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Shared Education and collaboration between schools in a contested space setting

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Introduction

In 2011 the Interface/Contested Spaces Programme was launched. This programme, funded jointly by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister and Atlantic Philanthropies was designed to improve relations between and across disadvantaged contested space/interface communities. The programme, over two phases ran between 2011 and 2015. In the first phase of the programme (2011 - 2014) there were five projects supported by the fund and four additional projects were funded in a second phase (2012 – 2015). The programme encouraged groups such as schools, youth service providers and community/voluntary organisations to establish projects that could address need, encourage reconciliation and contribute to better outcomes for children, young people and families. Four areas were supported by a fund of £4m: early years and parenting programmes; shared space targeted and delivered through schools; interface youth engagement programmes aimed at young adults; and shared neighbourhood programmes targeted at families. To be eligible for funding, projects needed to involve groups and organisations representing both sides of the two main traditions. Each project had to be supported by a lead organisation which could evidence a background in one or more of the four outcome areas discussed above. Crucially projects had to be located in contested space settings which were within the 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland as measured by the Noble Indices.

The Sharing Education Programme based at the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast acted as a lead organisation and supported the formation of a new school partnership in the City of Derry/Londonderry. The Foyle Contested Space Education Partnership formed in the spring of 2011 and comprised of eight schools - five primary and three post-primary. Many of the schools in the partnership, in the past, had been involved cross sectoral initiatives such as the Sharing Education Programme or as part of the local Area Learning Community, for more details see Duffy and Gallagher (2015).

From September 2011 to June 2014 a total of 1161 pupils ranging from year 5 through to year 10 were involved in weekly shared learning classes within the partnership. There were eight Principals, three vice principals, thirty five

teachers (29 primary and 6 post-primary) and an external primary co-ordinator involved in the management, coordination and teaching within the partnership.

The development of a shared education programme

In order to be eligible for funds from the Interface/Contested Space programme, the schools were required to consider their local and social context within which they were situated as the basis of partnership working. There was an onus on schools to address community relations particularly in contested space settings and consider the various symptoms that invariably emerge in locations where there is high deprivation. As part of establishing the remit of the partnership, educators also wanted to explore health issues with pupils and in particular expressed concerns about the types of pressures children and young people faced in regards to alcohol, drugs, solvents and cigarettes. Teachers and leaders also wanted to encourage young people to adopt healthy lifestyles and develop pro-social attitudes. Concomitantly, the post primary schools agreed that there was a need to address healthy lifestyles and in particular sexual health and resilience whereas the primary schools agreed that they could focus on promoting healthy lifestyles more generally.

Concerns about pupils being involved in substance misuse and anti-social behaviour across the city, prompted the schools to invite a representative from the PSNI to join the steering group that was set up to define the remit of the partnership. In doing so the PSNI representative was able to corroborate anxieties, revealing that street drinking amongst teenagers was problematic in the city and often issues of anti-social behaviour resulted from this. The schools also agreed that the pervasiveness of the internet, social media and smart phone technology meant that pupils faced new and often evolving pressures to remain safe and also act appropriately whilst on-line. As a result the partnership agreed to explore five social themes using a shared education approach:

- **Improving community relations in a contested space setting**
- **Anti-social behaviour**
- **Substance misuse**
- **Health, sexual health and resilience**
- **Appropriate and safe use of the internet and social media**

These five social themes were located within the curricular areas of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding [PDMU] for primary pupils and Learning for Life and Work for post primary pupils.

Methodology

The research undertaken between April 2011 and June 2014 employed a multiple-case study design. While there was a single partnership involving 8 schools, unified by a partnership infrastructure, collaboration between teachers and leaders and a curricular programme, for practical purposes the partnership created 4 sub-partnerships within the larger network structure outlined in Table 1 below.

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| Case Study 1 | Primary School 1 (Controlled) | Primary School 2 (Maintained) |
| Case Study 2 | Primary School 3 (Controlled) Primary School 5 (Controlled) | Primary School 4 (Maintained) |
| Case Study 3 | Post Primary School 6 (Controlled) | Post Primary School 7 (Maintained) |
| Case Study 4 | Post Primary School 6 (Controlled) | Post Primary School 8 (Maintained) |

Table 1: Multiple case studies

In each of the case studies the authors carried out ethnographic observations in schools and other venues across the contested space setting. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were also conducted in each of the schools. Participants included school leaders, teachers, partnership co-ordinators, pupils and parents. In the primary schools, formal focus groups or interviews with pupils did not take place. Instead, informal or unstructured interviewing (Fontana and Frey, 2005) captured conversations between the researcher and pupil which took place during observations of shared lessons.

The study sought to understand more about what constitutes collaborative effectiveness and as such applied, in particular, contributions made by Katz et al. (2008); Katz et al. (2009) and Katz and Earl, (2010) and others such as Atkinson et al. (2007); Head (2003); Higham and Yeomans (2009); Hodgson and Spours (2006); Woods et al. (2006); Wenger (1998) all of which propose characteristics which can be used to assess the effectiveness of a collaborative model in educational contexts. Katz et al however also argue that these characteristics should be evident in the practices and structures of within individual schools and between collaborating schools to effect school improvement and positive changes in pupil learning.

Social Impact

The study explored the context of contested space with participants, where the two main traditions are separated by a river, political, cultural and religious differences and institutional differentiation - keenly exacerbated by separate schooling. Participants described, prior to sharing and collaboration, prejudices that they would have held about the other community and anxieties about travelling across the contested space. The study however, highlights how the partnership has changed the nature of the contested space by reframing separate schools as a cross-sectoral network in which pupils from different community backgrounds learn together and forge new relationships and where educators, through collaboration, have opportunities to develop new professional and personal connections. Moving between schools meant that pupils and educators travelled through the contested space into each other's communities, thus challenging the idea of 'bounded contentment,' proposed by Roche (2009). As a consequence, participants talked about how anxieties and prejudices reduced and how the felt experience of visiting schools in the other community and learning together normalised over time.

Pupils described various types of relationships with each other and their definition of friendship was quite flexible. In focus groups and during classroom observations, pupils were keen to demonstrate how many of the pupils from the other school that they knew by name, but these relationships appeared to be confined to shared lessons and more akin to acquaintances than friends. Other students described closer relationships with pupils from the other school which tended to emerge from groups of pupils that remained together over more sustained periods. A minority described existing friendships beyond school and many pupils described sustaining relationships via social media. Educators described particularly positive relationships with one another; frequently describing both personal and professional

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relationships that emerged through working together. Observations across all schools revealed an abundance of evidence of developing social relationships. Teachers sat together, conversed and joked together, shared breaks and lunchtimes with each other. Significantly beyond the remit of the programme and further outside of the school context teachers talked about texting and emailing each other in the evenings and weekends. In some cases staff described socialising outside of school including having drinks and meals together.

The study also describes how the partnership engaged parents, largely through hosting parental events such as information seminars and showcase events which highlighted their children's shared learning experiences together and the curricular focus and social need themes adopted by the partnership. Parents from both sides of the community were encouraged to visit schools and other venues, such as theatres and hotels on both sides of the river, thus encouraging parents to move across the contested space.

Connections between schools and community services improved as a consequence of collaboration. In the course of addressing social themes as the basis of the shared education project, schools sought the expertise of community based agencies to help build the capacity of teachers and assist with the delivery of shared lessons. Schools connected to a wide variety of agencies including health professionals, city council officials, other educational bodies and various voluntary agencies. One connection of note was the relationship that developed between schools and the PSNI and in particular the relationship that developed between the police and maintained schools. This is significant given the historical and political blockages and general levels of mistrust that existed in many Catholic communities especially during the period of the troubles. By default the police found it difficult to access maintained schools. The study describes the key role played by the PSNI in terms of sitting on the partnership steering committee, working with teachers and advising around the social need themes and presenting to pupils in shared classrooms.

There are various examples of joined up approaches in cities where schools play an important role in responding to social needs and challenges; for example the Promise Neighbourhood Initiative in cities such as New York (Harlem) and Los-Angeles (Youth Policy Initiative, 2013) or Children's zones as described by Dyson et al (2013). The schools in this study have devised a model of shared education that addresses social needs across a city. This type of model is innovative and relatively uncommon in Northern Ireland in that it involves an entire network of schools, which are cross phase and cross sectoral working together in the same city setting. As such the schools could collectively be thought of as a type of social partnership which according to Billet et al. (2005) is a localised network which connects local community groups such as education and training and other agencies such as governmental and non-governmental with the aim of addressing social issues and building social capital.

Educational Impact

The study also reveals the educational impact of the partnership. Pupils highlighted how shared education was both engaging and enjoyable; pupils described looking forward to traveling to and learning in each other's schools, with some suggesting that shared lessons were the most enjoyable element of the school week. The broader study provides descriptive vignettes of shared lessons, describing pedagogical approaches and then reflections from pupils which emphasise the impactful nature of lessons. Some pupils described enjoying shared learning because often pedagogical approaches were informal and more relaxed than lessons in their own school. Others talked about the methods teachers used in particular active methodologies and the opportunities to engage in group work, discussions, debates and games as ways of exploring the social themes. Pupils also highlight the impact of having external agencies present in classrooms. Pupils highlighted the impact of the PSNI and CEOP teams as the most memorable and engaging elements of shared learning.

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The study describes the importance of the partnership infrastructure that was created; comprising of school leaders, teachers and external members, this infrastructure helps crystallise a collective identity between the 8 schools and establish the remit for collaboration. But, while the partnership draws leadership and direction from this steering group, there was evidence of leadership being distributed. In particular teachers at the primary and post primary levels assumed much of the co-ordination of the partnership on the ground including planning, creating resources, teaching, organising travel thus freeing up senior leaders to oversee the partnership at a more strategic level. In doing so some teaching staff describe feeling entrusted and respected to make important decisions about logistics and curricular development within the partnership.

Teachers talked about the challenges of addressing controversial or contentious issues in the classroom. Given the social needs focus of the project, many of the themes addressed in shared classrooms were challenging topics. Interestingly, for some, the most challenging themes were not around themes such as substance misuse or sexual health, rather how to talk about religious or political themes in shared learning environments. Staff highlighted the importance of engaging with external agencies to build their capacities particularly around challenging topics.

Furthermore the study revealed how collaboration between leaders and teachers helped create mutually supportive environs between schools, where educators helped each other to professionally develop because they could avail of resources and expertise and garner support from one another. Leaders and teachers described how collaboration between schools mitigated the impact of professional and sectoral isolation. Staff describe how new mechanisms were established to both review partnership progress and support teacher capacity including: end of academic year reviews at both primary and post primary levels; new teacher orientation and lesson planning events (primary schools); weekly co-ordinators meetings (post-primary); staff training events; support from external agencies and informal networks between teachers.

Lastly the study describes a significant example of how school collaboration can lead to school improvement. During the period of data collection, the controlled post primary school in the partnership had been placed in formal intervention by the Education and Training Inspectorate [ETI]. Its science department was deemed inadequate after inspection. In response, one of the partner schools (maintained) - a specialist science school, offered to assist the controlled school in terms of improving its science provision. The specialist science school made its head of department, science teachers and resources available to controlled school. Staff from both schools met regularly to share practice. Each of the school leaders at interview argued that this level of collaboration could only have happened because of the existing relationship and trust which had developed between teachers and school leaders, over time. When the inspectorate returned the science department was assessed and given the status of outstanding. The school leaders at interview attributed this improvement as a direct consequence of collaboration between the schools. A culture of collaboration, whereby schools share expertise and resources, has emerged between the three post primary schools. Importantly collaboration has broadened beyond the remit of the contested space programme and is evident in other curricular areas and departments, particularly, with the controlled school offering expertise the maintained schools around approaches to special needs and all three schools exploring how to develop middle management.

A model of effective collaboration

The data presented in this study provides strong evidence that the partnership was able to demonstrate the type of characteristics associated with effective collaboration. Each of the characteristics identified in the Katz et al. (2008) Networked Learning Theory of Action and other related literature was evident in this study. For educators there was a clear sense of agreement as to the *purpose and foci of the partnership*. A variety of *relationships* developed within the

partnership; these were vital in terms providing conduits for information, expertise and resources to flow between individuals and schools but also in helping reduce anxieties and prejudices about each other through personal relationships. Collaboration between the schools was of good *quality* and the *activities* were intense between teachers and leaders. Collaboration occurred on multiple levels, in particular between school leaders and between teachers. The data demonstrated the educational participants were *reflective about their collaborative practice* and there were a wealth of opportunities in which educators reviewed and assessed this type of practice, through weekly meetings between teachers, annual review mechanisms, forms of assessment and evaluation and through regular steering group meetings and leader meetings. In terms of leadership both formal and informal structures were created to oversee the partnership. Strong professional and personal relationships were evident in data collected. Some school leaders described their job as being isolated or lonely and being able to connect with other leaders helped offset this. School leaders in this study were particularly central to and supportive of collaboration, this level of involvement provided institutional approval to the partnership. *Leadership* within the partnership was not confined at the senior level. Teaching staff and especially coordinators indicated that there was a level of trust conferred upon them to undertake the daily management of the partnership. In some cases staff from partner schools talked about being trusted by the leader in the partner school. Lastly there was a wealth of evidence describing how teacher's *capacity and professional development* was being addressed. In particular the strategy of working with external statutory and voluntary agencies in the community was important, in terms of providing teacher with resources and strategies to address some of the more challenging issues deriving from the need themes.

Systemic impact – challenging existing structures

The model of partnership supported by the Sharing Education Programme described in this study is based on the premise of pupils learning together and educators working together over sustained periods of time. Importantly, many of the schools involved in this partnership, particularly the post primary schools, have sustained close institutional relationships over many years and the contested space partnership is best thought of as having evolved from this sustained collaboration. The collaborative activities between teachers and leaders and shared learning between pupils, given that they stem from the curriculum and focus on local context, align more closely to the core priorities of schools. In the case of this study and other shared education partnerships, (Duffy and Gallagher, 2015) sustained cross-sectoral collaboration between schools begins to blur the sectoral boundaries that exist in the Northern Ireland system; as a series of sustainable bridging mechanisms (Duffy and Gallagher, 2014) are forged between the sectors including personal and professional relationships, teacher/leader networks, innovative approaches to curriculum, exchange of resources, expertise and capacity building opportunities.

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