

School Collaboration in Northern Ireland

Opportunities for Reconciliation?

2008

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School collaboration in Northern Ireland: Opportunities for Reconciliation?

Aim of Research

This report presents the findings of a quantitative and qualitative investigation into school collaboration in Northern Ireland. The quantitative research aimed to set a baseline for the nature and extent of school collaboration in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland and to provide a basis from which to select four Learning Partnerships for the more in-depth, qualitative work. The purpose of the qualitative element of the research was to elicit principal and teacher experiences and perceptions of school collaboration across four Learning Partnerships¹ and to explore the extent to which collaboration has the potential to promote reconciliation and more positive intergroup relations between Protestant and Catholic pupils.

Structure of Report

The report is separated into six main areas: A summary is presented in Section 1. This is followed by an explanation of the policy context for school collaboration in Northern Ireland in Section 2. The research methods are set out in Section 3 and the findings from the quantitative element are presented in Section 4. The qualitative research findings are presented in section 5. The concluding section of the report summarises some of the key challenges for collaborating schools in Northern Ireland.

¹ A 'Learning Partnership' is a consortium of schools and other educational providers which meet to explore opportunities for establishing collaborative activity.

Summary of main findings

The context for school collaboration in Northern Ireland

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 provides the broad legislative framework for school collaboration in Northern Ireland. This piece of legislation gives effect to the curricular Entitlement Framework which states that from September 2009 all post primary schools must ensure that children at KS4 and post 16 have the opportunity to avail of either 24 or 27 subjects respectively.

The Review of Public Administration² (2002) also makes clear the need for greater co-ordination and co-operation across all public bodies and in the Independent Strategic Review of Education (2006) there is a clear argument for school collaboration based on falling enrolments and greater economic rationalisation and in terms of enhancing relations between pupils enrolled in different schools.

Whilst it is assumed that schools will not be able to provide children with access to the full range of courses unless they establish collaborative partnerships with other schools and/or educational providers there is notably no obligation placed on them by the Department of Education to collaborate.

Initial experiences of collaboration

At the time of research [2007] inter-school collaboration was not yet statutory but the data suggests that much work has already been undertaken by schools to prepare for it. Schools

² The Review of Public Administration reached a conclusion in March 2006. It was a large scale 'root and branch' investigation of the arrangements for the administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. It covered over 150 bodies, including the 26 district councils, the Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts, the five Education and Library Boards and about 100 other public bodies. The Review was launched by the Northern Ireland Executive in June 2002. Joined up government and collaboration are key themes and the expectation is that public bodies including schools will increasingly share resources to ensure that services are delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible.

were already collaborating or preparing to collaborate in a range of areas, most notably in relation to the delivery of the curriculum and shared staff development activities.

The principle of collaboration has generally been well received by schools who described it as a necessary step in the face of falling enrolment. The benefits which collaboration was believed to offer schools included:

- An opportunity to share expertise amongst teaching staff in different schools
- Providing a wider ranges of curricular options for young people
- An opportunity to break down barriers between sectors of schooling particularly between grammar and secondary schools
- Providing opportunities for children and staff across different schools within the locality to build informal relationships

Most schools are members of Learning Partnerships and collaboration is taking place across a range of key areas. However, despite the generally positive assessment of collaboration, participants indicated that sustainable collaborative relations were difficult to establish and a range of factors were reported to have an impact on the process of school collaboration. Predictably, these included a range of logistical issues but they also included factors such as school culture and school leadership:

- Different approaches to the construction of the school timetable
- Transport costs of transferring children from one to school to another
- Distance between schools
- Financial resources to ensure that initiatives to develop collaboration are sustainable
- The sector in which the school is located: schools were more hesitant about establishing collaborative links with schools outside of their sector than those within it. Thus it was difficult establish links between grammar schools and secondary schools [only 35% of schools suggested that they had established collaborative links with a school which took a different approach to academic selection than their own] or between Catholic and Protestant schools or between integrated and non-integrated schools
- Perhaps reflecting the above, schools placed considerable emphasis on cultural issues and sought to establish collaborative relations with schools where the culture was deemed to be compatible with their own

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- A policy context that is uncertain or unsympathetic to collaborative activity. For example, uncertainty in regard to the future of academic selection and concerns about school closure combined with policies which continue to reward competitive behaviour seemed to curtail commitment to collaboration
 - School leaders argued that trust between leaders was critical for facilitating effective collaboration but this was difficult to establish in the short term
 - Similarly, teachers and principals consistently cited the school leader as a key influence on the process of school collaboration

Does School Collaboration promote reconciliation?

In general, the data suggested that collaboration creates an important opportunity for schools to foster positive inter-group relations but availing of that opportunity represents a considerable challenge to most schools.

Evidence from the questionnaire showed that 62% of schools had collaborated with, or were planning to collaborate with, a school from a different denomination, the qualitative data demonstrated that the process of such cross-sectoral collaboration was more fraught than this figure might initially suggest.

The qualitative data indicated the extent of separation between the sectors and the level of distrust and suspicion that pervades relationships between schools of different faith background.

Although schools willingly acknowledged the *potential* of cross-sectoral³ collaboration for building more positive relations between Catholic and Protestant pupils, research participants generally reported that promoting reconciliation was not their key priority, and it usually merited only limited discussion during meetings of the Learning Partnerships. As current policy

³ The term 'cross-sectoral' will be used to refer to collaboration between Protestant and Catholic schools

³ State controlled schools in Northern Ireland are often referred to as 'defacto Protestant' institutions mainly because the Protestant churches have nomination rights to the board of governors. For this reason the term 'Protestant school' will be used to refer to schools in the state-controlled sector and to non-Catholic grammar schools.

arrangements do not identify reconciliation or the promotion of tolerance and mutual understanding as a key objective of educational collaboration it is perhaps not surprising that this is not a priority for schools.

A series of specific issues were raised by participants that provide a useful insight into the challenges of engaging in cross-sectoral collaboration:

- Some Protestant teachers and principals indicated their unease with the [perceived] power and influence of the Catholic Church on Catholic schools and this prevented them from establishing cross sectoral relationships
- Some Catholic teachers expressed frustration that their efforts to establish friendly relations with the Protestant schools have been rejected, and this seems to deter them from seeking out Protestant schools as potential collaborators
- Some Catholic schools are engaging in substantive collaborative activity with each other to the exclusion of local Protestant schools as a means of safeguarding the system of Catholic education in their district
- For those schools that were engaging or planning to engage in cross-sectoral collaboration there is a general tendency to underplay the complexity of bringing groups from different religious/cultural backgrounds together. Schools tend to over-emphasise the extent to which all children are the same and disregard the cultural and religious differences that exist. This tendency to 'minimise difference' can lead to the development of polite, yet superficial, relations that existing research on inter-group relations cautions against because it is unlikely to prove conducive to the development of deeper trusting relations
- There is a general assumption that when children from different backgrounds are brought together then efforts should be made to 'neutralise' the environment and remove any marker of identity. This seems to be a rational response to a potentially challenging situation but the absence of symbols and markers of identity may create a 'false' environment wherein children do not engage with the realities of religious and cultural difference and so fail to understand each other
- The potential of schools to create a context which may promote reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants seems to be intrinsically linked to the leadership capacity of principals in schools and their willingness and commitment to establishing links across the denominational divide.
- To ensure whole school involvement and commitment to collaboration, school leaders need to ensure that relations that are established between leaders have the opportunity to cascade down to teaching staff

School Collaboration in Northern Ireland

Background and Context

The Education (NI) Order 2006 provides the broad legislative context for a number of key education reforms, under the Entitled to Succeed (e2s) Programme, including the revised curriculum and the Entitlement Framework [EF]. The EF is designed to present all pupils with greater choice and flexibility by providing them with access to a wider range of learning opportunities than is currently available and which, it is proposed, is more likely to reflect their aptitudes and interests than previous arrangements. It is expected that pupils will be provided with opportunities to access this curriculum irrespective of where they live or the school they attend.

The EF is a key element of the new post-primary arrangements. From September 2009 all pupils aged 14 and upwards must have access to the EF, which will ultimately require schools to offer access to at least 24 courses for pupils at KS4 and 27 courses for pupils post-16, with at least one third applied and at least one third general, as defined by DE. It is unlikely that many schools will be able to provide access to the EF on their own; schools will need to develop arrangements to co-operate and collaborate with other schools and with the Further Education (FE) sector and other providers. These arrangements will be developed locally to respond to local needs and circumstances [Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2007:5]

That schools will be required by law to offer a wider range of learning opportunities than before creates a new dynamic in education in Northern Ireland as it is unlikely that a single school will have the resources to deliver the full range of statutory courses on their own. There is an expectation therefore that schools will have to create meaningful collaborative partnerships with other educational providers in order to provide pupils with access to the full curriculum. In recognition of this, Article 21 of the 2006 Education (Northern Ireland) Order has conferred power on the Board of Governors of schools to make arrangements for collaboration with other educational institutions:

The Board of Governors of a grant-aided school may enter into arrangements to secure the provision of secondary education on behalf of the school by (a) any other grant-

aided school;(b) any institution of further education;(c) any other person or body approved by the Department and appearing to the Board of Governors to be qualified and equipped to provide that education (The Education (2006) Order)

Whilst the changing curricular arrangements have obviously created an important impetus for school collaboration, the Review of Public Administrationⁱ (2002) and the findings of the Independent Strategic Review of Education⁴ (2006) have also explicitly emphasised the need for greater co-operation and collaboration between schools. It is suggested that in response to falling enrolment figures and concerns about growing levels of community segregation, Northern Ireland requires a new, more inclusive approach to education:

Our argument for this more inclusive and pervasive approach is three-fold: first, the educational case – access for pupils to the full range of the curriculum, to high quality teaching, and to modern facilities; second, the social case – societal well-being by promoting a culture of tolerance, mutual understanding and inter-relationship through significant, purposeful and regular engagement and interaction in learning; the economic case – through cost-effective provision that gives good value for money. (The Independent Strategic Review of Education 2006: 26)

The extent to which collaboration between schools will facilitate and promote reconciliation between Protestant and Catholic pupils represents a critical theme in this Review. It is argued for example that the school system ought to accord recognition to the benefits which can be accrued when schools collaborate, particularly in terms of preparing children to understand and appreciate religious and cultural difference. Hence school collaboration fits neatly within a wider policy framework which is encouraging positive relationship building within a shared society.

⁴ *The Independent Strategic Review of Education was published in December 2006 and was broadly accepted by Maria Eagle, the then Minister for Education. Signalling a commitment to promoting relations between Protestant and Catholic pupils, she stated: Government's commitment to increasing levels of integration in the education system is clear... Government is ready to provide capital investment to develop a shared future in Northern Ireland's schools. (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2006)*

It appears then that changes in the curriculum combined with further efforts to foster better relations between different communities have conspired with falling pupil enrolments and a renewed drive for economic rationalisation to create a fresh and innovative approach to the delivery of education in Northern Ireland. Rather than delivering the curriculum in the traditional single school model the central policy objective now appears to be to create a new type of collaborative structure which provides all children with access to a broadly based curriculum delivered within mixed-faith/cultural classrooms. These new structural arrangements clearly offer important opportunities for schools, but it is also apparent that schools will need support to cope with the challenges that are presented by collaboration. In recognition of this, the Department of Education has introduced a series of interim measures to assist schools in developing sustainable collaborative arrangements.

Transitional Arrangements for Educational Collaboration in Northern Ireland

School collaboration has been accorded ‘transitional’ status by the Department of Education in order to create the opportunity to test and refine models of effective collaborative working and to disseminate good practice. There are currently two strands of collaborative activity, the first of which is the Vocational Enhancement Programme (VEP) which focuses on supporting collaboration between schools and Institutes of Further Education or other educational providers, whilst Strand 2 is the School Collaboration Programme (SCP) which focuses on supporting collaboration between schools (DENI 2007)

The purpose of these transitional programmes is to assist in establishing and building relationships and experience between schools and with other providers in advance of the full implementation of the Entitlement Framework in September 2009. However the 2007/08 year is the last in which support for the delivery of the EF will be separated into the two strands. From 2008/09, support for collaborative arrangements between schools, and/or between schools and Institutes of Further Educations and other providers, will be provided through a single programme co-ordinated on an area basis.

Clearly, the transition from individual to a collaborative model of educational delivery will be resource intensive and in recognition of this the Department of Education has made available additional resources to enable the various statutory bodies in charge of education [Education and Library Boards, Catholic Council for Maintained Schools, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta- The Council for Irish Medium

Education] to provide Development Officers to help schools develop collaborative arrangements and increase pupils' access to courses in preparation for the introduction of the EF. Schools are entitled to submit applications for additional funding to assist in the progress towards collaboration where there is a risk that the pupils will not have access to the curriculum in 2007/8 and 2008/9.

Research Methods

The data for this research was collected using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative study was undertaken in February 2007 when short questionnaires were sent to all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland (see appendix 1). The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather data on the extent and nature of school collaboration across Northern Ireland. The questions addressed a range of issues including types of collaborative activity and factors that facilitated and challenged the process of school collaboration. The response rate was 62% which is well within the 60% response rate that is advised as necessary to ensure that the replies of those responding will give an accurate picture of the population from which they are drawn (Armstrong and Ashworth, 2000).

The survey responses were used as a basis from which to select four 'Learning Partnerships', wherein more in-depth qualitative research could be undertaken with principals and teachers. To ensure that we could develop a sense of how collaboration is implemented and experienced it was important that partnerships had been in operation and had engaged in regular meetings over a period of at least six months. Partnerships were selected if they had been established for at least six months and if they involved schools drawn from across the main school sectors [grammar/secondary, Catholic/Protestant/integrated].

A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were undertaken across four Learning Partnerships between March and September 2007. Five schools in each Partnership participated in the research. The interviews were carried out with both principals and/or vice- principals and with teachers. Eight of the schools were drawn from the Catholic sector and eight from the Protestant sector. Four integrated schools were included in the sample. Six of the schools were grammar schools and the remaining 14 were not academically selective.

Interviews were semi-structured to ensure that the main issues were addressed but also to allow participants the freedom to elaborate on issues of interest. All interviews were tape-recorded and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Questions explored participants' prior experiences of collaboration and examined their perceptions and experiences of the potential which collaboration holds for promoting reconciliation.

The Learning Partnerships were located in four large towns throughout Northern Ireland and, as noted, all had met regularly within the past year, although relations between principals in some of the partnerships had been developing over a number of years.

The qualitative data presented in the report provides an important insight into perceptions of school collaboration but it is essentially exploratory and so cannot be taken to represent the experiences of all schools throughout Northern Ireland. To protect their identity and preserve confidentiality no information will be provided that may lead to the identification of the schools or the partnerships.

The Quantitative Data

The extent and nature of school collaboration in Northern Ireland

Whilst post-primary collaboration is not yet statutory in Northern Ireland it is significant that of the 143 schools that responded to the questionnaire 88% stated that they had engaged in some form of collaboration with another educational institution⁵. Whilst 17 of the schools stated that they had not, to date, engaged in any form of collaborative activity, four indicated that they were beginning to explore opportunities to work with an Institute of Further Education and six were exploring opportunities to collaborate with other post-primary or primary schools. The remaining seven schools had not indicated any plans to develop a collaborative venture with another school. In terms of the profile of schools which were not currently engaged in any form collaboration nine are Voluntary Grammar (five are managed by Catholic Church authorities four are managed by Protestant Church authorities) five are Voluntary Maintained, two are Controlled and one is Grant Maintained Integrated.

On what basis do schools collaborate?

Table 1 (below) shows the areas where schools are already collaborating or where they have indicated that they plan to collaborate in the academic year 2007/08

TABLE 1

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Percentage of schools</i>
<i>Shared staff development activities</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Collaboration as part of a Learning Partnership</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Pupils from your school taking GCSE or GCE A' level subjects in another school, or vice versa</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Delivery of the curriculum</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Sports activities</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Cultural activities</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Work related to Education for Mutual Understanding</i>	<i>43</i>

⁵ In the questionnaire collaboration was defined broadly as **any** joint activity undertaken with either a College of Further Education another post-primary school; a special needs school or a primary school.

That 55% schools are either currently delivering or planning to deliver GCSE or A' level subjects in the next academic year suggests that for the majority of schools the model of collaboration is not simply confined to tokenistic gestures or superficial links but it now appears to be a substantive and viable option for schools to explore as they seek to find ways of delivering a broader curriculum for students at post-14.

It is also worth noting that 48% of the schools have already begun to focus on developing shared staff development activities. At this early stage of collaboration establishing connections and building trust with individuals in partner institutions is critical. It is in providing opportunities for open communication between the collaborative partners that the basis for long term trusting relationships will be fostered. It is from these relationships that the most effective model of collaboration is most likely to flow (Linden, 2002). Since almost half of the schools have recognised the need for joint staff development it seems that some careful consideration has already been given to trust and confidence building between staff as a preparatory measure for collaborating schools.

Finally, 62% of schools are already members of an established Learning Partnership and 24% indicated that they are currently establishing joint goals and objectives within this Partnership in advance of beginning to work together. As with staff development, the formulation of goals and objectives is likely to prove decisive in the construction of successful collaborative relationships. For example, research has already shown that many of the challenges to collaboration arise from different institution's objectives, rules, cultures, and values, and differences in professional background, expertise, and perspective can create enormous challenges in both understanding and valuing the contribution of different partners (Bardach, 1998). Establishing a new partnership model however allows for new rules and cultures to develop within a formal structure which is more likely to allow for clarity of purpose whilst also engendering greater trust between participating organisations.

In general, the responses seem to suggest that most schools are preparing to implement the Entitlement Framework. The construction of Learning Partnerships appears to facilitate the establishment of professional relationships across schools and seems to provide the necessary basis from which to develop joint curricular initiatives that will lead to more substantial long term collaborative relations.

Evidence of Collaboration between different school sectors

An important objective of the survey was to establish the extent of inter-sectoral collaboration, particularly in terms of the extent of grammar / secondary school collaboration and Catholic/Protestant collaboration. 62% of schools have suggested that they currently engage in, or are planning to collaborate with, a school of a different religious denomination than their own, whilst 34% of schools that collaborate stated that they are currently, or are planning to collaborate with a school which has taken a different approach to academic selection than their own. Thus in contrast to what might be expected in Northern Ireland, denominational difference appears to pose much less of a barrier to inter-school collaboration than perceived academic differences between schools. However, it must be acknowledged that the concept of collaboration may have been defined by many schools in terms of ‘superficial or transient links’ rather than the creation of more substantive, durable partnerships that are implied by the new policy structures. The lack of clarity around the concept of collaboration may thus account for the higher proportion of schools that are engaging in collaboration across the denominational divide.

Challenges to collaboration

Predictably, schools cited a range of logistical problems which were currently undermining their capacity to foster collaborative links. These were principally related to timetabling pressures, distance between schools and discipline. However other responses reflected more fundamental concerns which related to managing the cultural shifts which are implicit in the new forms of school collaboration. For example, 17% of respondents stated that imposing a culture of collaboration upon an existing competitive culture was problematic. Indeed, two schools enclosed extensive written responses with their questionnaire which outlined particular concerns around the lack of support or guidance offered by Department of Education or local Education and Library Boards to help them deal with the challenges of collaboration.

Summary of quantitative data

In general, the responses to the questionnaire showed that most of the schools which responded to the survey are making extensive preparations in advance of the introduction of

the Entitlement Framework in 2009. This is evidenced by the high percentage of schools which have already established Learning Partnerships and the proportion that have set up opportunities for shared staff development. Similarly, the commitment to delivering aspects of the curriculum, especially GCE and GCSE subjects, is also testament to the depth of collaboration currently being undertaken. However, the responses also suggest that much of the collaboration which currently exists is between comprehensive schools and institutes of Further Education: many comprehensive schools have traditionally sent cohorts of children in years 11 and 12 to the local Institute of Further Education to undertake Vocational Educational Programmes or Occupational Studies and so the collaboration described is a continuation of a longstanding collaborative arrangement rather than a venture undertaken in response to the new policy framework.

The Qualitative Data

Perceptions of Inter-school Collaboration

In general, the interviews showed that participants were mostly enthusiastic about the *principle* of collaboration and were encouraged by the opportunities which it could potentially offer their school. Enthusiasm was particularly apparent when they talked of the new opportunities for building professional networks and opening up channels of communication between schools that didn't hitherto exist:

I think that the revised curriculum is driving collaboration to some extent but what ever drives it – it is based on a sound principleif you are getting heads of department meeting from different schools to discuss what everyone is doing say in Geography then that is a huge plus because it breaks down the barriers between schools and allows us to learn from each other. I was reserved at first but I find that I am getting to know the different teachers and principals as people and learning to understand how to do things differently. Through collaboration suddenly you have found yourself with this group of people finding out more about each other's schools and that is where it all starts

Yet it wasn't only the chance to share professional experience or to find alternative ways of working that seemed to persuade teaching professionals of the benefits of collaboration. Participants also pointed to its unique potential for extending learning opportunities for pupils:

By broadening the curriculum we are naturally generating benefits for students and opening up their learning experiences to something beyond their own school. There are lots of advantages and disadvantages too but one of the main advantages is that in collaborating we are allowing children access to a wider range of experiences, what ever they maybe, and that can only be good. Now with collaboration we can stop being limited and we can say to our children 'anything is possible' and if the children want things we will burst a blood-vessel to make sure it happens.

Indeed, the notion that collaboration could challenge a rather staid, narrow and outdated approach to education was a recurring theme in interviews and it is perhaps significant that smaller schools, which had initially felt threatened by collaboration, or believed that they had little to contribute to a collaborative arrangement, seemed now to recognise possibilities for their pupils that they would not have believed achievable before:

I have noticed a change in me and my school since collaboration has been mentioned. I really notice how I have changed in my attitude. I am not content anymore to limit

opportunities for learning just because we are a small school- it's not an excuse... I want to provide my children with far more variety. There are problems, don't get me wrong, and it is a very, very challenging time but I am now seeing the value of it and I was quite sceptical to begin with

Collaboration has clearly been demanding for schools, but it is interesting that the changing educational structures have, for some at least, precipitated a shift in mindset. It was particularly significant that some principals had begun to revise their initial, often negative, perceptions of this type of educational arrangement and in so doing had begun to develop a greater commitment to the process. Yet this optimistic attitude, whilst evident across many schools in the partnerships, was tempered somewhat when participants reflected on the factors that impacted on the effective operation of collaboration.

Factors that impact on collaboration

Logistical and financial factors

The most frequently cited responses to questions on the factors that impact on collaboration between schools, were, as expected, linked to logistical and financial issues. Reflecting the data in the questionnaires, the design of the timetable, distance between schools and transport costs all seemed to combine to influence a school's commitment to collaborative activity. It was common for example, for schools to assume very different approaches in designing their timetables -some schools scheduled their classes on a two week basis others operated a 6 day timetable and others retained a 5 day time table- and creating timetables that worked across schools naturally created additional burdens on staff. For some principals the work involved in re-scheduling classes outweighed any benefits that could be accrued through the collaboration:

I have a 6 day timetable and the school that I want to work with has a 5 day timetable so one of their requests during the year was that I would switch to a 5 or 10 day so that we could co-ordinate more easily. I did the sums and I found that we would have to cut curriculum time and basically subjects like maths and English were going to lose teaching time and KS4 was going to suffer and we agonised about it and had a full day SMT discussion to thrash it through and in the end we came down to the horrible reality that we are not going to change our school timetable just for year 11 pupils. I think that is the biggest difficulty – the pressure to change the timetable and the difficult decision to prioritise my own school

The time taken to transfer pupils between collaborating schools was also an important consideration for participants and concerns were expressed about whether the current funding allocations, which were vital for financing the new transport arrangements, would be sustained over time:

I am not complaining about the funding for transport really but I am concerned about whether it will continue. I mean I could see us collaborating with a couple of the schools- and we have very good ideas but when the money runs out... what then? Say there is no money to fix the bus that we are buying if it breaks down... I am cynical I suppose but I have seen these things before where they are great because there is money but when the money runs out then they just fall away to nothing

Current funding arrangements are clearly facilitating the progress of collaboration. For example, schools reported how they could purchase materials, pay for teaching cover and transport costs when required. However, the comments from some of the teachers emphasised their fears that that funding arrangements may not be maintained in the long term. Concerns about the durability of collaborative projects have also been raised in other research where it has been suggested that long term funding must be available if the value of collaborative projects are to be realised over time (Powell et al., 2004).

School Culture

Shinners et al (2005) have argued that culture clash, turf protection and a lack of understanding of the other partner's environment and its needs can destroy a partnership. Indeed they go on to argue that attention needs to be paid to practical matters within each school and the partnership if the institutions are to sustain their relationship over time. These concerns also emerged in the current research where it was apparent that [perceived] cultural differences between institutions exerted a defining influence on the way that the partnership evolved. Particular concerns arose for those schools that sent pupils to educational providers other than schools as the reflections of the teacher in charge of Vocational Enhancement programme suggested:

Our year elevens are treated like adults in the Institutes of Further Education and a lot of them find that hard to adjust to. There are loads of things like they are allowed to call the lecturer by their first names and it is not as formal as school and they are allowed more freedom. But the lecturers too are not used to these youngsters in that they are

used to 16 plus - all of these things means that for one day a week the children are subjected to a very different model of education and that is good but it is also difficult because they are not exposed to the consistency that a lot of them need in order to maintain good behaviour.

The lack of 'cultural consistency' across institutions was also a concern for those involved in inter-*school* collaboration. Principals suggested that potential collaborators must be selected very carefully, not least because schools had to ensure that their pupils would be subject to the same procedures and practices as in their own institution. These 'cultural factors' inevitably encouraged schools to exercise considerable caution when identifying a school to collaborate with:

It can be risky I mean when we send children out we actually don't know if they are going to have adequate pastoral care or be taught properly. Or say something happens to the child in that school? – If they are struggling with their work for example can they get heard by the teacher? Now the Development Officer was great for us because we were worried the selection of particular schools but he was able to reassure us and guide us because he knows the different schools well.

In recognition of these issues and in a clear attempt to deal positively with the problems that collaboration often presented, schools in one of the Partnerships had agreed that the Vice-Principals for Pastoral Care should be present at all Learning Partnership meetings and should work together to draft an integrated Pastoral Care and Child Protection policy. Reaching agreement on these practical and policy matters seemed to allay the fears that many of the principals had reported experiencing when initially considering the collaborative arrangement.

Policy factors

The current lack of clarity on the administration of education in Northern Ireland was deemed to exert an important influence on school collaboration. Many participants were confused about the future of academic selection and this, combined with the continued threat of school closure arising from the Independent Strategic Review of Education, contributed to a general sense of malaise amongst teaching staff in schools:

Really embracing collaboration can be difficult because there are so many questions still unanswered. Is selection here? Is it not? What about school closure? – I don't know if our town can cope with this many schools. And until a lot of those policy issues are

sorted out then it is very difficult to know how any school can move forward. Now the money that is offered that helps but we need clarity on the bigger questions that are critical to education here at the minute.

Unease with policy developments at the local level was only exacerbated by frustrations with the broader educational policy framework, where the continued emphasis on marketisation, competition and performance measurement in education, was widely believed to undermine effective collaboration. It was clear for example that a 'culture of performativity', where the performance of individual schools are assessed and measured against certain pre-set targets, was perceived to sit at odds with collaboration, and despite assurances by the former Minister for Education, that 'schools will be incentivised to collaborate' [Department of Education, 2006], this was not the prevailing impression left by interviewees who consistently referred to the ongoing tension between collaboration and competition and the lack of support offered by those charged with advising schools on the process of collaboration:

Competition is morally indefensible I think- well the sort of competition that has been encouraged in education. We are in a situation where for our school to remain open and viable we must have enough children. We might want to co-operate but we have to promote one's own school otherwise our league table position may fall. There is a tension there and I am not sure how to balance that and to be honest I haven't heard many of the advisors on collaboration deal with that one...

Other principals rehearsed similar arguments but what was perhaps most interesting was the extent to which the competitive culture intertwined with the selective and segregated school structures to create a context where the model of collaboration that evolved was not underpinned by an altruistic desire to share but simply used as a mechanism to preserve self-interest. There was no question for example, that where there was collaboration between the grammar school and a secondary school, it was the grammar school that set the agenda and determined the 'rules of the game'. This point was neatly articulated by the head of one of the Catholic grammar schools:

The relationship between myself and the high school is fine. I'm the big brother I am not losing anything. I can define the agenda in a way and the high school is usually happy with that as they are gaining by just being associated with us. My biggest challenge though has been to persuade my 'audience' [parents] of the benefits of collaboration. I have had to be careful to sell the idea to the parents and to negotiate the difficulties

where parents may not be happy with sending their children to the local secondary but I have managed to do that successfully and without too much trouble.

The type of collaborative venture described was not based on equal status between the partners as was advised by Burns (2003), but ironically it seemed to work [at least in the short term] because both schools explicitly recognised themselves as *unequal* partners:

I am trading up and [the grammar] is trading down and that is it really. I have a lot to gain we are a good secondary school but we are a secondary school and that brings challenges in any kind of collaboration with the grammar. We are different institutions there is no question but I certainly am glad of the link with the grammar and the parents are happy with us doing it too.

Despite the apparent success of this arrangement though, collaboration between grammar and secondary schools was not the norm. In contrast to the comments above and reflecting the responses of the survey (where 35% of schools stated that they had engaged in collaboration with a school which took a different approach to academic selection than their own) over half of the secondary schools in the study reported considerable difficulty in establishing relations with a grammar school because of a [perceived] inequality in status and clear disparities in the academic and social standing of the two school sectors. This was causing considerable discontent amongst the non-selective schools in the study, as one of the principals of a secondary school explained:

That divide between the grammar and secondary is so, so important. Sometimes I wonder if they [grammar schools] think that we are a lower form of life because they create all sorts of reasons as to why they can't collaborate with us. In some ways there is difficulty on our side too because I wouldn't want to expose my pupils to a learning context where they might feel intimidated by other children that are more academic. It is certainly a difficulty.

Moreover, the problem of 'educational apartheid' between grammar and secondary schools seemed to be intensified for schools in the integrated sector. Echoing the experiences above, three of the integrated schools in the study had encountered some difficulty in persuading grammar schools to recognise them as a potential partner. However their problems were compounded because most of the secondary schools regarded them as a competitor and so were also unwilling to make links. A teacher in one of the integrated schools revealed her

frustration with a recent Learning Partnership meeting:

I am deeply enthusiastic about collaboration and I think we have a lot to offer the other schools but they don't want to know. I was at our Partnership meeting last week and it was quite apparent that none of the schools wanted to link up with us. It was really awful as we are keen but the Catholic grammar just didn't rate us and the secondary schools viewed us as a threat to their survival... it was really frustrating

Whether this is resonant across the integrated sector in Northern Ireland is not yet clear but the experiences reported do illustrate the pervasive influence of educational competition and its negative effects on the construction of successful inter-school partnerships. Perhaps more importantly though, the exclusion of integrated schools could prove detrimental to any attempt to promote reconciliation through collaboration not least because Integrated schools are the only schools in Northern Ireland that are granted funding to promote relations between pupils from the two main communities and the experience they have accrued in this regard is likely to prove useful to other sectors of schooling.

Collaboration: Opportunities for Reconciliation?

For the purposes of the research, reconciliation was defined broadly as a process which allowed for the promotion of more positive inter-group relations between Protestant and Catholic pupils. Three broad themes were explored as a means of ascertaining the extent to which schools had the potential to build reconciliation through collaboration. Firstly participants' views were sought on the concept of reconciliation and how this might be promoted by schools. Secondly, participants were asked about their views on cross-sectoral collaboration and finally, where schools were engaging in cross-sectoral collaboration, they were asked what mechanisms were employed to encourage reconciliation and promote positive inter-group relations between Catholics and Protestants.

Can schools promote reconciliation?

Participants were asked to reflect on the concept of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and to explain how the collaborative arrangements for schools might help promote better relations between the two main communities. Most participants were hesitant about answering these questions and in 6 interviews across the four partnerships the question was studiously avoided. For those that did provide a clear answer, it was generally agreed that reconciliation was a

process through which the groups, previously in opposition, begin to acknowledge and accept the political, cultural and religious differences them whilst also recognising what they have in common. However, the question of how schools might contribute to this process seemed to present participants with considerable difficulty:

You go to any school and there the principal would say they would want a fair society and a society where people understand each other and accept their differences -I can't imagine Catholic or Protestant who wouldn't want that. The same with acknowledging and dealing with the past, building positive relationships, but the real issue is how far are you prepared to go to bend and adapt your faith and culture to fit in with somebody else's and I think that in theory school settings are good places for this but in practice I am not so sure how we can do it.

This uncertainty was further emphasised when participants discussed their experiences of the Learning Partnership meetings. Most stated that the question of reconciliation or the promotion of more positive relations between Catholics and Protestants had never arisen. There appeared to be a variety of reasons for this but what is particularly significant [in the light of the Independent Strategic Review of Education referred to earlier] is that reconciliation or the fostering of relationships between the main communities was not believed to be a core policy objective of school collaboration:

We haven't really mentioned reconciliation... I am not sure that reconciliation or that kind of thing is really an important aim of collaboration as it has been set out to us by the Department [of Education]. I certainly never heard that. But I suppose there is a nervousness about these things as well if I am being really honest and the reason is that, well, we don't really know how to deal with these kind of conversations - it is not something that we have been used to. Of course with collaboration it is something that we are aware of but we don't labour it during our discussions with the other schools because it is sensitive. I mean when you start these discussions you have no idea where they might end and the whole thing [collaboration] could be jeopardised.

Others reinforced these views and the principal of a Protestant school argued that one of the key problems was that Protestant and Catholic teaching professionals were unable to engage openly during Partnership meetings. She suggested that the presence of polite relationships often masked deeper suspicions and prejudices that vetoed open discussion of important issues:

I'm being realistic here. We haven't really moved on at all in Northern Ireland - ok politically, maybe but in terms of our relationships with each other I really don't think so. Now if I said that at our Learning Partnership meetings with the other schools I would be castigated but the truth is that we say all the right things but deep down when you scratch under the surface the hostility is there –have those ingrained ways gone away? I am not so sure...

These comments capture something of the underlying tension and uneasiness that can pervade mixed religious gatherings in Northern Ireland and they go some way to explaining the difficulty that schools seemed to encounter when trying to establish relationships across the denominational divide.

Perceptions of collaborating with schools of a different denomination

It was stated earlier that all schools were selected for participation in this study because they had indicated in the survey that they were a member of a Learning Partnership that included schools from across the sectors. Yet as interviews progressed it became clear that membership of such a Partnership did not, of necessity, imply that schools were engaging in or planning to engage in cross-sectoral collaboration. Despite the fact that over 60% of schools in the survey had stated that they engaged in cross-sectoral collaboration, during interviews it became apparent that there was a discernible reluctance to collaborate with a school outside of the denominational sector:

Schools are divided faith wise and this is a huge stumbling block for collaboration... if you go up this road you come to the Catholic school and it would be a natural choice for collaboration but there is just such a big barrier of faith and I can't see it happening at the minute

Although this teacher was quite explicit about the issues which differences in faith raised for school collaboration, such candid responses were unusual during most of the interviews. Rather, participants seemed reticent about their views on this issue and when asked would often state that whilst they were supportive in principle of cross-sectoral collaboration, this type of collaboration was impossible for their particular school. A range of practical barriers such as distance, timetable or transport were normally presented as justification for their decision. However the following comment hints that there were other, more fundamental,

concerns that served to keep schools separate:

We've found in the past that we can be very outgoing and welcoming people in but you go to the high school which is one of the non Catholic schools in the town and they don't really want to know. On a superficial level they would never come to anything that we have on here even though they would be invited and we would go to whatever shows or whatever they had in their school. Likewise we would always go to the XXXX high school shows but they never come here so it's difficult. I'm not blaming the staff I think the communities often have very controlling effects on non catholic schools than say our community has and more of them have openness from the Catholic side than the controlled /Protestant sector.

Such frustration was also evident in other responses from Catholic teachers but a possible explanation for the reluctance of the Protestants to engage in relationship building was provided by one of the Protestant principals who described how his lack of knowledge of the Catholic system and the role of the Catholic Church in schools often acted as a powerful deterrent from reaching out to the other sector:

It is not that I am opposed to collaboration with Catholic schools *per se* but the Catholic Church's influence on the ethos of those schools sets them apart from our own and that does pose a difficulty. I know my own school type in a sense and that makes it far easier to relate to the schools in our sector... I hope that doesn't sound intolerant as I am really just being honest.

Yet the wish to maintain contact only with schools of their own denomination was not confined to the Protestant sector. Despite the comments from the Catholic teacher above, there also appeared to be a preference amongst some Catholic schools to engage in substantive collaboration only with other Catholic schools. However this seemed to be stimulated less by a suspicion of the Protestant Churches and more by a wish to ensure that Catholic education was protected and maintained particularly in areas where it was deemed to be under threat. For example, the principal of a Catholic grammar school made clear his desire to use collaboration to preserve the status quo in education both by reinforcing the system of Catholic education in the locality, but also by ensuring that his grammar school status was protected. His comments underline the 'micro-political' context in which collaborative ventures are undertaken and the extent to which innovative policy initiatives can be shaped and re-fashioned by local actors:

Collaboration is about helping other schools. But is there self interest involved? Of course the self interest is there. My self interest is that I need to keep the Catholic secondary school open so that post 11-plus there are two pathways available to people who are transferring into Catholic schools. If the secondary school closes then I end up with a huge Catholic comprehensive and I dilute my 'grammarness' and people might choose other non Catholic grammar schools. So collaboration for me is about working together to protect the Catholic system. Ensuring the grammar schools have their quality and tradition and to do that I have to save my neighbouring secondary school so I am helping them survive by giving them support. But of course it is a finely judged friendship if I devolved 2 or 3 subjects to them then that is too much

However it is perhaps encouraging to note that whilst these views predominated they were not universal. In two of the partnerships four principals suggested that they were very committed to establishing relations between the Catholics and Protestant pupils at their schools and had already made concrete plans to deliver A' level and GCSE subjects collaboratively from September 2008. It is difficult to be clear about why these schools were different from the others but that relations between the principals had already been evolving over a number of years seemed to be significant:

I have known the principals from all of the schools here for a long time mainly because this town is small and we all share an interest in music and we got that going and from that developed really good friendship between us- Catholic and Protestant, grammar and secondary. It is that trust really ... we got that established between myself and the principal of the Protestant school and that was critical -you can't force that as it just developed over time but it is critical.

It also seemed important that the schools had participated in a number of cross-community 'link' programmes for a number of years. Whilst the programmes involved small groups of pupils on 'one off' events these appeared to create a foundation from which more substantive models of collaboration could evolve:

We have been involved in XXXX where there are outside speakers and so on facilitating cross-community groups of pupils. This has been going on for a number of years now and has been successful for the groups involved. It has just helped us get to know each other... you know breakdown a few stereotypes and that has helped us get to this stage where we can now think about delivering the A' levels together....

Thus the combination of the principals' ongoing friendship and a prior history of involvement in cross-community programmes [through for example Education for Mutual Understanding programmes] facilitated schools to establish channels of communication across the denominational divide. But whilst *principals* had clearly spent much time establishing relationships with each other less cognisance seemed to be attributed to the need for teaching staff to also build relations. Indeed, four teachers across the partnerships reflected on their concerns about the demands which collaboration was likely to make of them. Their anxieties appeared to be heightened by a sense of isolation from discussions about collaboration as one of the teachers explained:

Collaboration isn't something that I know an awful lot about. I know some things have been going on but I am not sureit is kind of something that the principals have been doing together. If I am being truthful, I am a bit uncomfortable about it because I don't know what will be expected of me next year when it all starts and I have quite a lot of work on already.

According to Turner (2005) principals ought to implement strategies to create and maintain the commitment of the staff teams in all the collaborating schools. Involving staff at an early stage will help them see the value in the collaborative activity whilst helping promote an allegiance to it. In schools which seek to encourage more positive relations ensuring staff commitment is arguably even greater as it is important to prepare and support teachers as they move from teaching in single identity environments to mixed faith/cultural groups. Yet what is important in this research is that principals appeared have implemented few strategies to support teachers in this regard:

Are teachers prepared for collaboration and do they know what it might mean for them?

Principal: The teachers know about collaboration – I have talked to them about it but to be honest I think that a lot of the important discussions need to take place with us principals first. In terms of preparation: well I feel if you are a teacher then you teach. It shouldn't matter to you what colour the uniform or what background pupils come from you just go in there and teach. Luckily our staff is open to it and certainly don't see it as a problem at all- we just deliver the curriculum the same way as we would to our own pupils.

These comments are interesting for two reasons. Firstly, they suggest that collaboration may be

in danger of becoming ‘something that principals do’ rather than an initiative that will have an effect on the entire school. If teachers are excluded from discussions on collaboration it is likely that they will have little interest or motivation to get involved in it. Secondly, they illustrate the tendency of principals to underestimate the challenges of teaching pupils from across the religious /cultural divide. When schools are defined as ‘safe havens’ which are unaffected by sectarianism it is unlikely that teachers will believe that they need to place an emphasis on relationship building between mixed groups.

Yet not all of the schools had elected to make light of the challenge of teaching mixed religion groups. In five of the secondary schools some consideration had been given to the question of how to deal with mixed religion groups. In these schools the basis of the collaboration was different to that described above. Rather than bringing children together in school to complete an A’ level or GCSE subjects these children were involved in the Vocational Enhancement Programme and so attended the local Institute of Further Education one day per week with children from a range of other schools [across the religious divide] in the locality. A decision had been made amongst all of the schools that children would not wear their uniforms or display any symbol that might cause antagonism whilst they attended the Further Education Institute. This decision was taken mainly because Institutes of Further Education have a non-uniform policy and because courses which are undertaken by pupils such as mechanics, bricklaying or beauty therapy demanded that protective clothing was worn. But it was also taken because school uniforms automatically identify children’s faith/community background and this was believed to have the potential to create hostility between the pupils. Considerable efforts were also made to ensure that no pupil displayed any symbol which might be construed as offensive, as the VEP coordinator in one of the schools explained:

There is a ban on football shirts or uniforms or anything that might cause a problem between the students and we ensure that those in breach of that remove the offending item. I am not sure why we do it – it is just the rule and we don’t think too much about it –it is for the right reasons and it is about ensuring there is no provocation or arguments.

The determination to remove offensive items appears, at first glance, to be an entirely reasonable response to a potentially difficult situation. But that the decision seems to have been made more as an ‘automated’ response rather than with careful consideration of the issues at stake may eventually prove problematic. For example, forbidding symbols and other

markers of identity seem to reveal a desire on the part of staff to foster a neutral atmosphere in the Institute, however the extent to which such an atmosphere will engender real mutual understanding is debateable because in Northern Ireland biases and prejudices are often so ingrained that an action which is construed as sectarian or offensive by one group may not even be noticed by another. Thus, for teachers, who are operating on the basis of their own cultural and religious perspectives, there is considerable potential for inconsistent responses or reactions to behaviour. Therefore the need for open and honest dialogue between Protestants and Catholics as a means of coming to some consensus about what constitutes 'offensive' behaviour seems intrinsic to the effective operation of cross-sectoral teaching. If this does not take place then the potential exists for school policies to be developed which are not fully cognisant of the multiplicity of viewpoints (Donnelly, 2004).

Moreover, some consideration also needs to be given to the efficacy of a 'neutral' environment for creating a context where positive relationships and reconciliation may be established. The following comment from the VEP co-coordinator casts doubt on the current arrangements for facilitating understanding and tolerance:

The youngsters by and large want to be with their friends – they know each other's names and they will be polite but if I am honest they don't mix too well with the Catholics. They do spend about 2 years with each other but even at the end of that they are more comfortable with the people they know already- whether that is because they are from a different denomination or is that just human nature? I don't know.

Given that relations between the groups seem not to progress beyond the superficial during classroom encounters, perhaps questions need to be raised about the value of creating a neutral environment in schools if reconciliation is a desired outcome of collaboration. Whilst there is little doubt that the presentation of symbols which reflect one identity or another can engender discomfort and possibly cause hostility amongst pupils and teachers, it is also the case that the creation of an environment where symbols are worn and displayed openly can act as a catalyst for generating the debate and discussion around cultural differences which is so critical for fostering deeper relations and promoting reconciliation amongst the groups represented (Liechty and Clegg, 2001).

Whether schools seek to underplay cultural and religious differences or whether they are concerned to 'neutralise' the teaching environment, the effect on inter-group relationships is likely to be similar. Both approaches allow for the evolution of polite conversations but these

rather 'guarded interchanges' are unlikely to lead to the deeper relationships that can foster reconciliation between the groups [Allport, 1954; Connolly, 2000 Donnelly, 2004; Dixon et al 2005;]. Indeed, Liechty and Clegg (2001) in their analysis of sectarianism in Northern Ireland have consistently cautioned against the tendency to 'minimise difference' in mixed group encounters not least because it has the potential to actually harden boundaries by stifling the views of those who feel that they are different.

The responses of the schools to teaching mixed religion groups reveal some important questions about the capacity of educational professionals to really create the conditions that might lead to reconciliation. Teachers which are pressured by curricular and assessment targets often have little time to devote to the fostering of inter-group relationships and usually do not see this as an essential element of their job. In many ways this is not surprising. In a society where education is increasingly 'evocative of production regimes drawn from industry and ...where the objective is to ensure optimal outputs and zero defects in the educational product' (Morley and Rasool, 2000:10) any concern to promote values which will lead to tolerance or mutual understanding are likely to be marginalised in favour of 'measurable educational targets'. Thus it seems that if schools are to really capitalise on the opportunities for reconciliation that collaboration provides, they will need to be incentivised not just to establish cross-sectoral contact but also to create the conditions that will allow children from different backgrounds to develop meaningful relationships where the focus is on understanding their differences as well as similarities.

Risk taking and symbolic leadership: the potential for inter-community relationship building through collaboration?

The data presented thus far demonstrates the challenges that can exist when attempting to establish the type of inter-community relations that may lead to reconciliation between Protestant and Catholic pupils in schools in Northern Ireland. Rather than promoting reconciliation, the tradition of physical and psychological separation between the different school sectors combined with an unsympathetic policy environment seems to have created a fertile environment for suspicion and misconception to thrive. Whilst there is some evidence that collaboration has shifted the mindsets of teaching professionals the new types of collaborative structure is unlikely to eradicate entrenched attitudes in the short term.

Yet it was clear that collaboration had some potential to instil change in regard to relationship building, especially where school leaders were committed to establishing contact with other

sectors and where they had risked their own professional reputation to reach out to the 'other' community. This was particularly evident in two of the partnerships where principals were committed to challenging existing practices of separation. However it was the comments of a principal in a Protestant grammar school that best captured the opportunities that exists for promoting reconciliation through collaboration. He explained how he had opened himself and his school to considerable criticism from local politicians and parents when he made a potentially controversial decision to invite a senior politician from the Republic of Ireland to speak to sixth-form pupils.

My sixth formers approached me last year and asked me to invite XXXX. Initially my response was 'definitely not' as I just didn't know how that would go down either with the local DUP councillors or with the parents or staff. I didn't want to go there basically. But I couldn't get it out of my head and after a couple of days fretting about it I thought why not? – I suppose I thought 'here I am talking to them all about reaching out to Catholics and challenging themselves and I don't have the nerve to do it myself' so we went for it – XXXX came up here and talked to the sixth formers and you know it really paid off I think in terms of breaking down the stereotypes that the other Catholic schools in the area had of me and this school that was one of the best things....

Indeed, the extent to which it 'paid off' was explained by one of the principals in the neighbouring Catholic grammar school who was effusive in his praise and suggested that the decision of the headmaster had been critical in establishing the trust to promote collaborative links:

That was a brave decision and the anticipated hostility never happened - there was one complaint from a parent but that was dealt with and the problems with the council were equally well managed and didn't constitute any real problem in the end. This type of thing takes schools to a new place... it used to be that it was just believed that people would never agree or support these things but that is gone and schools can venture out without fear of their own constituency giving them problems. In terms of some concrete evidence of how it has affected things we are now planning to teach one A' level collaboratively from 2009 and I would say that decision is a direct result of his actions...

Whilst it is difficult to overestimate the barriers that many schools will have to address before they can get to the 'new place' described by the principal above, this example shows what is possible in education in Northern Ireland and suggests that with greater support and a more

conducive political climate, school leaders will be able to take advantage of the opportunities to develop relationships across the denominational divide. The importance of fostering trust, as a first step in organisational collaboration, has been well documented in the literature (McMeeking et al, 2004; Williamson, 1985) but it is clear from this example that when school leaders have the courage to take risks to reach out to others then trust is a natural outcome.

Conclusion

The research presented in this report was undertaken within an evolving policy context which demands that schools establish collaborative relationships if they are to provide pupils with full access to the range of courses specified within the curriculum. The aim of the research was to examine the nature and depth of school collaboration and to explore the extent to which new collaborative educational structures have the potential to promote reconciliation between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland.

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, the study has shown that whilst collaboration is at an embryonic stage, considerable efforts have already been made by schools to prepare for it, and that the type of collaboration engaged in is not simply confined to tokenistic or superficial 'links' but many schools are actively preparing to develop substantial and durable relationships so as to provide children with access to the curriculum.

Whilst teachers and governors are generally supportive of the *principle* of school collaboration, the data has shown that its effective implementation can be impaired by a range of practical and logistical factors including timetabling, distance and transport. Notwithstanding the importance of these 'operational' issues, there also appear to be a range of other matters that influence the collaborative process. These include the leadership capacity of the head teacher and their willingness both to make links with other schools and their ability to involve teaching staff [outside of the senior management team] in the collaborative venture.

The sector in which the school was located seemed to exert a key influence on collaboration. For example, only 35% of the schools that responded to the questionnaire reported collaborating with a school that took a different approach to academic selection than their own and there was some limited qualitative evidence to suggest that schools in the integrated sector were finding it difficult to establish collaborative relations with any post primary school in their locality.

Aside from these 'inter-sectoral' impediments, there were other concerns, outside of the schools' immediate control, that were also deemed to influence the construction of collaborative relationships. For example, it was clear that the current uncertainty with regard to academic selection, the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority and the threat of school closure arising from the Independent and Strategic Review of Education (2006) were all dampening enthusiasm for collaboration. In time these issues are likely to be resolved, but it is apparent from the research that schools need to be kept well informed of policy developments through training days, or through other forms of information dissemination, if collaboration is not to become part of the 'initiative overload' that schools are currently grappling with. There is also evidence that the wider 'managerialist' agenda in education which endorses competition, performance measurement and marketisation, serves to undermine attempts to establish collaborative relationships. Indeed, the detrimental influence of current measures of performance was made particularly clear when participants reflected on the potential of collaboration to promote reconciliation between the main communities: Participants consistently reported that relationship building or promoting reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics was not their priority because it is not specified as a key target by the Department of Education. Thus if collaboration is to really take hold in schools some consideration needs to be paid to measures of performance as well as the flow of resources to schools as both appear to stimulate competitive rather than collaborative behaviour.

Yet it is not just an unsympathetic policy environment that seemed to affect cross-sectoral collaboration. Despite the fact that the survey showed that over 60% of schools had collaborated with a school outside of their denomination, this was not supported by the qualitative data. Rather, this more in-depth analysis suggested that the long standing practices of social and cultural segregation in Northern Ireland continue to exercise a defining influence on the nature of relationship building between different school types. There was for example, a discernible reticence amongst principals to engage collaboratively with schools outside of their faith /denomination which seemed to be driven by a general misapprehension of the values and ethos promoted by the 'other' school sectors. The experiences reported indicated a clear need for groups to inform and educate each other about their respective educational 'ethos' and the values that are promoted within schools as a means of dispelling some of the misconceptions that serve to embed segregation. There also appears to be a need for extensive training and education of participants engaging in cross-sectoral collaboration if inter-school collaboration is to lead to greater understanding and reconciliation between the two communities in Northern Ireland.

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