammar schools (controlled and voluntary) provide education until pupils have completed 'A' level examinations.

In the primary sector, the figures for year 2017/2018<sup>1</sup> are 365 controlled and 367 maintained Catholic schools, but only 45 integrated

(attended by pupils from Catholic and Protestant homes and from other faiths and none). At secondary level, there were 86 controlled (grammar and non-selective); 91 Catholic maintained (grammar and non-selective) and 21 other (Protestant) voluntary grammar schools. There are 20 second level integrated schools.

In order to begin to understand the unusual features of our education system, we must briefly seek the assistance of history.

## Historical Background

The Partition of Ireland came about by the Government of Ireland Act (1921) following a Rising in 1916 against British rule, execution of the leaders and a brief Anglo-Irish War. The Irish Free State was established in 1922 inside the British Commonwealth, consisting of 26 counties with a predominantly Roman Catholic population and the remaining 6 counties came to be known as Northern Ireland (often referred to erroneously as 'Ulster', which in earlier times consisted of 9 counties) with a predominantly Protestant population, mainly of 'Ulster-Scots' Presbyterian origin. A devolved parliament was established at Stormont, east side of Belfast.

In Ireland, in 1831, a Board of Commissioners of National Education was established by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland through which public finance was supplied to schools whose managers applied for assistance. Arrangements ensured that the National Commissioners in Dublin controlled finance of education as well as the curriculum. The main Churches were represented on the Board. These so-called National Schools, established immediately after Catholic Emancipation (1829) were intended to be integrated in pursuit of mutual understanding of the main Christian traditions and they received equal finance for building and management costs, as well as teachers' salaries. A denominational system developed, however, due to clerical rivalry expressed in competing values and attitudes from the early years after the system was set up. The Church of Ireland, for example, in its capacity as the country's Established Church until 1869, 'claimed as such to be the only legitimate body through which education for all denominations

should be organised'. Presbyterians, historically suspicious of 'popery' objected to the integrationist ethos. Although the Catholic bishops were initially supportive of the National Schools, 'as being the first ostensibly integrated, non-proselytising form of schooling in Ireland', they changed their stance in the 1840s when Bishop Whately—the Church of Ireland's representative on the National Board—though a supporter of Catholic Emancipation, published textbooks in which he alluded to Catholic worship having 'pagan origins'.<sup>2</sup>

Whately's publications only strengthened Catholic opposition which was growing in principle, particularly under the influence of the man who was to become Catholic Archbishop of Armagh and later of Dublin, Paul Cullen. Catholic parents were strongly dissuaded from sending their children to non-Catholic managed schools. Furthermore, as religious orders became more closely involved in providing schools for Catholics, the system quickly lost its inter-denominational character.

After the partition of Ireland in 1921, control of education in Northern Ireland was in the hands of the dominant political party, the Unionists, as the few Nationalist politicians returned tended to disengage and to see Catholic education as being a matter for the Catholic bishops.

The liberal minded Minister for Education Lord Londonderry, experienced ongoing conflict in his dealings with the mainstream conservative Unionists and the Churches. In spite of the Prime Minister Craig's intention, famously encapsulated in the phrase: '*A Protestant parliament for a Protestant people*',<sup>3</sup> the Minister and his more liberal colleagues (of which there were few) wanted, in principle, to follow the English model in forming a progressive, democratically controlled non-denominational system to cater for both Protestant and Roman Catholic children. Neither history nor the socio-political context augured well for the realisation of such an optimistic aspiration.

Lack of foresight at government level was matched by uncompromising determination on the part of both Catholic and Protestant Churches to maintain a controlling grip on their respective flocks, through education policy and curriculum control. Indeed, the political and social control exercised by the Churches demonstrated the widespread unquestioning trust which the laity placed in their clerical

shepherds and which continued for several decades. The laity tended to allow their Church leaders to fight their battles for them in the belief that denominational interests of leaders and followers coincided. On occasions, though, the Catholic Church authorities found ready, vocal support from Nationalist politicians, while the Orange Order as well as Unionist politicians supported the Protestant Churches.

Two months after becoming the first Minister of Education, Lord Londonderry announced the establishment of a committee of enquiry to make proposals as to the future structures of education in Northern Ireland. As Chairman, Robert Lynn, Unionist MP for West Belfast and editor of the strongly Unionist daily newspaper, *The Northern Whig*, gave his name to the committee. The Minister's first disappointment came when Cardinal Michael Logue turned down an invitation to nominate four members to sit on the committee. His response conveys a clear lack of trust in Unionist politicians to provide for Catholic education. In it he states:

I should be glad to cooperate in any effort for the improvement of education, but judging from the public utterances of some members of the Belfast Parliament and their sympathisers, I have little doubt that an attack is being organised against our Catholic schools.<sup>4</sup>

One might judge the cardinal's utterance as indicating good judgment, though it could be argued that he showed poor judgement, was impetuous and should have shown willingness by accepting the invitation.

Although the remit of the Churches covered the whole of the island, after Partition in the separate jurisdictions separate patterns of education developed with different aims, structures and curriculum content. The government in the North set out to educate its population broadly according to the British model, while in the South the aim was to follow a pattern which would seek to translate a post-colonial vision of re-Gaelicisation into reality, placing strong emphasis on the Irish language, history and culture including sports. One-third of the population in Northern Ireland for some years after Partition denied the legitimacy of the new statelet (a pejorative term, though it was as many Nationalists regarded it) and believed that their minority status would

likely bring economic, social, religious and cultural discrimination. Perhaps for that reason, or regretting their imposed severance from the remainder of the island, Catholic schools tended to resemble those in the south in terms of curriculum content.

From the outset, the Protestant clergy were known as ‘transferors’ because they transferred their schools into state control in the firm belief that Unionist governments would look after their interests and that they would be relieved of an unbearable burden of funding them. As early as 1931, the Education Act of that year contained concessions which provided for (i) ‘transferred’ schools to be represented on education committees and school management boards and (ii) the inclusion of religious education along sectarian lines in ‘state’ schools.

This legislation ensured that the province would continue to have a dual education system on denominational grounds and in terms of financial support. ‘Transferred’ schools had become state schools which would henceforth become in effect Protestant schools, attended by Protestant children, taught by Protestant teachers, retaining a distinctly Protestant ethos. Full grants for capital projects given to ‘transferred’ schools and partial grants to Catholic schools reduced from two-thirds available before 1922 to one-half. The Catholic voluntary sector—by their own choice indeed—had no representation on local education committees or on management committees of state schools and was totally dependent on the generosity of the Catholic community for large sums to provide financial support.

Cardinal William Conway succinctly, expressed the rationale of Catholic education thus many years later:

Religion is not something which is just learned like a multiplication table. It is a way-of-life which affects all one’s other attitudes. While they are growing up, children have to learn to live their faith and they will do this with much greater security and confidence if they spend their school day in a place where this way of life is seen as something shared between parents, pupils and teachers alike.<sup>5</sup>

The Catholic Church authorities, therefore, decided to retain their own school system while seeking to be subsidised from public funds to a

level granted to Catholic schools in Great Britain and justified by their community's contribution to public expenditure by taxes and rates.

The attitudes of the Protestant Churches suggested lack of unity among their clerical representatives who negotiated with politicians (whose views ranged from liberal to conservative to fundamentalist) but there was also marked dissonance between clergy and some laity. Among the latter were some Protestant teachers; the vociferous Ulster Teachers' Union struggled against clerical management of 'transferred schools', insisting that freedom of conscience be recognised and that denominational loyalties should not determine appointments.

According to McKelvey,<sup>6</sup> while concessions made to those Churches' demands tended to establish common ground between them, there were subtle differences between them as to their reasons for involvement in education. He (an insider in the Church of Ireland) chides them thus:

neither the Church of Ireland nor the other Protestant Churches ever actually produced a rationale of its educational policy. There was no critical assessment of the purpose or content of education.

Against this backdrop of ongoing wrangling, finger pointing and dissatisfaction for a quarter of a century a new 'threat' arrived from Westminster just before World War II came to an end.

## 1944–1972

### **The Butler Act (1944) and Its Impact on the Northern Ireland Education System**

The passing of the Butler Act in England increased the level of tension, already longstanding, between education decision-makers in Stormont and outside. The Hadow (1926) and Spens (1939) Reports indicated that Westminster envisaged educational reform which would provide equality of opportunity for all children to benefit from secondary education. It was obvious that while following a policy of social and educational parity with England, the Northern Ireland government would

be constrained by the Churches' attitudes to the far-reaching changes to come.

Both Protestant and Catholic Churches raised strong objections to the Westminster model of sweeping educational change, but on different grounds. The Protestant Churches feared that what they had won in the form of influence over state public elementary schools by the 1930 Act would be lost in relation to the proposed new secondary intermediate schools. A conscience clause would allow teachers to withdraw from worship and/or teaching Religion. Another difficulty arose, not highlighted previously, in that the Government of Ireland Act (1920) forbade endowment of denominational education and it was pointed out in the interim by the Attorney General that the provision of Bible instruction paid for by public funds contravened the Act. A third reason for opposition arose in the form of increased funding of capital costs from 50 to 65% for Catholic schools not transferred into the state system, but which had accepted two local authority members to sit on their management committees. This became known as the four-and-two arrangement—the 'four' representing trustees. The increase to 65% was later extended to all voluntary schools.

The Catholic Church reiterated its claim to responsibility with parents for the education of Catholic children attending Catholic schools, without the degree of state control intended. It argued that acknowledged freedom of religious conscience and worship placed a duty on the state to provide financial support for schools with Catholic ethos. Furthermore, the cost of building new schools for a secondary population without access to already established grammar schools was seen as placing an enormous financial burden on a largely poor laity. The truth of this point is demonstrated by the fact that by 1955–1956 only 7 Catholic intermediate schools had been built, as compared with 43 in the public authority sector.<sup>7</sup> Difficulty in finding suitable sites was an aggravating factor.

Despite a difficult birth, the 1947 Act marked a watershed in education structure and enhanced opportunities for at least four years and longer, if appropriate, of free secondary education in either grammar or secondary intermediate and technical schools. Two aspects of the 1947 Act showed it to differ from the Butler Act:



1. A majority of voluntary grammar schools agreed to allocate 80% of places to pupils who had passed the 11+ test, allowing the remaining 20% to be allocated to children whose parents could afford to pay the fees. From 1989 the latter was disallowed.
2. Scholarships were awarded to the 80% of pupils attending by the Department of Education (DENI) directly bypassing local education committees.

A small group of the richer, most prestigious grammar schools ignored an offer of 65% for capital costs and 100% recurrent funding in order to remain free to choose pupils as they wished. This freedom may have prompted the dramatist Samuel Beckett, while a teacher at Campbell College, Belfast, called to account by his headmaster who referred to the pupils as the 'cream' of Ulster, to remark scathingly: *'like double cream, rich and thick'*.<sup>8</sup> Of those grammar schools that accepted funding, the 20% of places were often taken up by pupils who had attended their partially subsidised preparatory departments, and after one year could obtain a scholarship via a 'review' procedure, on the recommendation of the head teacher.

The extension of grammar school education to all who were deemed capable of benefitting from it had huge social impact, particularly in relation to children from poorer households. This resulted as time went on in greater numbers of graduates entering the professions, more accurately reflecting the whole society and later challenging the status quo in relation to civil rights and equal opportunities. Criticism arose over the years that followed 1947 in relation to selection at the age of 11 in principle, the validity of the tests, but also to the testing procedure. Huge progress was also shown by the scale of provision of secondary intermediate schools. Total enrolment had increased from 27,000 in 1947 to almost 95,000 in 1963.<sup>9</sup>

One positive reform which soon followed the 1947 Act was the Ministry's decision to set up Advisory Councils to advise in the light of criticisms levelled by teachers and parents at the distortion of the curriculum and alleged pressures put on children by the selection tests. Cognisance was taken of research and experience emerging from England, particularly the questioning of intelligence testing as the best

indicator of future performance and the publication of Circulars 10/65 and 10/66 which suggested supplanting the tripartite system of primary, secondary and further education supposedly '*suited to the aptitudes and abilities of pupils*'. A choice of systems was offered: 11–18 years; 11–14 and 14–18 years; 11–16 and a sixth form college 16–18 years; 9–13 with variants of 13–18 years. In traditionally conservative Northern Ireland, an experiment using the 11–14 and 14–18 models was attempted.

### **Ora et Labora: Personal Reflections**

A product of this segregated education system, the author will share briefly her experience of growing up in a pre-Troubles, pre-Direct Rule era.

The practice of families attending different Churches on Sunday being reflected in attendance of children at our village Roman Catholic and Protestant schools was accepted. Pupils formed and maintained friendships outside school hours, playing games, gathering wild fruits, dressing up for an annual fancy dress parade and attending birthday parties. Choice of school was, of course, dictated by parents' religious affiliation but no hostility or rivalry at adult level was apparent and one would doubt that any existed. Annual parades through the four streets and square by sashed Orangemen playing Lambeg drums were watched and apparently enjoyed by everyone on the 12th of July, the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne when William the Third, Prince of Orange, defeated James the Second in 1690. My parents tended to ignore the division in Ulster society as far as possible and socialised freely across the divide where this was possible and welcome. My father, for example, each year provided a huge array of his prize dahlias for the harvest thanksgiving in our neighbouring Presbyterian Church.

Facilities and equipment were restricted in both of the two-teacher public elementary schools in our village—particularly playing space—and the 3 Rs dominated the curriculum. Subjects such as Art and Craft, Storytelling, Music and PE were considered 'treats' when our teacher was pleased by our progress in Number, Reading or Writing. The only

knowledge of the Irish language we learned was during the daily half hour RE lesson when we were taught to make the sign of the cross accompanied by 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen' and to recite the 'Our Father' in translation. The parish priest called about once a month to examine our knowledge of the catechism, particularly as we approached First Holy Communion and Confirmation. Our Christian formation was of great importance to our parents and we never missed 11 o'clock Mass each Sunday, except on rare occasions such as periods in hospital for tonsil or appendix removal. Our parish priest was overheard having conversations with the male teacher about matters pertaining to the school building such as replacement of tiles, water leaks and painting over the summer holiday period. Such were of concern to him at this time when Catholic schools were only partially funded by the government.

When we transferred from the female teacher's room at the age of 7–8 to 'the Master' the curriculum was extended to include more English grammar, history and geography. Rhyming off multiplication tables continued; history consisted of life during Celtic times and stories of Hannibal, Wilberforce, Marie Curie, Abraham Lincoln, Scott, Florence Nightingale and similar figures; geography lessons were conducted around a map of Ireland or of the British Isles following a similar pattern—mountains, rivers, lakes and chief towns. Radio programmes for schools were considered 'treats' during these senior years in the public elementary school. In the final year, the European countries were introduced into the curriculum when a very few pupils were selected to sit the 11+ examination. For us, homework consisted partly of practice tests for this feared experience in a large school some miles away.

A voluntary grammar school of 240 pupils owned by the Sisters of Mercy which catered for boarders and day pupils was my next destination. The school motto which was 'Ora et Labora' (Pray and Work) left the pupils in no doubt as to their priorities—spiritual development, character formation and academic success in accordance with one's abilities. We were streamed throughout our time there from the first year and the B stream girls tended to be older and from families in the 20% who did not sit the transfer tests, or failed to satisfy the examiners.

Our RE programme consisted of detailed study of the Four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, Church History, Liturgy and Christian Apologetics. Our knowledge was tested each June by the 'Bishop's Exam'.

The girls studied all the subjects on offer in the first two years and on the basis of results were allowed to drop a subject in which they showed limited ability and/or interest. The exception was Latin, for which we had to take an internally set test on entry before being accepted by Sister A into her select club. In some cases, Irish was jettisoned by girls after first or second year, pleading that it would not be essential for entry to any career and would be of no practical use. While regretting their failure to recognise the Irish language as part of their cultural heritage, the headmistress put no pressure on to continue studying it. We covered mainly prescribed periods of British and European History, as well as the nineteenth century Irish history option. It was usual practice for Protestant grammar schools then and later to exclude Irish history from the curriculum until cross-community themes were introduced during the Troubles.

Our headmistress, a nun, a gifted mathematician and musician with an engaging sense of humour, came down heavily on any pupil who attempted to bring politics into school. A girl from a republican family had her pencil confiscated because the rubber on the end was coloured to imitate the Irish tricolour. There were no senior school debates on issues directly related to Irish politics; rather safer topics such as 'Single sex schools are best for girls', 'Religion is the opium of the people', 'A nation's wealth is in its people', 'Money is the root of all evil' being preferred.

One aspect of grammar school which I regret was the absence of a good science department, which inevitably restricted our choice of career. Our science graduate teacher spent most of her time teaching mathematics as there was only one poorly equipped chemistry laboratory. Hindsight suggests that, expense aside, there was still a lingering attitude that girls should emerge as caring and socially skilled, articulate and 'cultured' but not expected to excel in 'boys' subjects'. Our curriculum seemed to be borrowed from English Examination Boards, particularly our set texts for English literature which were by English writers. There was no mention of Joyce, Shaw, O'Casey, Wilde or

Swift—though the poetry of Yeats found a place. (Indeed, this tendency continued at university.) There were no youth clubs, but extra-curricular interests included reading, private piano and speech and drama lessons, staging musicals and plays and watching films usually related directly to our school work or conveying a moral message.

We were not conscious of living in a divided society, much less that this should be considered odd or unacceptable. If some people's thoughts were consumed by the constitutional question, precious little evidence of it appeared in everyday life. There certainly were no suggestions made by teachers during discussions that our generation should seek political or social change. There appeared to be general acceptance of the status quo, including division along lines of religious affiliation, which was respected. This attitude was in stark contrast to the situation which developed during the Troubles, when many people found it prudent to divide into separate camps and unelected 'protectors' arose in the form of paramilitaries who wrought murder and mayhem, until all were exhausted and there was no winner. There was no offensive banter on train journeys to school. Perhaps it would have been more normal if there had been. After pushing and crushing to board the train, the girls sat with their friends from class, while the boys scrapped with peers from their own or another school, but with pupils of their own religion. So, I expect it is true to say that there was a kind of voluntary, subtle apartheid between equal tribes. There was no crossing the divide, neither was there overt hostility, just mutual tolerance—either natural or unconsciously learned.

University came as a great, surprising, liberating intellectual experience. A majority of our RP sounding professors and tutors were from the south of England, though there was one Scot from St Andrew's, and a considerable number of Ulster unionists. Irish Catholic staff were comparatively rare and almost exclusively in the departments of scholastic philosophy and Celtic studies where they worked with a Welshman and a Manxman—so that the two branches of the Celtic languages were catered for. Academic life was based very loosely around the Oxbridge model with sherry on offer during meetings with a small number of the tutors after 5 p.m. This practice was not entirely appreciated by Catholic students who had been members of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association since the age of 14, nor by the many Protestant

student members of the Christian Union. In my experience overindulgence in alcohol by the student body was virtually unknown, a reflection of their families' values.

Faith nurturing was catered for by chaplains and the vast majority of students spent a lot of their free time socialising at their denominational chaplaincies, particularly in the evening after the library had closed. Many Catholic students attended Mass there at lunchtime. In our first year, Catholic girls stayed in Aquinas Hall run by Dominican nuns, while Protestant girls stayed in Riddell Hall run by lay staff.

We never met for inter-hall social events, nor did we ever have an opportunity to attend broadly Christian services. Although student 'hops' were popular, except among fundamentalists, romantic relationships tended almost completely to observe the religious divide. From the arts faculty, we graduated in black gowns with ermine trimming, followed by strawberries and cream on the lawn accompanied by music from the Royal Ulster Constabulary band.

I found a hugely inspiring contrast when later I studied for a master's degree in Bristol University. There were people who openly admitted that they had no religion and our very progressive Jesuit chaplain and his opposite numbers organised inter-faith events, where the common Christian heritage was emphasised. What a contrast to what I had left behind in Ulster society and what a relief to find an alternative way of life—which included playing croquet on a vicarage lawn and quaffing rose wine made by the vicar! Having enjoyed this journey down memory lane, I must return to the general narrative.

## **The Dickson Plan—Variation on Selection**

Innovative Director of Education in Armagh W. J. Dickson was seen to be of similar ilk to Stuart Mason and Sir Alec Clegg, progressive English educationalists. The new city of Craigavon was judged to be a suitable area to experiment with non-selective education, it being the fashionable gospel across the water in the 'sixties'.

Aware of difficulties facing him which included the dichotomy that existed between the social images of grammar and secondary (intermediate) schools in the Craigavon area and of the tension between

second level schools of both types and the technical colleges concerning bright pupils, Dickson bravely set out to convince his Education Committee and to consult with parents, teachers, management committees and staffs, as he strove to reform education in Craigavon which encompassed the established towns, Lurgan and Portadown as well as the planned large new housing and industrial development located in between. He realised, too, that he would have to cope with the strong, influential grammar school lobby containing parents as intransigent as trustees, governors and staff.

Dickson decided that a break at 14 was the preferred option since a good social mix was necessary in schools in the new area and that a two-tier system was less expensive than a tripartite one, as there could be less duplication of equipment. By initiating a consultation process and copying Mason, he was breaking new ground in Northern Ireland where people tended to accept decisions made for them from above. In an interview carried out by McStravick, the Director voiced his only partial awareness at the outset of the strength of the grammar school tradition, stating that '*the equal opportunity for all concept had not percolated or penetrated from England and Wales to these shores*'.<sup>10</sup> After holding 18 consultative meetings with stakeholders in both controlled and voluntary sectors, the entire voting pattern showed 479 in favour and 207 against. Primary, secondary intermediate and technical college, parents, staff and management were in favour. Predictably the grammar schools were against as they would lose their 11–14-year-old pupils. The Director had, however, to modify his plans as the consultation and negotiation process progressed, so that, in McStravick's opinion, the implemented Dickson Plan resembled a pale imitation of the Leicestershire scheme and a very modest experiment in non-selective education favoured by the Ministry of Education. Even those in favour of the scheme had reservations: they wanted all pupils to transfer at 14+ without a selection examination, but by a procedure based on teacher assessment with parental choice; parents should not be able to opt out of the new scheme at 11+, to prevent creaming off by the grammar schools outside the area (though within easy travelling distance).

By February 1967, Ministry approval had been obtained. Among the provisions were: only thirty-three and a third percent could transfer to

senior high school at 14+ by parental choice, teacher assessment and external examination; fee-paying places must still be provided in grammar schools; the concept of technical high school should be developed for those pupils not selected for senior high schools. Teacher and parent pressure, however, forced Dickson to drop the idea of 'The Craigavon Common Entrance' from the selection criteria for entry to grammar schools.

The Catholic managers in giving approval to the Dickson Plan in principle indicated that '*as far as possible, the voluntary system would develop along parallel lines*'. The approach taken as follow-up appears ambivalent but pragmatic. In the voluntary maintained sector in Lurgan and Portadown, a much larger proportion of parents have continued to use the 11+ selection tests to send their children to single-sex Grammar Schools outside the area—which had been the tradition since the schools were founded in the nineteenth century mostly by religious trustees. This has, obviously, had a 'creaming off' effect on the 11+ intake of the voluntary maintained Junior High School. A surprise came in 2014, when after public consultation, the Catholic bishop announced the amalgamation of two single sex junior high schools with the 14–18 grammar school to form a non-selective co-educational college with new build by 2019 on the site of the former grammar school. In the opinion of the Catholic authorities, this arrangement meets social justice demands for equality of opportunity and parity of esteem (between social classes), while affording choice to send their children outside the area at 11+ stage to 11–18 selective schools and to pay travelling expenses, free travel having been withdrawn.

No such far-reaching change is envisaged at this point in the controlled sector where, from the early 1970s, most pupils transferred at 14+ from feeder junior high schools to Lurgan College and Portadown College, further education colleges being alternative destinations.

The saga of selective versus comprehensive education still continues with a lobby of confident, middle-class folk, supported by the formidable Governing Bodies Association representing grammar schools from across the sectarian divide robustly withstanding any likely threat from any source, including the British Government.

McEwan<sup>11</sup> makes interesting comment on increasing 'crossover', largely by Catholic pupils attending Protestant grammar schools. One reason is obvious and has been in practice for several decades: in areas



where attending a Catholic school would involve long travelling each day, pupils have opted to attend the local Protestant school. A more recent practice—since fair employment legislation was passed and implemented in the 1970s, creating greater opportunities for Catholics to enter certain occupations and to be promoted on merit—some parents have chosen the more prestigious of the Protestant grammar schools e.g. the Royal School, Armagh, Methodist College or the Royal Belfast Academical Institution in Belfast, seeing them as ladders towards enhanced opportunities in business and the professions. An increased ‘crossover’ of teachers is also noticeable.

### Local Government Downgraded?

Services introduced by the establishment of the Welfare State after WWII were not in Northern Ireland entrusted to local government to administer. One innovation which indicated lack of central government trust in local councils was the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, established after the civil rights demonstrations, which took over responsibility for providing much needed public sector housing for people on low incomes. Most local councils were dominated by Unionist councillors because proportional representation had been abolished in 1922 and the franchise was restricted to owners of property (including domestic dwellings) which in practice excluded approximately one-quarter of those entitled to vote in Stormont elections. Catholics, being generally poorer, were therefore disadvantaged. Birrell and Hayes<sup>12</sup> quote an example of how this worked out in practice: ‘*Londonderry County Borough was 60% Catholic, but they were represented by only 40% of councillors, due to the distortion or gerrymandering of ward boundaries*’.

Central government, by failing to investigate allegations of discrimination, indirectly promoted in part a growing demand for civil rights as the 1960s rolled forward. It was, however, the Matthew Report (1963)<sup>13</sup> which made a strong case for reforming local government in order to help meet demands for planning and development, finding the general infrastructure inadequate to meet the task. The rise to prominence of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the People’s

Democracy and the infiltration of these peaceful organisations by paramilitaries prompted the Westminster government to lend support to the idea of tasking Lord Cameron and his team to investigate the causes of major civil disturbance and street riots.

The Cameron Report (1969),<sup>14</sup> in analysing the cause of the violence, identified local government as being significantly guilty in respect of public housing allocation, discrimination in making appointments, deliberate manipulation of electoral boundaries—all intended to perpetuate unionist control. In addition, the Stormont government was faulted for failing to investigate accusations against local councils' behaviour and to seek remedies in the face of burgeoning resentment among the large minority population.

As the Westminster government realised more and more that Northern Ireland was in a seriously unstable political condition, Direct Rule was imposed in March 1972. Public housing reform was quickly followed by attention to other services, in the wake of killing by members of the Parachute Regiment of 14 men taking part in an illegal civil rights protest in Derry/Londonderry on 'Bloody Sunday', 30 January 1972. The Stormont parliament was prorogued indefinitely. The Local Government Act (NI) 1972 and the Local Government (Transfer of Functions) (Northern Ireland) 1973 Order brought sweeping changes in all major services: housing, personal social services, local health, libraries, planning, roads, water and sewerage, as well as education, were removed from local government administration and transferred to statutory boards or to government departments. Relatively minor functions were given to the twenty-six new district councils whose areas had been altered by boundary reform.

## **Direct Rule 1972–1998 and Its Impact on Education**

### **Education and Library Boards**

So, education was a beneficiary of the 1973 legislation and the outworking of it gradually brought agencies staffed by professionals to form an intermediate layer between the Department of Education and

the individual institutions. Five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) were created for the local administration of 'controlled' schools and 40% membership was nominated by the Secretary of State, rather than elected by local government councillors. The remaining members consisted of transferors' representatives, trustees of maintained schools, serving teachers and members of the general public interested in the services provided by the Board. The amount of influence which councillors wielded on various bodies is debatable and probably varied according to the quality of their contributions. Hayes (1997)<sup>15</sup> suggests that many of them complained that there was general reluctance by government departments to take seriously the advice councillors offered or to act on it consistently. After the Belfast Agreement, the new arrangements for education meant that these Boards had two masters at central level, namely the Department of Education and the Department of Employment and Learning—the latter in the case of higher and further education—as well as the general public to whom they were responsible for stewardship of public funds.

The Boards' responsibilities in relation to schools were: securing adequate provision for pre-school, primary and secondary schools, special educational needs, school meals and transport, school attendance and school uniform schemes. They were bound by strict rules regarding submission of estimates annually for approval, use of resources in exact accordance with an approved spending plan and they had a statutory duty to achieve best value for expenditure and to submit annual statements of accounts.

Data from an interview with Ms L, a lady who 'fancied a change' to Education Officer from Head of Department in a voluntary grammar school, cast light on relations between an Education and Library Board, the schools it served and the Department over a period of 25 years' service. During an interview, she said that the arrival of Local Management of Schools (LMS) and its implementation brought significant change for both ELBs and Boards of Governors, in that both had to use their newly acquired extension of autonomy and responsibility in efficient and effective ways. Much time, she said, was spent meeting representatives from the Boards and from DENI to clarify interpretation of legislation (Orders in Council) and to learn to work more closely.

Large secondary schools generally welcomed LMS as they were already used to buying small items and a very important new departure was freedom to allocate resources for teaching and non-teaching staff.

Training in management of finances had to be provided by ELB staff, but the Boards had no power to compel schools to participate. Large-scale curriculum reform required appropriate growth in the Advisory Service. Ms L was of the view that local councillors on Boards of Governors and on ELBs were selected for having given good service to their political parties, describing them as 'recycled' and 'parish pump types'.

She found DENI staff 'great to deal with' and the DENI Inspectorate 'super'. She identified a number of areas where tensions arose. These included:

- (i) proposed school closures which required consultation with Boards of Governors, the community, including parents and where the Principal (i.e. Head) of a small rural school who, having reached early retirement age, 'wanted out', but felt obliged to act as a strong supporter of the local 'Save our School' campaign;
- (ii) distribution of money to satisfy those who disagreed with differences in per capita funding between primary and secondary schools, or simply the 'my budget's not big enough' brigade;
- (iii) interpersonal relationships were extremely important and had to be nurtured, in particular with Principals who were important gatekeepers in her opinion;
- (iv) complaints about appointments, often from Vice-Principals who applied unsuccessfully for promotion within their own school. The Governors were required to interview (ideally) eight candidates and reduce the list to three for recommendation to the ELB. Frequently, they did not recommend the top three, but instead the best candidate and two 'lame ducks', thereby attempting to influence the outcome heavily.

It seems appropriate at this point to consider the thoughts of Mr V, retired Principal of a controlled secondary school and a 'client' of the

same ELB. In his day-to-day work, he had little contact with DENI and found the ELB staff in his area to be very supportive in helping schools deal with change, in providing suitable training to enable various groups of stakeholders to carry out their duties and to enjoy a sense of achievement. He felt that while he had no power as Secretary to the Appointments Panel in his school, he wielded considerable influence on selection of candidates whose names were put forward for appointment by the ELB. He preferred lay governors nominated by 'transferors' rather than clergy, being strongly of the opinion that the latter considered their membership to be a duty without commitment, while the laity showed much greater personal loyalty to the school.

Both Ms L and Mr V welcomed encouragement from DENI to ELBs and schools to meet regularly with a view to working cooperatively and collaboratively to share both experience and resources, where possible. The 26 district councils and 2 city councils (Belfast and Derry/Londonderry) set up by the 1973 Order may be seen as having been divested of the range of services traditionally associated with local government in the remainder of the UK. Progress was made, however, in the sense that through practice and necessity, they gradually learnt to work together for the common good, eased by the introduction of the single transferable vote (STV) system under the Electoral Law (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, which increased voter turnout and only 5 out of the 26 councils elected one party to be in overall control a year later.

### **Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)**

While the ELBs brought about desirable change in the way controlled schools were managed and run, parallel changes for Catholic schools arrived with the establishment of the CCMS by way of the 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order. A Committee, chaired by Professor Alan Astin of Queen's University was asked by the government to '*take a completely new look at the way schools should be managed in Northern Ireland*'. After two years of discussions involving trustees of the Catholic schools and the Department of Education there emerged a

recommendation for a statutory body funded by DENI representing an upper tier of management with *'authority and responsibility'*.

In effect CCMS became employers of teachers in Catholic Maintained Schools (not selective Catholic grammar schools for which the Council had no brief) and *'would exercise certain other functions in policy formulation and negotiation for that sector'*.<sup>16</sup> This new body, therefore, had two distinct roles: (1) to support Trustees and Boards of Governors in the effective management and control of their schools and (2) to contribute with education partners to policy formulation on a wide range of issues including curriculum review, selection, pastoral care and leadership. Membership of the council broadly mirrored those of the ELBs—representatives of Trustees, parents, teachers and the Department of Education who selected their representatives from applicants who responded to press advertisement; politicians were not included.

Successful lobbying by CCMS and the Northern Bishops brought 100% capital funding for Catholic schools, bringing it into line with that given to state schools. It seemed that in contrast to those earlier decades of the twentieth century when the Catholic authorities did not feel they could trust the Stormont government to treat the minority population fairly, the attitude had changed completely, perhaps partly due to Direct Rule and to Minister Brian Mawhinney of Northern Irish birth and education, serving in the Northern Ireland Office at the time and playing a significant part in the preliminary negotiations and developments of this body.

## Distant Ministers and Local Civil Servants

Northern Ireland experienced sweeping change for almost three decades following the suspension of the Stormont Parliament in 1972 by Prime Minister Edward Heath. Suddenly, no local MPs held posts as ministers in any departments of government, which were run by ministers based in Westminster, many of whom routinely spent only one day per week in Belfast. Ultimate power resided with the Secretary of State. Enactment of legislation came through a route different from

that applying in other parts of the UK. It was dealt with by Orders in Council on the authority of the Privy Council, deprived of full debate normally applicable to Parliamentary Bills. Dissatisfaction with this process was partially rectified by the creation of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in the Commons which was given a limited remit to check implementation of Orders in Council for the purpose of holding Northern Ireland Office politicians and civil servants to account.

If Westminster politicians holding roles in the Northern Ireland Office were also representing English constituencies and considered by many to be 'at arm's length' from their local duties, it would appear logical that they depended heavily on local support in framing and implementing legislation. The peripheral role occupied by local government in this period resulted in civil servants in Stormont occupying relatively important positions of influence. DENI occupied:

a unique position vis-à-vis its equivalent in the Welsh and Scottish Offices in the extent to which it [acted] as a regional authority unaccountable to local democratic bodies, whilst responsible for aspects of education including the payment of teachers' salaries, the Education and Library Boards' funds, the curriculum, and the framing of educational policy.<sup>17</sup>

Ministers were clearly dependent on local civil servants and agencies to judge the attitudes and responses to proposed developments from the various social groups.

## Education Becomes an Agent of Social Change

Although a longstanding system of segregated education still remained in Northern Ireland during the period of Direct Rule, significant change occurred, partly explained by the violent context in which education operated. Initially, schools were depicted as 'oases of peace', where, for 5–6 hours during five days of the week, children were able to continue with their education, despite the distractions and temptations outside of school hours to engage in street rioting, or to join the junior ranks of paramilitary organisations—a matter of priority recognised

by teachers, particularly in relation to school leavers.<sup>18</sup> Credit is due to educationalists and parents for initiating change in the areas of structural differentiation and curriculum development. Government ministers tended to lend support by providing some funds to bring schools into the frame as instruments for the promotion of peace and reconciliation.

Following serious escalation of violence including incidents such as Bloody Sunday (1971), John Malone, Principal of Orangefield Boys School in Belfast was first to come forward with ideas for a curriculum development project to promote better community relations and he succeeded in obtaining modest funding from the Ministry for Education. A number of other projects followed, most notably Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) first mooted in 1983 by the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Development (NICED). The Education Reform (NI) Order (1989) placed a statutory requirement on schools to include EMU and Cultural Heritage in cross-curricular themes from 1992. The Northern Ireland Curriculum Council produced materials for pupils and teachers and so, schools became agents of social change. Enthusiasm in implementing this innovation varied between teachers and within schools and local areas.

Teachers were given considerable support in delivering the curricular demands and there developed an encouraging change in relations between 'controlled' and 'maintained' schools, as a result of the in-school programme followed, but also through joint extracurricular activities such as sports, the arts and historical site visits, sometimes organised and/or financially supported by business organisations or the police.

## **Integrated Education**

In addition to curriculum change, there was stimulus for organisational change, providing more parental choice in the form of integrated schools, which came from a group of determined, mainly middle-class parents from both major communities. They argued that structural reform was needed going beyond mere curricular reform in a segregated



system. They were fortunate in that it was strongly supported in principle by the Conservative government in Westminster, where it was perceived to be a means of potentially promoting social cohesion in a seriously divided society. Progress from moral support to financial support was slow and uncertain.

Enthusiasts for integrated education, i.e. those who oppose a segregated system, claim either that there is a causal relationship between segregation in education and community divisions or that it sustains religious, political, social divisions historically embedded in our society. Robust negotiating and lobbying by the pioneering parents, with strong support from Lord Dunleath<sup>19</sup> of the Alliance Party, brought only a consolation prize in the form of an enabling Order in 1978 which made it possible for existing schools to be given controlled integrated status, whereas the All Children Together (ACT) members wanted legislation which would enable integrated schools to be established where a demand existed.

The enabling Order, however, opened a door to further possibilities. Negative responses from the Churches towards the idea of shared management of schools provoked brave enthusiasts to establish the first Independent Integrated School, Lagan College in 1981. The founder members of ACT led the successful charge, Tony Spencer and Maeve Mulholland—the former *'an impassioned English Catholic who taught sociology in Queen's University ... [the latter] a Protestant from County Down, a nursery teacher, a veteran of several peace movements, and an Alliance Party supporter'*.<sup>20</sup>

Starting without buildings or money, Lagan College was rescued by the Rowntree Trust, a Quaker foundation which has generously provided funding to support peace-making in the province over several decades. The Trust paid the salaries of the first small group of teachers. Relief followed in 1984 when grant aid and maintained status were won and this marked a watershed in the modern history of education in Northern Ireland. (It is all the more extraordinary that Lagan College opened during one of the worst periods of 'the Troubles', when ten republican prisoners died on hunger strike in the Maze prison in response to PM Margaret Thatcher's refusal to award them political status, effectively the right to be treated as prisoners of war.)

By 1987 there were seven newly established integrated schools and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) was formed as a charitable organisation to:

- co-ordinate efforts to develop Integrated Education; and
- support parent groups through the process of opening new schools.

Under Article 64 of the 1989 Education Reform Order (ERO) (NI) the Department of Education was given a duty to '*encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education, that is to say the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils*'. At last, grant aid was made available to integrated schools provided they met prescribed criteria. The expansion in numbers (23 by 1996) proved too expensive for the Department, though parental demand was not yet being met. Criteria for funding were tightened and the quality of buildings downgraded. In order to overcome this grave funding crisis, NICIE struck a novel deal with the business sector which lasted until the credit crunch in 2008, when the scheme ended, leaving NICIE in substantial debt.

The quango still survives, however, and it is official Assembly policy to encourage the facilitation of schools wishing to transform. The total number reached is currently 65 of which 45 are primaries and 20 are colleges, attended by approximately 7% of the school population.

## **The Belfast Agreement and Beyond—Conflict and Cooperation**

The period of Direct Rule, as demonstrated earlier, brought significant change in the provision and management of education. Inevitably, British ministers and their officials tried to reflect developments at Westminster. Assisted, however, by local civil servants, they realised that local historical, cultural and social factors had to be taken into account, requiring modifications or backing down—for example, in trying to have Northern Irish schools go comprehensive. After 26 years of Direct

Rule major political change arrived. Tortuous and protracted negotiations involving five political parties, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair and his advisors with substantial, patient input from the Irish, British and American Governments brought the reward of a Belfast Agreement in the early hours of Good Friday 1998. The main purpose was to return Northern Ireland to devolved government, but with a very different mission, powers and structures from those enjoyed by the Stormont parliament which preceded the Direct Rule period.

'Power sharing' became the dominant phrase in political circles; political scientists describe it as 'consociational' government. Critics might say with justification that the Agreement attempted to 'share out' power between Unionist and Nationalist members of the Local Assembly (MLAs), little attention being paid to the squeezed middle, including those belonging to the non-sectarian Alliance Party. Not wishing to be labelled according to Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) or Catholic Nationalist Republican (CNR) when the Assembly was formed, members of the latter party had no choice but to be designated 'Other'.

In fairness, it must be said that the Belfast Agreement was an enormous leap forward, even though Direct Rule was re-imposed between 2002 and 2007, because the two dominant partners (and furthest separated ideologically) could not work together cooperatively, reflecting long embedded political and sectarian divisions. When one reflects on the circumstances in which the Belfast Agreement was achieved, one might agree with the political analyst who commented thus on the public's verdict of a 71% 'Yes' vote in the referendum which followed: '*It was only acceptable because the moral imperative towards ending violence is so overwhelming*'.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, after nearly 20 years, progress has been made in that fundamental reforms were made in policing and the judicial system; both mainstream republican and loyalist paramilitaries have publicly decommissioned their weapons (though small groups with minimal public support remain); north-south bodies have been established to bring political and economic benefits. Welcome progress was promised in the 'Fresh Start' agreement reached in November 2015 after ten weeks of negotiations involving the usual interests from inside the province and outside.

In an article, Whysall<sup>22</sup> argues that only short-term stability has been reached in the 'Fresh Start' document, but that underlying problems still remain. He draws attention to Bills to be introduced to reduce membership of the Assembly from 108 to 90 and to reduce the number of ministries from 12 to 9 (the latter already implemented). There are further hints of saving money, though not receiving much publicity, in commitment to a process of greater control and transparency in relation to members' salaries and expenses. The controversial Petition of Concern procedure which, in effect, gives the DUP (the largest party) a veto on any Assembly proposal, is likely to be curbed. So far, the DUP have shown they tend to use this mechanism to defeat proposals on moral issues such as gay marriage and legal abortion, even though a slight numerical majority voted in favour of gay marriage on the last occasion that it was debated at Stormont. After protracted discussions they tend to produce encouraging documents with declarations of intent to bring about progress by initiating research projects, putting documents out for consultation, setting up advisory committees or replacing one or more which are already in existence, but whose members are not providing recommendations which they favour.

The presence of Senators Richard Haass and Gary Hart in successive years at moments of acute crisis in 2013 and 2014 failed to make progress on intractable problems related to the past (especially definition of a victim of the 'Troubles' and identification of those who ought to receive compensation, or to have police investigations reopened around the deaths of loved ones who died, perhaps as long as 40 years ago). The legacy of the past continues to be a powerful stumbling block to progress, as does lack of consensus on identity-related issues such as display of flags and emblems, permission to parade along public routes and standards of behaviour to be observed by marchers including loyalist band members. These unresolved issues, which may sound trivial or juvenile to outsiders, tend to constitute a powerful and time-consuming distraction, absorbing parliamentary resources which in other parts of the UK might be devoted to apparently heavier matters. To the loyalists of Northern Ireland, however, such concerns are at the very heart of the cultural expression of their Britishness and of their political identity.

If the story of the devolved Assembly has been a mixed one, what of local government? Earlier in this paper abuses of power by local councils were alluded to and it was noted that under Direct Rule councillors were not favoured when local government was reorganised on two memorable occasions in the seventies and the nineties. The Belfast Agreement makes no specific reference to local government since, as a transferred matter, it would fall within the remit of the Assembly.

## **Education at Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Level**

From their earliest days, the children in Northern Irish schools are encouraged in varying degrees to mix with peers from the two major traditions as well as with growing numbers from ethnic minorities. Parents are given at least in principle a wide choice, but shortage of funding often prevents translation of principle into practice. Being a nationalist and moderate socialist, the strong Minister for Education, John O'Dowd of Sinn Fein in the years before the 2016 general election clearly favoured shared education, comprehensive schools and Irish medium schools for social and cultural reasons.

Although several had been in existence before, provision for Irish medium schools was notably enhanced by the Education (NI) Order 1998 which placed a duty on the Department 'to encourage and facilitate' their development. 'Immersion education', by which children learn most subjects through Irish, enables pupils to become bilingual. These schools enjoy similar status to integrated schools and can apply for voluntary maintained status. If freestanding schools are not viable, then they can be established as units in existing schools. There are currently approximately forty such schools, about two-thirds of which are stand alone.

At the other end of the spectrum there is a small number of independent fundamentalist Christian schools under the control of the Free Presbyterian Church, founded by the late First Minister and DUP leader, Reverend Ian Paisley. In recent days there have been murmurings of inter-faith primary schools being formed in rural areas where numbers have dropped below acceptable viability level and in order to retain

one local school, the Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy and community see amalgamation as a solution. This form of voluntary amalgamation would be preferable to 'forced marriages' and suggest healthy community relations of which the Department would approve.

Progress in having children educated together, whether part-time or full-time and with appropriate forms of school governance, may result in virtue born out of financial necessity, but one would hope that there is a hint of more parents favouring shared or integrated education as time passes and that the public increasingly see the merits of contributing to the emergence of a truly shared society.

Tensions remain within education structures and outcomes. The maintained and controlled sectors still eye each other closely in case one is favoured by government more than the other. One current bone of contention is the existence of the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools, whereas the controlled sector has a weaker champion in the Transferors Representative Council whose members closely monitor proposed new legislation, respond in writing and challenge its content in meeting with the Minister or his officials, but have failed so far to achieve a parallel organisation to CCMS.

While we can be justly proud of our excellent grammar schools, including the top academic scores which their pupils achieve, we must admit that teenagers, particularly Protestant boys from working-class homes are failed by the system and form 'a long tail of underachievement', leaving school at 16 years old without any qualifications. A large number live in East Belfast where their forbears could have realistically expected to find employment in the shipyard, aircraft factory or engineering firm, irrespective of paper qualifications. Such expectations cannot be fulfilled today in a city where high technology companies are large employers, consultancies require their workforce to have third level qualifications and employment legislation demands selection on merit.

## Higher and Further Education

Post-school formal education in Northern Ireland has, in line with the rest of the UK, become more closely aligned with economic demands

for highly qualified manpower. The prevalence and popularity of grammar schools has historically led to relatively high numbers, almost 50%, choosing to pursue university courses. The highest percentage of 'A' level grades achieved at A-C standard in the UK is achieved consistently, particularly by grammar schools for Roman Catholic girls.

Unfortunately, approximately one-third of university entrants are obliged to go elsewhere—mainly to Scotland and England to take up places. In the two local universities, fees have been frozen at approximately £3800 per year, modest in comparison with a figure of £9000 in English universities. The fear in some quarters is that these graduates will not return to support the local economy, that some of our brightest young people are being educated for export. One might argue persuasively, however, that a period of work outside Northern Ireland might prove to be a significant stage in their general education. It must be remembered that Northern Ireland cannot provide all the opportunities sought by her graduates.

Educationalists, economists and local businesses are making good progress by working together in planning to have graduates appropriately qualified to fill the posts created by local employers and demanded by inward investors. Thirteen hundred additional undergraduate places are being created in STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) with additional support for Ph.D. students in these areas. The growing trend, as universities have had their funding cut drastically, seems to place greater emphasis on vocationally-orientated courses and less emphasis on the traditional role of university education for its own sake, as a civilising influence.

Further education is also receiving attention at the centre of the skills infrastructure to ensure that needs are met now and in the future. A strategic advisory forum is being set up by the Department of Education and Learning to advise on provision of apprenticeships through a range of sectoral partnerships involving colleges, employers, government and trade unions. Further education is seen to be of pivotal importance in driving the economy forward.

There appears to be an imbalance between groups of professionals coming out of our education system, where currently a shortage of undergraduate engineers exists, but this is not true of teachers. Schools

have an estimated 50,000 empty pupil places. It is not surprising that there are qualified teachers qualitatively underemployed in catering, retail and other sectors, because they cannot find teaching posts. This problem was spotted decades ago by the Chilvers enquiry, whose report (1982) recommended the amalgamation of Stranmillis University College and St Mary's, the Catholic college which pre-dates Partition by more than a decade. The Catholic authorities, however, refused to accept this recommendation, wishing to retain a Catholic college with an ethos which would prepare teachers for schools with a similar ethos.

Dr Stephen Farry, while DEL Minister, raised the matter again but was overridden by successful lobbying, in spite of pointing out that Northern Ireland has five establishments producing teachers, namely Queen's University, the University of Ulster, Stranmillis (which has now merged with Queen's School of Education), St Mary's and the Open University in a province with a population of 1.86 million. One strong argument put forward for the continued existence of St Mary's was that it contributes as much to the economy of predominantly nationalist West Belfast as Bombardier, the Canadian manufacturer of aircraft, does in loyalist East Belfast. Stranmillis and St Mary's, both financially supported by the Department of Education and Learning are open to students from all backgrounds, provided they meet entry requirements. Applicants have tended overwhelmingly to come from the two distinct communities in the population; staff have been appointed on merit. Universities are publicly funded and multicultural, as one would expect.

## **Community Education—Or Education of Adults?**

Outside the boundaries of formal education provision, non-governmental and voluntary organisations have been contributing enormously to the Peace Process, which is, in many ways an education project. Some have been Church or inter-Church based; others have been driven by members of the general public, some of whom strove first to end violent confrontation and, when an appropriate stage arrived, to embark on ambitious, long term journeys to achieve tolerance, mutual respect for all traditions, peaceful co-existence, reconciliation, even forgiveness.



Progress has been painstakingly slow and frequently inhibited by iconic events such as Bloody Sunday, the Omagh bombing, murders of security forces and civilians, deaths of Hunger Strikers. In the case of some organisations, single identity workshops educating groups about their history, culture, symbols, celebrations have had to precede cross-community encounters by newly empowered individuals and groups. There are still many instances where specially trained facilitators are working particularly with former loyalist activists at single identity stage.

The work of some of the best-known organisations is considered worthy of comment in a document from a leading US university.<sup>23</sup> A partnership between the Redemptorist Clonard Monastery and Fitzroy Presbyterian Church—both in Belfast—have for decades encouraged their parishioners to gather at joint Church services and to discuss ways forward in peace-making. Clonard Monastery is well known as the site where Gerry Adams, IRA leader agreed to meet clergy and John Hume, Nobel peace prize winner in order to persuade the paramilitary organisation to lay down their arms and to tread an exclusively peaceful political path. The Corrymeela Community, a Christian group based on the County Antrim coast for more than 50 years, has hosted peace building residential retreats involving an annual figure of 6000 individuals and has attained international recognition.

The Irish School of Economics (ISE), Trinity College, Dublin, with an outreach campus in Belfast has been a major theological research centre with an emphasis on conflict resolution, promoting reconciliation after cessation of hostilities. ISE staff have facilitated workshops, based on their research around trouble spots of the world, in Northern Ireland and the Republic, especially in the border counties. Unfortunately, its northern satellite has had to close due to lack of funds. On a very practical level, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, one of the largest voluntary social service organisations in the province, works in conjunction with Protestant organisations such as the Salvation Army. Food, clothing, coupons for heating oil and other forms of practical support in addition to training in budgeting and money management are available to needy groups, including immigrant communities in segregated social housing. Peace funding from

the European Union, Atlantic Philanthropies and private trusts gave a powerful fillip towards educating adults in new ways towards new outcomes, far removed from traditional evening classes focused on obtaining vocational qualifications and leisure activities in regional colleges. So, age groups too old to experience projects such as EMU in schools were included in the surge of peace building effort.

### **Community Outreach Group—A Case Study**

(Here again, I draw upon my experience over more than eight years to illustrate a personal attempt in one area of Northern Ireland to begin solving a widespread problem, perceived by many to be insoluble.)

Working as Chairperson of the Community Outreach Group I have found parishioners from one Church of Ireland and two Roman Catholic parishes in a very divided town to have a keen appetite for Irish history, especially the period covering the ‘Decade of Anniversaries’ (1911–1921) which includes the centenary of the Ulster Covenant, World War I (WWI), the Rising in 1916, the execution of its leaders ordered by the British army chief in Dublin, the Anglo-Irish War which followed and the Treaty which brought Partition in 1921. These are all potentially contentious events if viewed exclusively through either unionist or nationalist prisms. Presentations by academic specialist historians followed by discussion have been most potent weapons for challenging ‘certainty’ and encouraging a questioning approach to bias and previously held ‘facts’.

A second popular theme is Comparative Religion delivered at a level below university standard. One recent residential 24-hour seminar focused on the basic beliefs of the four main Churches in the province: Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland and Methodist and the ways their adherents live out their Christianity. Curiosity about the differences and similarities provoked keen discussion, following presentations by clergy representing the Churches. Visits to all the churches, large and small in the town form another part of the programme—at first, when there are no services going on and later, it is hoped, when there are. One has to make haste slowly in these sensitive areas.

Brave and sustained efforts to achieve societal transformation have been made for a long period from grass roots and organisations unrelated to political parties. Indeed, some of the most robust efforts are being made by reformed 'Troubles' activists, including ex-prisoners who try to dissuade youth from becoming involved, whereby they may throw away their chances of receiving a good education and of equipping themselves for employment. The problem arises when the public cast their votes in Westminster and Assembly elections. A substantial majority of those who turn out continue to elect representatives along traditional tribal lines for the confessional parties, though in 2016 local elections the cross-community Alliance Party found their vote increased from 7 to 10.1%.

## Central and Local Government Balance in Education?

The Department of Education and its related agencies that control standards in teaching and examining have been and continue to be powerful decision-makers, even if their titles have altered slightly through the years. It is probably to be expected that the system is highly centralised in a region of such small area and population.

One might immediately think that an absence of strong local government input to decisions made in relation to the education provided in their council areas must be deemed inadvisable. It can be argued that before the breakdown of the Unionist regime and intervention by Westminster since 1969, democracy was seriously flawed in that the minority population could not play a proper part. Dominance from the centre and establishment of quangos such as the Equality Commission clearly contributed strongly to redressing the balance.

Those in authority in the Northern Ireland Office quickly reduced the power of local councils by reducing their representation on decision-making bodies such as the ELBs. The local knowledge of councillors was, however, useful in making suitable provision within the various Board areas. Two tranches of legislation left councillors out in the cold in one sense, but during that protracted period they learned that it was in their interest to work together, not least with their immediate colleagues but with their counterparts across the Border.

Review of local government, begun in 2002 and published in the Programme for Government 2012 brought in new 'super' local councils created by redrawing boundaries. The functions delegated by the Assembly and still in the process of learning to work together have been local planning and regeneration, urban regeneration, community development, local economic and tourism development and off street parking. Though the word does not appear anywhere in these new areas of responsibility, education must of necessity, be a significant factor in decision-making, especially since shared education and 'mixed' housing (occupied by people from different religious backgrounds) have been established as Executive priorities. The potential contribution which the 'super' councils will make towards improving the economy and the more subtle aim to improve community relations, it would be premature and foolhardy to attempt to predict, though they all have Good Relations personnel in place.

## **A New Millennium with Old Problems?**

This chapter has attempted to show that for almost two centuries in Ireland, and later in Northern Ireland, education has been largely a tale of two systems running in parallel and based on different religious affiliations. Structures have been and still are different from the remainder of the UK, not least the substantially unequal balance of power between the Stormont Minister and inspectorate compared with local agencies delivering services. Quangos have been a prominent feature of the landscape for almost 50 years to ensure that government policy is implemented locally but also fairly. Periods of Direct Rule have brought attempts to change aspects of the education system to bring it into line with England and Wales. The most glaring failure was an attempt by the Labour Government in the person of Lord Melchett to abolish selection of pupils for second level education and to replace it with a comprehensive system.

Power sharing by the DUP and Sinn Fein has revealed clearly their conflicting visions. Martin McGuinness, Caitriona Ruane and John O'Dowd, consecutive Sinn Fein Ministers of Education between 2007

and 2016 forbade selection, but many schools still continue to ignore the directive. The May 2016 election brought a new Minister in the person of Peter Weir (DUP). His policy was early made clear: 'I support the continued right of schools to use academic selection as a means of entry criteria. The guidance that I am issuing today sets out the department's support of academic selection, this is not about compelling any school to take a particular course of action, rather the reverse'.<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to rationalise current practice, he set up a review panel to make recommendations on a common assessment tool, which he hoped would receive schools' approval. The selective grammar schools currently accept results from either or both of the two tests being used. Selection is highly competitive with numbers of applications far outweighing the number of places available.

Although the education model in the province might correctly be described as 'top down', since the Troubles there have been clear initiatives taken by parents and schools who identified the potential of education as a possible route to social change in the form of improved community relations. The push towards establishing integrated schools brought its first victory in 1981 when Lagan College without state funding was opened. Another example, mentioned earlier was the necessary invasion of the 'secret garden' by enlightened teachers such as John Malone, Principal of Orangefield Boys, whose initiative was taken up and developed by the Government beginning with EMU in schools and in teacher education colleges.

In more recent years, evidence of agreement between the First and Deputy First Ministers (OFMDFM) came in the form of an announcement that a Delivering Social Change Signature Project would be set up to improve literacy and numeracy standards in areas of high deprivation. This programme was to be funded from a Social Investment Fund set up by the Executive with a budget of £80 million over four years to reduce poverty and unemployment in needy areas. The scheme operated in primary schools at Key Stage 2 and in secondary schools at GCSE level to benefit pupils and recently graduated teachers unable to find permanent employment. Of the latter 80 were placed in primary schools and 150 in non-grammar secondary schools, providing one-to-one tuition. The success which the scheme achieved was described by a

teachers' union representative as 'a rare example of OFMDFM working together in a manner which is making a real and practical difference'.<sup>25</sup> The benefits of this commendable scheme must, however, be balanced against casualties of budget pressures. Programmes which had to be dropped were the Primary Modern Languages Programme, a building and maintenance scheme, as well as provision of books for pre-school children issued free to parents to read to their young children. Likely redundancies of 500 teachers and 1000 support staff were predicted to happen in the years to follow.

A thrust towards Shared Education has continued. By March 2015, 31 partnerships involving 66 schools had received funding to further the process, using various collaborative projects intended to have two positive outcomes: (i) improving educational standards and (ii) promoting peace and reconciliation by educating children together.

Minister O'Dowd also announced 'a new era in education delivery' in the form of a new Education Authority to replace five ELBs with a budget of £1.5 billion in order to 'provide efficient and effective administrative arrangements in the years ahead'.<sup>26</sup> Burgeoning pressure on financial resource is inevitably forcing undesirable change, but perhaps also indicating, as in the example above, increasing central control.

## More Trouble at Stormont

The early months of 2017 brought collapse of the Executive and another election is to be held on 2 March, a mere ten months since the previous one. Poor relations between the DUP and Sinn Fein deteriorated rapidly during 2016, to the extent that a budget was not agreed for 2017/2018. Mutual distrust and hostility and several accusations of corrupt practice mainly, but not exclusively, around property deals involving DUP politicians, provoked the collapse of the Assembly. The catalyst was alleged maladministration, incompetence and insider dealing by the DUP of a scheme introduced in 2012 to reduce the level of carbon emissions. The Renewable Heating Incentive (RHI), nicknamed 'Ash for cash' and 'Burn to earn' by its critics was intended to subsidise the cost which businesses had to pay to run economically friendly

boilers, but the subsidy levels were set too high and without caps, giving a return of £1.60 for every £1 spent on fuel. A broadly similar scheme with caps was already in operation in England, but this appears not have been copied even in modified form. Two warnings from a whistle-blower in 2012 and 2014, who pointed out that the scheme was unviable, were disregarded. The scheme was presided over by Arlene Foster when she was Economy Minister, who on the resignation of Peter Robinson in early 2016, became First Minister and DUP leader.

As the fiasco, fired by huge local media coverage, gripped public attention, Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness advised her to step down for a short period with his public support, while an investigation was held to establish the truth, but she steadfastly refused, insisting repeatedly that she had nothing to hide and was 'going nowhere'. McGuinness resigned on 9 January 2017 in obvious serious ill health and died a short time later. The institutions collapsed one week after his resignation, when his party refused to name a successor. An independent public enquiry was triggered by the Sinn Fein Minister of Finance. A year later, Northern Ireland still has no functioning government, in spite of unsuccessful attempts by successive Secretaries of State to bring the DUP and Sinn Fein parties together to negotiate conditions on which they could return to Stormont. The dire political vacuum shows no signs of being filled and public services are accordingly suffering severely. No budget has been agreed for 2018/2019, so departments do not know how much funding they will receive. Civil servants resist taking decisions which are within the remit of ministers who cannot be appointed until the parties return to the Assembly.

The future of the land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland after Brexit is worrying and uncertain for those who cross it daily to carry on business, find employment, go to college or pursue recreational activities. The mutual dependence, especially in economic terms, between the north and the south of the island is a matter of great concern. Huge unresolved issues remain, which relate to dealing with the past and national security, flags and emblems, marches by loyal orders, in addition to the budgetary dilemma. In short, Northern Ireland retains its unresolved historic sectarian-related problems, while

experiencing an unstable present and contemplating a threatening future.

Viewed in context, education in Northern Ireland is unlikely to be considered an issue of high priority for an uncertain period, either by Westminster or a devolved administration (if and when it returns).

## Notes

1. Department of Education. *Annual Enrolment at Grant-Aided Schools in Northern Ireland 2017/2018*: Basic Statistics.
2. Whateley's large collection of publications includes (1830). *On the Errors of Romanism Traced to Their Origins in Human Nature*.
3. Quoted in Buckland (1981, p. 55) from Parliamentary Debates, NI House of Commons, Vol. XV1, Col 1095, April 1935.
4. Farren, p. 39.
5. Conway, W. (1974) *Catholic Schools*, Veritas, Dublin.
6. McKelvey, R., and S. J. Houston (1988). *The Church of Ireland's Policy in Education in Northern Ireland 1930–1980*, unpublished M.Ed. dissertation, QUB, p. 37.
7. *Annual Report of the Ministry of Education (NI) 1955–56*, quoted in Farren, p. 217.
8. 'Sam Beckett's Schooldays', article in *The Telegraph* by Tom Peterkin, Ireland Correspondent, April 13, 2006 on 100th anniversary of Beckett's birth.
9. Ministry of Education (NI) (1964). *Educational Development in Northern Ireland*, HMSO, Belfast, quoted by Farren, p. 221.
10. McStravick, B (1974). *A Study of School Organisation and Curriculum Provisions for the 14+ Pupil in the Dickson Plan for County Armagh*. Unpublished MA thesis, QUB. Quoted in a talk given to Dromore Diocesan Historical Society, 2012.
11. McEwan (1998, p. 63).
12. Birrell and Hayes, p. 15.
13. Matthew Report (1963), HMSO.
14. Cameron Report (1963), HMSO.
15. Hayes, M (1997). 'Reviewing local government' in *Review of Northern Ireland Administrative Arrangements*, a paper delivered to Chief Executives Forum, Belfast.



16. [www.onlineccms.com](http://www.onlineccms.com). Accessed October 2016.
17. [www.onlineccms.com](http://www.onlineccms.com). Accessed October 2016. McEwan (1999, p. 54).
18. The Careers Teacher in a West Belfast boys secondary school told an inspector that his most difficult challenge was to dissuade his 16 year old pupils from joining 'C' Company of the IRA, whose representatives recruited outside the school gates each afternoon.
19. Lord Dunleath, Alliance Party, House of Lords, February 16, 1978.
20. O'Connor, F (2002). *A Shared Childhood: The Story of the Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland*, Blackstaff Press, Belfast.
21. *The Independent*, October 12, 1998. Review, p. 3.
22. Whysall, Alan. *Northern Ireland's 'Fresh Start'*. Blog posted 24 November 2015 by The Constitution Unit, Department of Political Science, University College, London.
23. *Northern Ireland: Religion in War and Peace*, August 2013. Berkeley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University, USA.
24. *Belfast Telegraph*, September 7, 2016.
25. *Belfast Telegraph*, January 27, 2017, p. 19.
26. *Belfast Newsletter*, April 1, 2015, p. 7.

## Bibliography

- Akenson, D.H. 1973. *Education and Enmity: The Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland 1920–1950*. London: Harper and Rowe.
- Astin Report. 1979. *Report of the Working Party on the Management of Schools in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: HMSO
- Aughey, A. 2005. *The Politics of Northern Ireland: Beyond the Belfast Agreement*. Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
- Buckland, Patrick. 1981. *A History of Northern Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Books and Media Inc.
- Burrell, D., and A. Hayes. 1999. *The Local Government System in Northern Ireland*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Cameron Report. 1969. *Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission Appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland*. Belfast: HMSO, Cmd 532.
- Farren, S. 1995. *The Politics of Irish Education 1920–1965*. Belfast: Queen's University of Belfast and Institute of Irish Studies.

- Hadow Report. 1926. *Report of the Consultative Committee of the Board of Education on the Education of the Adolescent*. HMSO.
- Harkness, David. 1983. *Northern Ireland Since 1920*. Helicon History of Ireland. Dublin: Helicon Limited.
- Hayes, M. 1997. Reviewing Local Government. In *Review of Northern Ireland Administrative Arrangements*. Belfast: Chief Executives Forum.
- Leonard, M., and M. McKnight (eds.). 2010. *Shared Space: A Research Journal on Peace, Conflict and Community Relations in Northern Ireland*. Issue 10 (November). Published by the Community Relations Council, Belfast, in Association with the School of Sociology, Queen's University of Belfast.
- McEwan, Alex. 1999. *Public Policy in a Divided Society: Schooling, Culture and Identity in Northern Ireland*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- McEwan, A., J. Salters, M. Salters, and U. Agnew. 1988. *Integrated Education: The View of Parents*. A Report Funded by the Leverhulme Trust. QUB School of Education.
- McGrath, Michael. 2000. *The Catholic Church and Catholic Schools in Northern Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press.
- McGuinness, Samuel J. 2012. Education Policy in Northern Ireland: A Review. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* 4 (1): 205–237.
- McKelvey, R.S.J. Houston. 1988. *The Church of Ireland's Policy in Education in Northern Ireland 1930–1980*, 37. M.Ed. dissertation, Queen's University of Belfast.
- McStravick, B. 1974. *A Study of School Organisation and Curriculum Provision for the 14+ Pupil in the Dickson Plan for County Armagh*. Unpublished M.A. thesis, Queen's University of Belfast.
- Murray, D. 1985. *Worlds Apart: Segregated Schools in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Appletree Press.
- O'Connor, F. 2002. *A Shared Childhood: The Story of the Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.
- Timpany, Stephen. 2009. *The Church of Ireland and Educational Policy in Northern Ireland 1900–1962*. Unpublished M.Ed. dissertation, Queen's University of Belfast.