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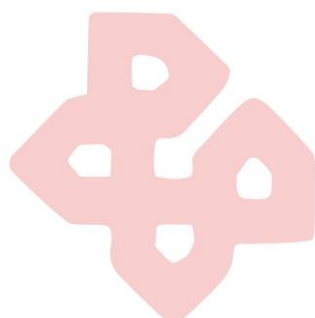
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TROUBLES, TRANSFORMATION AND TENSION: EDUCATION POLICY, RELIGIOUS SEGREGATION AND INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Problemas, transformación y tensión: política educativa, segregación religiosa y formación inicial del profesorado en Irlanda del Norte



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Abstract:

It is now over 20 years since the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement and the ending of conflict or the 'troubles', as the conflict is referred to in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, as a post-conflict society Northern Ireland remains deeply divided in social, cultural and religious terms. This division is reflected, if not sustained, by the continued segregated nature of the structures and institutions of education, including those related to initial teacher education. This article adopts a critical policy analysis, drawing on primary source survey data, to understand, explore and reflect on the nature and existence of these divisions. Further, in reflecting on the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement as a consociational settlement, the article considers the inherent tension of a peace process built on the very religious ethno-national divisions, including those pertaining to education, it is ultimately seeking to integrate. The article concludes that any desired systemic change and inculcation of values associated with the building of harmony, tolerance and mutual respect, as reflected for example in student teacher competences, is discursively emasculated by policy and practice still largely based on religious ethno-national division and segregation.

Key Words: Consociationalism, Northern Ireland, Segregation, Teacher Education

Resumen:

Hace más de 20 años desde la firma del Acuerdo de Belfast (Good Friday) y el final del conflicto o los 'problemas', en Irlanda del Norte. Sin embargo, como una sociedad post-conflicto, Irlanda del Norte sigue profundamente dividida en términos sociales, culturales y religiosos. Esta división se refleja, si no se mantiene, en el carácter segregado de las estructuras e instituciones educativas, incluidas las relacionadas con la formación inicial de los docentes. Este artículo adopta un análisis crítico de políticas, basado en datos de encuestas de fuentes primarias, para comprender, explorar y reflexionar sobre la naturaleza y existencia de estas divisiones. Además, al reflexionar sobre el Acuerdo de Belfast (Good Friday) como un acuerdo consociacional, el artículo considera la tensión inherente a un proceso de paz basado en las divisiones étnico-nacionales muy religiosas, incluidas las relativas a la educación, que en última instancia está tratando de integrar. El artículo concluye que cualquier cambio sistémico deseado y la inculcación de valores asociados con la construcción de la armonía, la tolerancia y el respeto mutuo, como se refleja, por ejemplo, en las competencias de los estudiantes de pedagogía, se ve castrado discursivamente por las políticas y las prácticas que todavía se basan en gran medida en la división y la segregación étnico-nacional religiosa.

Palabras clave: política de la educación, conflicto social, segregación, formación del profesorado, Irlanda del Norte

1. Introduction

Northern Ireland, despite over 20 years of peace following the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, remains a deeply divided society; a division which is historically marked and manifest in relation to contested and broadly defined religious ethno-national identities. In very general essentialist terms, the division pertains to those holding to an identity with a cultural and political desire to remain part of the United Kingdom (namely: Unionist/Loyalist/Protestant) or one which desires to reunify Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland (namely: Nationalist/Republican/Catholic) (McCully and Clarke, 2016). These religious ethno-national identities continue to be reproduced at every level of society including where people chose to live. For example, according to the last available census data, in 2011, 37% of electoral wards (geo-political areas of settlement) were single identity with 80% or more of the residents either Protestant or Catholic (NISRA 2011.). Moreover, even in more religiously mixed neighbourhoods, residents were found to self-segregate in housing settlement on the basis of religion (NISRA 2011). As McCully and Clarke (2016) observe, at all levels of this divided society constructs are fostered within families and communities, and are reinforced through structures and institutions, which are often mutually exclusive and this includes education.

A critical understanding of education policy and its structural and institutional forms and processes, including those of initial teacher education, is of particular significance in the context of Northern Ireland as a divided, post-conflict society. In terms of policies and practices, schools, colleges and universities are able to discursively position themselves and operate explicitly or implicitly in ways which have the potential to (re)produce, create and convey socio-cultural identity forming narratives which help define and redefine 'individual and collective identities as well as the boundaries between communities (Fontana, 2017, 39). In this sense education,

including initial teacher education, can equally function to either help achieve social equality and maintain peace in a divided post-conflict society, or else sustain and reproduce the very discourses, beliefs and behaviour which create and underpin divisions and generate conflict.

In relation to the current policy context in which education and initial education are located, The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998) established a complex consociation as a mechanism to regulate and manage the peace in Northern Ireland. The consociational agreement (discussed in greater detail later in the article) is premised on the 'institutional assumption of two communities separate but equal living in peaceful coexistence' (Fontana, 2017, 86).

This article applies a critical policy analysis (Diem, Young, and Sampson, 2019), drawing on hard to access initial teacher education student profile data, to explore the potential tension between the consociational Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998), the continued divided and segregated nature of education, including the delivery of initial teacher education, and the implications for social equality and peace in Northern Ireland.

2. Methodology

Critical policy analysis (CPA) provides a methodological engagement with policy which doesn't view policy as a single entity or a set of directives or mandates from a central governing body (Diem, Young and Sampson, 2019). Rather, policy refers to: a multiplicity of 'material' and 'technical' forms such as specific programmes, practices and institutions...alongside, for example, practices of advocacy, sponsorship, strategic support and finance which, enable and shape such material and technical forms (Bailey, 2013).

From a CPA perspective, policy is thus perceived as a process which enables and facilitates the transition of principles or ideas in practice (Ham and Hill, 1993). In particular, CPA deems policy as needing to be viewed as related to specific social and historical conditions. As stated by Diem & Young (2015) critical policy researchers engage in critique, interrogate the policy process, and the epistemological roots of policy work, examine the players involved in the policy process, and reveal policy constructions.

CPA is thus concerned with policy origins, context and processes and the ideas and values underpinning the structures, contents, and implications of policy, especially in relation to social justice and equity. Ranson (1995, 440) in addressing the purpose of policy for governments sees it as being to 'codify and publicize the values which are to inform future practice and thus encapsulate prescriptions for reform'. Similarly, for Olssen et al. (2004, 72) who situate policy as 'taken to be any course of action ... relating to the selection of goals, the definition of values or the allocation of resources'. In this sense a critical understanding of policy is related not simply to values, but governance and even more explicitly 'the exercise of political power and

the language [discourse] that is used to legitimate that process' (Olssen et al., 2004, 72). As Ball (1998: 124) notes 'policies are ... ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions', and as such they speak directly to the relationship between the state and the welfare of its citizens (Hill, 1996). Thus for CPA researchers, the concept of policy is entangled with notions of public and social issues, the solutions to these, and the role of the state in providing these solutions. Education policy in turn, represents an important site for the 'playing out' of political control and authority over the very nature of education, including initial teacher education, how it should be structured and which processes and practices are to be endorsed and which ones neglected, in different contexts of practice (Ward et al., 2016). Moreover, precisely because policy is bound up with a discourse of the state and the exercise of political power, discourses around education policy and initial teacher education that are supported by governments (either directly or indirectly) tend to dominate debate and prevail (Ward et al., 2016)

The primary foci of CPA in this article is education policy and initial teacher education in Northern Ireland and the discursive policy framing of this provision as part of the wider consociational Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998). It seeks to critically reflect on the complexity of the current policy context and the problematic ways in which the consociational settlement seeks to manage the peace in a deeply divided post-conflict society by harnessing existing Protestant and Catholic divisions. In effect, discursively supporting the maintenance of a system of educational segregation seemingly for the public good.

The CPA undertaken is augmented by primary source survey data obtained from the four higher education, initial teacher education providers in Northern Ireland. The data pertaining to student teacher profile is not publically available, with each institution holding its own information. Moreover, perhaps understandably, such data particularly related to religious background remains highly politically sensitive, and therefore especially difficult to access. For the purposes of this article individual requests were sent to the Human Resource Department of each of the initial teacher education providers. As the author is from one of those institutions the request was sent from their Human Resource Department to the three others. The three institutions were asked for current data related to admission numbers, and religion. The data from the three institutions was subsequently released on the basis that they were provided with the same data from the author's institution.

3. Findings

3.1. Segregated Education in Northern Ireland

Following the 1921 partition of the island of Ireland and the establishment of the Republic of Ireland as a country separate from Northern Ireland, which continued as part of the United Kingdom, the initial policy goal of the Ministry of Education in Northern Ireland was the creation of a state-controlled public and largely secular

education system akin to that operating in Great Britain. The notion of state control and secularisation of what in the 1920s was elementary schooling, was vigorously opposed by both Catholic and Protestant churches (Montgomery and Smith, 2006). Consequently, what emerged was a segregated and denominationally divided dual system of schooling whereby the Protestant community chose to send their children to state controlled Protestant schools and the Catholic community chose to attend Catholic voluntary maintained schools, with both sets of schools funded by the state (Montgomery and Smith, 2006). This system of denominationally segregated schooling is largely the system which continues to be in place in Northern Ireland today. In terms of school choice Protestant and Catholic parents, while free to choose to send their child to any school, in the main self-select one which predominantly reflects their own denominational and religious background and the wider existing divisions in society

Moreover, the system of post-primary education in Northern Ireland is one based on academic selection. At the end of key stage 2 at the age of 11 all pupils sit written tests in English, mathematics and science. The top 30% performing pupils subsequently gain a place in an academically selective Protestant or Catholic grammar school, while the remaining 70% of pupils will attend a Protestant or Catholic secondary school. This selective system mirrors the system adopted in England and Wales in the 1940s, and which was largely abolished in the 1970s on the basis of fairness and social equality. (A political move towards the abolition of selective education in Northern Ireland was halted in 1979 with the election of a Conservative UK government).

It is this academically selective and religiously segregated system of education which is serviced by initial teacher education in Northern Ireland.

3.2. Initial Teacher Education

Previous research (Hagan and Mc Glynn, 2004; Montgomery and Smith, 2006) suggests that student teachers on initial teacher education programmes in Northern Ireland have, in the vast majority of cases, attended grammar or secondary schools in Northern Ireland. They are admitted to programmes, in the case of primary school (BEd) initial teacher education, following their A' levels (usually taken in a grammar school) and in the case of post-primary school (PGCE) initial education programmes after completing a degree (Hagan and Mc Glynn, 2004; Montgomery and Smith, 2006).

Competition for teacher education places is high with each initial teacher education provider afforded an annual intake quota by the Department of Education, Northern Ireland. In recruiting students to teaching programmes entry requirements in relation to A' levels or degree qualifications tends therefore to be relatively high (Ross and Hutchings 2003).

Montgomery and Smith (2006, 52), refer to what they term the 'closed nature of the system', in terms of the homogeneity in the pre-University or College experiences of student teachers. This homogeneity is due to that fact that the majority of student teachers prior to enrolment will have attended schools in an academically selective and religiously separate system. As a consequence, it likely their contact with

students from cultural, social and religious backgrounds different to themselves will have been limited (Montgomery and Smith, 2006).

In Northern Ireland initial teacher education is undertaken by four providers: St Mary’s University College, Stranmillis University College, Ulster University and Queen’s University Belfast. The nature of the provision between these four providers is demarcated according to phase of education. Consequently, St Mary’s University College, and Stranmillis University College, offer a four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) programmes educating teachers predominantly for the primary school sector. Whilst Ulster University and Queen’s University Belfast, offer a 1-year Postgraduate General Certificate in Education (PGCE) tprogrammes for those seeking to teach in the post primary (ie grammar or secondary school) sector.

The breakdown of the total number of student teachers enrolling on the programmes at the four institutions, for the period 2019-2020, is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
2019/20 Approved Intakes.

Phase	Primary				Post Primary			TOTALS	
	Route	BEd	PGCE	PGCE (IRISH MEDIUM)	PGCE (EARLY YEARS)	BEd	PGCE		PGCE (IRISH MEDIUM)
Stranmillis		95			15	50			160
St Mary’s		94		20		49			163
Queen’s							131	7	138
Ulster			33				83	1	117
Total by route		189	33	20	15	99	214	8	578
Totals by phase		257				321			578

The Department of Education in Northern Ireland determines the student teacher quota for each provider, with Table 1 showing that in the academic year 2019-2020, a total of 578 student teachers entered initial teacher education in Northern Ireland with 323 embarking on a 4-year primary pathway and 255 enrolling on 1-year post-primary (grammar and secondary) school focussed programmes. In the data below (Table 2) the enrolment figures are scrutinised in relation to the religious background of the student teacher population.

Table 2
Religious Diversity of Students on ITT Courses in Northern Ireland 2017-2018.

Provider

Religion %	Stranmillis	Queen's	St Mary's	Ulster
Protestant	64.6	41.5	0.8	41.8
Catholic	23.7	44.7	96	44.6
Other	8.5	0.8	1.3	9
No Religion	2.3	7.7	0.2	4.6
Not stated	0.2	1.5		
Not collected (NI only)	0.7	3.8	1.7	
Total	100	100	100	100

In line with previous research (Montgomery and Smith 2006) the data shows the majority of those enrolled in teacher education to be from one of the two dominant religious communities represented in Northern Ireland, Protestant or Catholic. Furthermore, in terms of religious segregation in relation to initial teacher education in Northern Ireland, there is an apparent divide between providers and their location in the primary and post-primary sectors. In essence, the primary initial teacher education providers, St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College are markedly more segregated, with the former predominantly Catholic, the latter predominantly Protestant.

In order to understand this segregation, it is important to consider the history and ethos of each provider, along with the implications for the student teacher admissions profile, the associated student teacher placement, and subsequently teacher employment. As shown in Table 1, initial education provision can be divided between those providers preparing students for primary teaching and those preparing for jobs in the post-primary, grammar and secondary school sector. As Table 2 reveals the majority of students on primary initial teacher education programmes attend higher education institutions which reflect their own religious background. In essence Catholic students choose to attend St Mary's and Protestants choose to attend Stranmillis. In relation to the post primary sector and attendance at one of the two universities religious intakes can be seen to be much more mixed. This finding reflects an observation made by the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland some 12 years previously when they observed, that St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College draw 'predominantly from one or other tradition' whereas Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University 'have a more balanced intake' (ETI 2007, 7). The fact that the current data aligns with findings from 12 years ago not only reinforces those findings but more importantly signals how relatively little has changed.

Nelson (2010, 3) in reflecting on student choice, in relation to the underpinning ethos of initial teacher education providers, and borrowing in part from Alexander and McLaughlin (2003), heuristically delineates between those which might be labelled 'religiously tethered, religiously influenced and secular'. St Mary's University College

is subsequently considered to be a ‘religiously tethered’ institution, working explicitly within the Catholic tradition. It is important to note that the College does operate an open admissions policy and does not discriminate in the selection of students on the basis of their religion. Nevertheless, given its understandable Catholic ethos and pedagogy, the College, operating in the context of an already religiously divided Northern Ireland society, means as Nelson (2010, 3) notes, ‘its ability to attract students from Protestant backgrounds, other religious backgrounds or those of no religion is limited.’

Stranmillis University College is labelled by Nelson (2010) as having an ethos which can be described as ‘religiously influenced’. The College was initially intended in the early years following Irish partition to be a common teacher education institution. However, as the education system in Northern Ireland segregated along religious lines, so the Protestant clergy took positions of influence on the College’s governing body (Beale and Phoenix, 1998). Consequently, as Nelson (2010, 4) observes for all intents and purposes at that time ‘Stranmillis College became a Protestant college for the preparation of Protestant teachers to teach Protestant children’. It is important to note that significant governance changes in the last 15 years in relation to the reduced representation of Protestant clergy have modified this position; while the influence of Protestantism continues and the religious background of students remain in the main Protestant, there is, in comparing data from previous studies (see for example, Nelson, 2010), some evidence of an increasing trend towards a more denominationally balanced intake. Recent developments would suggest that this trend is likely to continue, as from 2019 Stranmillis will be able to directly deliver to students the Certificate in Religious Education, the qualification needed to get a job in a Catholic primary or nursery school in Northern Ireland. The expected outcome of which is that more students from a Catholic background will attend Stranmillis. As in the case of St Mary’s, Stranmillis operates an open admissions policy which does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, religion or disability.

In the case of Queens University Belfast and Ulster University their intake in terms of religious background can be seen (Table 2) as largely balanced between Protestant and Catholic, and in line with the vast majority of Universities providing initial teacher education programmes in the rest of the United Kingdom, may be described as secular (Nelson, 2010).

The differentiation in student teacher profile presented by the four initial teacher education providers, whilst important to illuminate, needs to be located and understood within a wider frame of student teacher placement and employment.

3.3. Student Teacher Placements and Employment

The notion of religious segregation occurring in relation to the history and ethos of a particular initial teacher education provider is potentially further systemically embedded if one considers school placements and partnerships. In effect, as part of their teacher education programme all student teachers undertake a practical school-based aspect of the course. This means students spending a specified period of time

in a pre-selected primary or post primary (i. e. grammar or secondary school) setting. The ways in which institutions determine which school students attend varies, with differing degrees of emphasis given to student preference and programme of study. As Nelson (2010) notes:

In both cases the outcome is roughly the same: student teachers from Catholic backgrounds, educated in Catholic schools, carry out their school placements in Catholic schools and Protestant students, educated in state controlled or voluntary grammar schools, carry out their placements in state controlled or voluntary grammar schools. (Nelson, 2010, 6)

This raises the issue that even in those University institutions which appear to have a more broadly balanced religious student teacher profile when in the University (see Table 2), these same student teachers subsequently self-segregate on the basis of religion when it comes to their own school placement.

Moreover, the majority of newly qualified teachers apply for and ultimately secure positions of employment in primary or grammar/secondary schools aligned with their religious background. Namely, Protestant teachers seek and find positions in the 'controlled' or state sector Protestant schools and newly qualified Catholic teachers seek and find positions in the 'maintained' Catholic school sector. Recently published data from Milliken (2019), shows that only 2% of teachers in Catholic primary schools are currently from a Protestant background, while only 7% of teachers in Protestant primary schools are from a Catholic background. In terms of post-primaries only 8% of teachers in Catholic post-primaries are currently from a Protestant background, with only 17% of teachers in Protestant post-primaries schools from a Catholic background (Milliken, 2019).

In summary, if we consider the career development of primary teachers in Northern Ireland based on the above findings it is likely that a student will go to a primary and then a post-primary school from their own religious background. They will then attend a primary initial teacher education programme at a college where the majority of other students are from their own religious background and undertake a student teacher training placement in a school of the same religious denomination as themselves. Finally, they will take a teaching post and spend the remainder of their professional career teaching in a school from the same religious community. As Montgomery and Smith (2006, 52) similarly summarised their research, 'the continuing pattern of recruitment to teacher education institutions and schools means that it is extremely likely that students completing...courses in Northern Ireland have had quite separate experiences of schooling, teacher education and, indeed, employment'

Furthermore, as Milliken (2019) observes, the continued segregation in teacher employment is compounded and legitimised by the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 ('FETO 1998'), which in recognition of the de facto denominational divide between schools, affords a legal exemption in relation to equality of opportunity and employment. In effect, FETO (1998) allows primary and grammar/secondary schools to lawfully discriminate on the grounds of religious belief,

in the appointment of teachers in schools. This exception applies to the initial recruitment of teachers, as well as their promotion and in essence provides for the continuation of a 'institutionalised sectarianism' (Milliken, 2019). A fundamental question remains in relation to both this legislation and the segregated nature of initial teacher education so far highlighted, and that concerns the extent to which providers, address questions of segregation both within schooling and society more widely. To that end the article turns to teacher competences.

3.4. Teacher Competences

In Northern Ireland teacher education courses are approved by the Department of Education, accredited by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) and inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). All initial teacher education programmes are required to comply with a standardised competence framework and code of values (GTCNI, 2011). Moran (2009, 51) observes that the framework and its associated values and statements are 'explicitly expressed' in relation to generating desirable teacher attitudes and dispositions. As the GTCNI Charter states:

We are committed to creating the culture and circumstances that ensure that all who seek empowerment, enrichment and affirmation through education are afforded both the opportunities and the support that they may: learn to know; learn to do; learn to be; and learn to live together (GTCNI 2011, 12)

One of the key rationales underpinning the core values for teacher education is their relationship to the socio-political context of Northern Ireland as a religiously divided post-conflict society. Hence the competences and values commit teacher education to engender and provide a teaching profession capable of 'enabling our young people not just to develop as rounded individuals able to prosper in the world but, as importantly, to live together in a culture characterised by tolerance and respect for diversity' (GTCNI 2011, 8). But as Beauchamp et al (2015, 10) acknowledge, whilst 'long-standing sectarian divisions are not ignored in relevant competences for teacher education in Northern Ireland...neither are they necessarily resolved'.

In this regard, it is important to note, that any policy discourse including those on teacher education as they pertain to competencies and standards, are mediated and enacted in practice differently across the teacher education sector in Northern Ireland (Beauchamp et al., 2016); as they shape and are shaped by the various institutions and actors across the spectrum of teacher education provision (Ball, 1994). In effect practices, no matter how worthy or desired, are not guaranteed to be implemented as expected or planned. As Honig (2006, 10) observes, 'policy, people and places interact to shape how implementation unfolds' and policy responses occur. Braun et al. (2010, 549) in this sense, talk not of policy response but 'policy enactment', which they state, 'involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualization'.

The 'interpretation and recontextualisation' in relation to initial teacher education programmes in Northern Ireland, in terms of addressing the competences

and values referred to above, primarily occurs through specific modules related to education studies or inclusive education. But the efficacy of such responses needs to be framed and understood in the wider policy context of the political inertia ‘which has characterised much of the post-devolution political milieu in Northern Ireland’ (Beauchamp et al., 2016, 162). The consequence of which is that the preparation of ‘student teachers to deal with controversial sectarian issues...have not been addressed at policy level (Beauchamp et al., 2016, 162). Thus as Beauchamp et al. (2016) observe...we recommend caution in reading practices of teacher education from standards/competences documentation and emphasise the significance of national institutional structures and guiding principles, political actors and veto players in the local mediation of policy.

This viewpoint of Beauchamp et al (2016) requires further consideration in relation to the ways in which anti-sectarian facing competences and values may be (re)interpreted and (re)shaped, not least in a system of schooling and initial teacher education system which remains, in policy terms, structurally and institutionally deeply divided and segregated. As it is in this legitimately divided and segregated policy context, that teacher education competences and values ‘committed to creating the culture and circumstances that ensure that..all..learn to live together’ (GTCNI 2011, 12) are expected to be delivered and achieved.

In order to try and provide an understanding of how such an apparent counterintuitive juxtaposition might be believed to be reconciled it is necessary to turn to the consociational policy settlement to the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland. And, the extent to which as a policy framework it discursively shapes, informs and permeates the educational policy landscape including teacher education.

4. Consociationalism

In terms of conflict resolution in societies deeply divided on religious and ethno-national lines, one of the key policy theories and approaches to emerge and achieve a degree of consensus as to its political effectiveness is that of consociationalism (Fontana, 2016). A political consociation is according to O’Leary (2005)...a state or region within which two or more cultural or national communities peaceably co-exists with none being institutionally superior to the others and in which the relevant communities cooperate politically through self-government and shared government.

According to Lijphart (2008, 76), one of the key ways consociations are able to establish and achieve peaceful coexistence, with cultural autonomy, is education and the political right for divided communities to be able to ‘establish and administer their own autonomous schools, fully supported by public funds’. These funds need to be allocated and distributed equally to all schools, ‘as long as basic educational standards are met’. Thus, the education system in consociational states is constituted by a diversity of state funded schools whose ethos will cater for those from different religious ethno-national identities. The rationale for this is based on the assumption

that the provision of diverse and de facto separate schools can help facilitate ‘upward social social mobility in deeply divided societies’ (Fontana, 2016, 228). Moreover, if perceived as discursively ‘legitimate’ and equal (including in terms of state funding) then ‘separate schools may contribute to peace by enhancing feelings of citizenship and stimulating loyalty to a state that reflects and values their cultural group (Fontana, 2016, 228).

Equally, the selection of schools and the ability to attend should be open with admission not determined by religious or ethnic grounds, with schools that are multicultural or multi-ethnic, also available. Lijpart (2008, 75) admits however, that a likely outcome of a consociational settlement with separate schools and freedom of choice, is ‘voluntary self-segregation’. In effect, given the freedom to choose, rather than be allocated a particular school, means that in the main those with a particular religious ethno-national identity will chose to attend a school aligned, with that identity. The important point here, according to consociational theory, is that this separation should viewed as a transitional temporary mechanism towards the ultimate objective of educational and socio-political integration (McCrudden and O’Leary, 2013).

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998), which brought an end to the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland, is a political consociational settlement. Significantly, in line with consociational principles, the agreement according to Fontana (2016)...didn’t challenge the existence of parallel and separate school sectors but endowed education with the dual function of preserving communal identities while promoting mutual understanding and tolerance.

The educational status quo in consociational terms is seen a sustaining the integrity of religious ethno- national groups and thereby contributing to political stability. Notably, however, in the relation to the concerns of this article, the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, as a consociational settlement, provided only very limited reference to future education policy reform. It referred only to the need to promote the Irish Language and initiatives to develop integrated education. The explanation for this is important, not least in understanding the continued religiously divided nature of educational provision in Northern Ireland. As Fontana (2016, 11) observes...even prior to 1998, Northern Ireland’s education system conformed in many ways to consociational principles; it allowed choice between Catholic maintained, state maintained (mainly Protestant) and integrated schools, all of which received equal funding.

The consequences of this at a policy level means the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998) had very little impact on the delivery of Education in Northern Ireland, indeed, what it could be argued it achieved was to largely consolidate, if not legitimise and reinforce, the same education system which was in place prior to the Agreement.

Fontana (2016, 228) describes the Northern Ireland education system as one based on ‘civic minimalism’ in which through a process of parental choice, parents

tend to opt for schools with an existing profile and ethos similar to their own; a mutually reinforcing and segregating system whereby 'schools tend to cater for uniform student bodies in terms of their income, ethnicity and religion'. Seemingly, in a similar vein student teacher selection of primary initial teacher education programmes produce the same outcome. Moreover, even where religious self-segregation is not so evident as in the post-primary education of teachers, this sector along with the primary operates as a conduit into teaching which apparently self-perpetuates the segregated system. The critical point here, according to Fontana (2016, 228), is that 'informal separation based on customs and practice is harder to erode than legally enforced segregation. A point which is likely to be particularly telling when one considers the extent to which the consociational goal of moving to a more integrated less divided system of education is to be achieved. In essence, the consociational settlement has at its heart an inherent tension; a mechanism supported to bring about peace, namely voluntary self-segregation, that by its very nature makes transition to a post-conflict integrated non-segregated society more difficult to achieve. As Fontana (2016) states:

On the one hand this sustains the integrity of ethnic religious and national groups upon which a consociation rests, thereby contributing to short-term political and elite stability. On the other hand in this educational landscape external pressures and internal political crises frequently translate into political zero-sum debates over education and into the reproduction of mutually exclusive narratives of identity (Fontana, 2016, 2)

Moreover, and critically, given that the settlement successfully functions on the basis of continued religious self-segregation and division, it could be claimed its success resides on the very same divisions it is ultimately intended to resolve (McGarry and O'leary, 2006). In terms of solving this socio-political policy conundrum, consociationalists would contend that the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement provides the required socio-political scaffolding and stability, which over the long term, will reduce the importance of religious ethno-national division. As such, in achieving its overriding goal of conflict resolution in Northern Ireland, the consociational settlement provides the best opportunity and strongest 'foundations for peaceful democratisation' (McCrudden and O'Leary, 2013, 36).

Even if, however, this assumption is accepted as correct in principle, a key criticism of consociationalism, is that it lacks 'clarity from its adherents as to how it helps society move from conflict management to transformation' (Nagle and Clancy, 2010, 4). If applied to Northern Ireland, the consociational Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement has undeniably managed the peace for the last 20 years. The unresolved question is the extent to which, over the same period, and in accordance with the underpinning consociational goals, Northern Ireland has become a less divided, religiously segregated, more integrated society.

Arguably, if the price for a managed peace in Northern Ireland, is a consociational settlement which harnesses and utilises existing societal divisions, this should not belie the fact that education and schools have a role to play not simply in

supporting the settlement and current peaceful co-existence but also working forward towards a more integrated less segregated and divided society. In this context, given the desire to break down division and increase integration, it is reasonable to suggest that denominationally segregated separate schools, cannot be expected to establish 'social cohesion as readily as integrated schools where contact is sustained' (Fontana, 2016, 229). Indeed, Hughes et al. (2007), has evidenced the ways in which cultural and physical separation in schooling between communities from different religious backgrounds in Northern Ireland is related to engendering suspicion and fear towards members of other communities thereby impeding the development of mutual understanding and trust.

Indeed, the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, in calling for the promotion of 'initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education' is not simply recommending the establishment of a different structure for schools but is signalling the value of education in helping to achieve a lasting peace through a more integrated system of schooling and by association society. Yet such educational developments have not been forthcoming with approximately on 7% of pupils educated in Integrated Schools (Gallagher, 2016). Moreover, as the findings in this article outline the education system along with initial teacher education and its associated processes, in line with other areas such as housing settlement, remain heavily divided and segregated. Educationally, with the lack of movement regards integrated schooling, increasing emphasis is being placed on the concept of Shared Education (Hughes and Loader, 2016); the building of sustained informal and formal links between schools serving different religious communities. A key question remains as to the effectiveness of such initiatives in fundamentally reconciling conflicting religious ethno-national identities, in a society which is institutionally and structurally segregated.

Fontana (2016, 89), speaking to the limited impact of attempts towards non-denominational integrated schools, considers that the continued demand for segregated schooling is 'derived from the political function of schools as agents of socialisation into mutually exclusive 'clusters' of religious national socio-economic and communal cleavages.' In effect both Protestant/Unionist and the Catholic/Nationalist communities continue even after the consociational Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998) to employ 'their respective schools to convey diverging narratives of identity and attitudes to the state, thus preserving their internal cohesion and external political alignment.' (Fontana, 2016, 89). As such religious denomination remains a fundamental and impermeable marker of community identity in Northern Ireland, and schools along with the process of initial teacher education remain instruments for reproducing and conveying it. In effect, this means the segregated and divided system of schooling in Northern Ireland requires an initial teacher education system which is able to supply and sustain it. Further, in line with this, and helping to maintain and legitimise segregation, the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998, acknowledges the denominational divide and allows schools to lawfully discriminate on the grounds of religious belief, in the recruitment of newly qualified teachers.

5. Concluding comments

If power relations in society are conditioned by a culturally generated set of ideas or discourse (Foucault, 2009), then the dominant discursive thinking underpinning the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998) are those associated with the notion of consociationalism; Northern Ireland as a state within which Protestant and Catholic communities peaceably co-exists with none being institutionally superior. This co-existence in relation to schooling and initial teacher education continues to reproduce a system of provision predominantly based on religious ethno-national segregation and division. The ideas that constitute this policy discourse and their institutionalised manifestation, have undeniably managed the peace in Northern Ireland for over the last 20 years. A position, according to Harvey (2009), which does not simply suggest policy acceptance, but indicates a resonance between the culturally generated set of ideas that constitute this policy and the dominant instincts, desires, values of its Protestant and Catholic recipients. The consociational settlement speaking to and harnessing the existing socio-cultural and religious ethno-national divisions within Northern Ireland, for conflict resolution.

The key question remains however, having utilised and further legitimised those past divisions of conflict for the purposes of peace, how to transition those divisions in schooling and initial teacher education, to a system of more religiously integrated provision. Undoubtedly, schooling and initial teacher education, have a key role to play, as the GTNI Code acknowledges, in building harmony, tolerance and mutual respect (GTNI, 2011). The problem is that the opportunities to harness and embed those values are limited by their discursive absorption within a wider and discursively more powerful set of values and structures still based on religious ethno-national division and segregation. And a system of teacher education provision which continues to discursively and institutionally reflect and sustain those divisions apparent in schooling and wider society. Ultimately, the concern remains, that as long as the same divisive and segregated systems are used to manage the peace as previously underpinned the 'troubles', then the potential for a return to religious ethno-national conflict remains.

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