



Research Update

In Search of the Middle Ground: Integrated Education and Northern Ireland Politics

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Introduction

Since its foundation in 1921, Northern Ireland has had two separate, religiously based, educational systems. The state ('controlled') system is mainly attended by Protestants, with a number of voluntary grammar schools also attended predominantly by Protestants. Catholics attend schools which are all grant maintained (as opposed to state controlled); although also state financed, these are operated by the Catholic Church administered through the Council of Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).

Government statistics confirm this long established bipartite educational system. Based on the religious composition of pupils at the primary and secondary level in Northern Ireland schools in 2002-2003, Table 1 shows that 94% of Protestant children attend *de facto* Protestant schools, either state 'controlled' or voluntary, while 92% of Catholic children attend a Catholic school, either maintained or voluntary.

within this 'Other' category account for just 0.3% of all school children in 2002-2003, but they are predominantly drawn from the very small ethnic minority populations in Northern Ireland (Osborne, 2004).

A similar pattern emerges when transfers between the two educational sectors is examined. Members of the 'Other' category are much more divided than either Protestants or Catholics in terms of their school preferences; whereas seven out of every ten children within this category attend a Protestant school, a further 12.4% attend a Catholic one. Of the 301,633 school children from either a Protestant or Catholic background enrolled in schools in 2002-2003, only 8,197 children (or 2.7%) attended a segregated school different to their own religion.

The establishment of integrated schooling is a relatively new phenomenon in Northern Ireland. It was not until 1981 and against vitriolic objections from church leaders that

primary level and just 19 are post-primary. As a consequence of parental initiatives, the integrated education sector has flourished since 1989. In 2001-2002, 3.2% of primary school children were in integrated schools, compared to 2.4% in 1998-1999 and a total of 10.0% of secondary school children attended integrated schools in 2001-2002, compared to 5.7% in 1998-1999.

Integration among the adult population

Although the extent of religious integration at the school level, while increasing, still remains low, survey evidence suggests much less segregation within the adult population. According to the 2003 **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey**, just over one in ten adults said that they had attended a religiously mixed school. However, the development of a pooled dataset, combining the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes surveys (1989-1996), the Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys (1998-2003), the 1998 Northern Ireland Referendum and Election Survey and the 2003 Northern Ireland Election Study allows us to explore trends over time. In fact, between 1989 and 2003, 13.5% of Northern Ireland adults claimed to have attended a religiously mixed school. This is, of course, a very considerable overestimate of those having attended a formally integrated school, which government statistics suggest is only 1.7% of the current adult population. What explains the discrepancy between the two estimates? Most of the survey respondents have interpreted the question as whether or not there were any pupils of the opposite religion at their school, rather than whether or not it was a formally constituted integrated school. Thus, when the proportion attending a 'formally integrated' versus a 'fairly mixed' school is disaggregated for the two main religious communities, this leads to a much lower estimate of 1.4% of the total adult population between 1998 and 2003 attending an integrated school. By contrast, 10.2% who report attending a mixed school said that it was not formally integrated, just one that was 'fairly mixed' (see Figure 1).

Table 1: Religion of pupils in Northern Ireland schools, 2002-2003

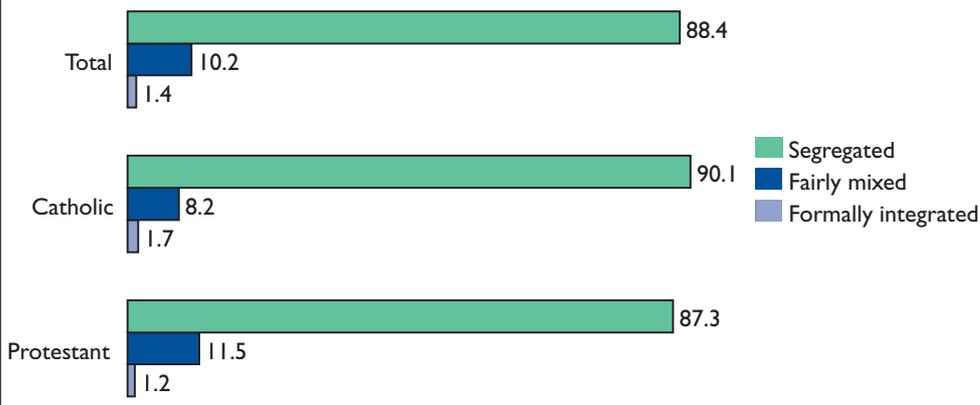
	%				
	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not stated	All
Protestant-controlled	93.6	4.3	69.6	90.5	48.3
Catholic-maintained	0.9	92.2	12.4	2.8	47.1
Integrated	5.5	3.5	18.0	6.7	4.6
(N)	(138,540)	(163,093)	(973)	(20,605)	(323,211)

Source: Adapted from Osborne (2004)

Only a small percentage of children attend an integrated school (either grant-maintained or controlled) – currently 4.6% of all pupils. Furthermore, attendance at an integrated school is disproportionately concentrated among those with neither a Protestant nor a Catholic background. For example, while 5.5% and 3.5% of Protestant and Catholic children, respectively, attend an integrated school, the equivalent proportion among the 'Other' category is 18%. Not only do pupils

the first integrated school, Lagan College, was established, although it did not achieve government funding until 1984 (O Connor, 2002). Since then, on average, between two and three new integrated schools a year have been opened, all either by a grassroots initiative or through a parental ballot which gave an existing school integrated status. By 2004 there were 57 schools with a total enrolment of 17,149 pupils. Of these schools, 38 are at the

Figure 1: Type of school by religion



Also of note in Figure 1 is the somewhat lower proportion of Protestants (87.3%) as compared to Catholics (90.1%) who reported attending a segregated school and the comparatively higher proportion – 11.5% as compared to 8.2% – within a fairly mixed school setting. There may be a pattern whereby Protestant parents are more likely to send their children to a non-segregated school as compared to Catholic parents, a not unexpected finding given that the *raison d'être* of Catholic schools is to provide an education for Catholic children.

The consequences of integrated education

Contact theory suggests that by separating Protestant and Catholic children, the education system has exacerbated community divisions. It is argued that the separation of children leads to ignorance about the other community and, in the words of Seamus Dunn (1986), fosters ‘an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion’. By contrast, the goal of integrated schools is to foster an understanding of both traditions and to overcome negative stereotypes. By encouraging the children to understand their historical and religious differences, it is hoped that they will feel less threatened by the other community, and form enduring cross-community relations.

To what extent have integrated schools been successful in achieving these aims? Are individuals who have experienced an integrated education different in their outlooks compared to those who have attended segregated schools?

To date, the research is inconclusive (McGlynn et al., 2004). Although several studies stress the positive benefits of integrated schooling, particularly in relation to promoting cross-community friendships and good community relations, others remain ambiguous, suggesting that it has little or no impact. There is also some

suggestion that rather than weakening rigid religious, ethnic or political views, integrated education may in fact reinforce them.

National and political identity

Contemporary explanations of the conflict suggest that it is differences in religiously-based national identities — British Protestants who wish Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom versus Irish Catholics who desire Irish reunification — which lies at the root of the conflict. The results in Table 2 support the contact thesis, or the positive long-term effects of integrated schooling in promoting more integrationist views, at least among Protestants.

One caveat concerning our results is the inability to determine causality. Since our results are aggregated cross-sectional surveys, we do not know the outlooks of the respondents or their parents before they entered an integrated school. For example, it could be argued that more liberally-minded parents are more likely to send their children to integrated schools, and

that the effects we attribute to schooling may in fact be due to selectivity among parents. More recent research, however, casts some doubt on this interpretation by arguing that not only are pupils in integrated schools drawn from a variety of social backgrounds but because they attract children who had little or no contact with the ‘other side’ prior to integrated education, it is the school environment and not parental influence which promotes this more integrationist position (McGlynn, 2003). This is an issue, however, that can only be comprehensively resolved by extensive, long-term panel surveys.

Table 2 also highlights the differences emerging among Protestants in terms of their support for the two dominant identities — British and unionist — between those who had attended a formally integrated school and those who had not. Protestants who had attended an integrated school were less likely to endorse either a British or unionist identity than those who had attended either a segregated school or one that was just fairly mixed.

A converse pattern emerges when a Northern Irish identity or the absence of a political label is considered. Protestants who had attended an integrated school not only were more likely to choose a Northern Irish identity, but they were also more likely to reject a unionist label in favour of the intermediate ‘neither’ position. But the most striking pattern is the marked unwillingness among Protestants to cross traditional boundaries and adopt the opposing identity, a result all the more persuasive given their lack of indecision in relation to this issue. In both instances, less than 1% of Protestants opted for the “don’t know” category when asked to indicate their national and political identity. Even among those educated in

Table 2: Identities and type of education by religion in Northern Ireland

	%							
	Protestant				Catholic			
	Integrated	Mixed	Segregated	All	Integrated	Mixed	Segregated	All
National Identity:								
British	63.4	71.5	72.2	72.0	11.1	12.1	9.3	9.5
Irish	3.7	2.8	2.5	2.6	59.3	56.3	64.8	64.0
Ulster	3.7	5.6	8.2	7.8	1.2	0.5	0.6	0.6
Northern Irish	24.4	17.9	15.3	15.7	27.2	29.5	24.0	24.5
Other	4.9	2.1	1.8	1.8	1.2	1.6	1.4	1.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N)	(82)	(780)	(5,903)	(6,765)	(81)	(380)	(4,186)	(4,647)
Political Identity:								
Unionist	54.3	71.2	73.2	72.7	0.0	1.6	1.0	1.0
Nationalist	2.5	0.7	0.8	0.8	58.5	57.9	66.4	65.6
Neither	43.2	28.1	26.0	26.5	41.5	40.5	32.6	33.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N)	(81)	(768)	(5,843)	(6,692)	(82)	(375)	(4,166)	(4,623)

formally-integrated schools, almost no Protestant was willing to be regarded as Irish or to adopt a nationalist identity. Thus, Protestants who experience a formally integrated education occupy the middle ground of Northern Ireland politics: they are willing to detach themselves from a British or unionist identity but not to adopt the identity of the other side.

This is not the case among Catholics, where support for the two dominant identities – Irish and nationalist – is not as clearly differentiated by educational sector. Catholics who had attended a religiously mixed school were less likely to endorse an Irish identity. Furthermore, in comparison to those who had experienced a segregated education, they are also more likely to choose a Northern Irish label and adopt the intermediate ‘neither’ position in relation to their political identity. But once again, there is a marked unwillingness among Catholics to cross traditional allegiances and adopt the opposing identity. Even among those educated in either an informal or formally integrated setting, almost no Catholic was willing to adopt a unionist label and just one in ten saw themselves as British.

Nevertheless, integrated education remains important in shaping identity patterns. When the impact of congruency in identity is considered, it is again Protestants who had attended an integrated school who stand out as being the least traditionalist in their views (see Figure 2). Protestants who had attended an integrated school were less likely to identify themselves as *both* British and unionist than those who had not. Among Catholics, the key factor was attendance at a non-

segregated school. Irrespective of the type of integrated school they attended, Catholics were less likely to identify themselves as *both* Irish and nationalist.

Constitutional preferences

To what extent does integrated education lead to differences in constitutional preferences? The pattern in Table 3 is again clear among Protestants; those who had attended an integrated school are less likely to support the link with Britain and to be undecided. Thus, while over 80% of Protestants who had attended either a fairly mixed or segregated school favoured the union with Britain, the equivalent proportion among those who had experienced a formally-integrated education was just 65.4%.

to 14.8% among the formally integrated. Again, Protestants are unwilling to cross traditional boundaries in their constitutional preferences. Very few Protestants were willing to support Irish reunification, or even an independent Northern Ireland, and there were no differences between the various educational sectors in relation to this issue.

Constitutional preferences within the Catholic population are not as clearly differentiated by educational sector, although the key factor here is attendance at an integrated school (both formal and informal) versus a segregated one. In general, Catholics who had attended either a formally or informally integrated school were more likely than their segregated counterparts to abandon their traditional

Table 3: Constitutional preferences and type of education by religion in Northern Ireland

	%							
	Protestant				Catholic			
	Integrated	Mixed	Segregated	All	Integrated	Mixed	Segregated	All
Part of UK	65.4	80.8	85.0	84.3	24.7	27.6	19.9	20.6
United Ireland	4.9	3.7	3.8	3.8	34.6	38.5	51.0	49.7
Indep N Ireland	6.2	5.9	3.9	4.1	14.8	10.9	9.9	10.1
Other	8.6	2.9	1.6	1.8	2.5	4.5	2.7	2.9
Don't know	14.8	6.7	5.8	6.0	23.5	18.6	16.5	16.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N)	(81)	(781)	(5,920)	(6,782)	(81)	(377)	(4,186)	(4,644)

When those who are undecided, or who failed to express an opinion on the constitution, are examined, the findings are similar. Just 5.8% of those who had experienced a segregated education expressed this indecisive view, compared

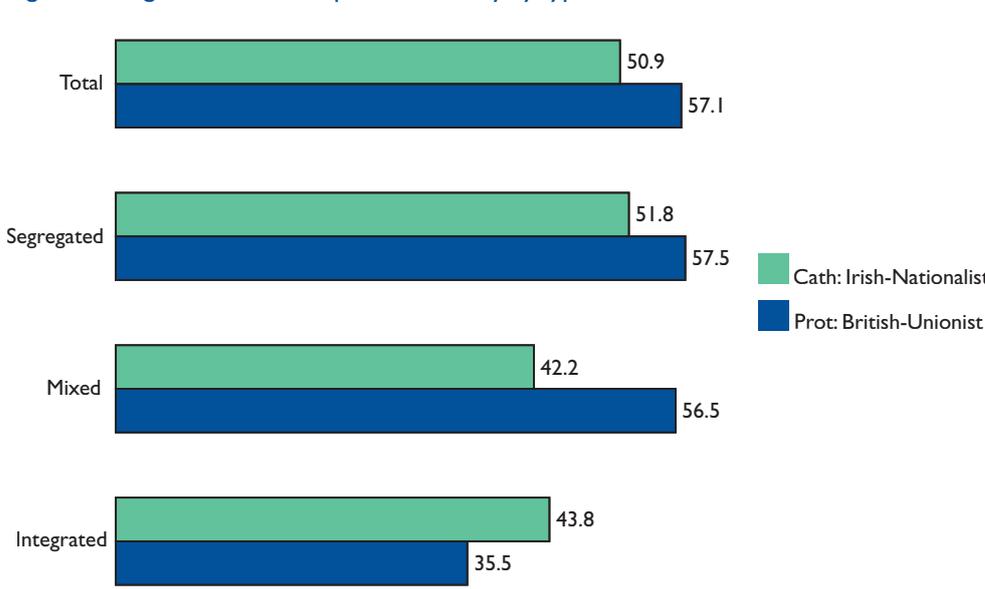
territorial allegiances. Whereas just over half of Catholics who had attended a segregated school supported Irish re-unification, just over one in three of those who had experienced an integrated education did so.

The most important finding is the willingness of Catholics to cross traditional boundaries and associate with the opposing preference. Overall, not only does a notable minority of the Catholic community – just over one fifth in total – support the link with Britain, but an almost equivalent proportion – 16.8% in this instance – remain undecided about the issue.

Conclusion

The interaction between integrated education and community relations in Northern Ireland is both complex and contentious. A quarter of a century after the first integrated college was established, we still do not know if integrated education breaks down religious and cultural barriers. While our results cannot provide a definitive answer, they do suggest that attendance at an informally or formally integrated school

Figure 2: Religion, national and political identity by type of education



has some positive long-term benefits in promoting a less sectarian outlook.

Our evidence in support of this proposition is threefold. First, irrespective of religion, individuals who had attended an informally or formally integrated school were significantly more likely to reject traditional identities and allegiances than those who had attended a segregated one. Second, this finding particularly resonates among Protestants, where clear differences in identity patterns and constitutional preferences emerged based

on the type of schooling. Protestants who had attended an integrated school were more likely than those who had not to occupy a neutral position in terms of political identities and constitutional preferences. Third, we find positive effects for informally integrated schooling on the outlooks of Catholics. Catholics who had attended a 'fairly mixed' school were more likely than others to occupy the centre ground in identity politics; in addition, they were more likely to disavow bi-partisan constitutional preferences.

These results, tentative as they are, add weight to the studies which have shown that integrated schools can and do have an impact on the outlooks of the pupils who attend them. Moreover, our study – based on a large sample of the adult population – suggest that the positive effects of integrated schooling extend into later life. As the numbers experiencing integrated schooling grows, these individuals have the potential to create a new common ground in Northern Ireland politics.

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Key Points

- Respondents who had attended an informally or formally-integrated school were more likely to reject traditional identities and allegiances than those who had attended a segregated one.
- Protestants who attended a formally-integrated school were less likely to say that they were British or unionist; however they were not willing to adopt an Irish or nationalist identity.
- Catholics who had attended a formally-integrated or fairly mixed school were less likely to endorse an Irish identity, were more likely to choose a Northern Irish label and say they were neither unionist nor nationalist. However, almost no Catholic said that they were unionist and just 10% said that they were British.
- 80% of Protestants who had attended either a fairly mixed or segregated school favoured the union with Britain, compared with 65% who attended a formally-integrated school.
- 51% of Catholics who had attended a segregated school supported Irish re-unification, while 35% of those who had experienced a formally-integrated education did so.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. The survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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