

*Integrated Education in Northern Ireland:  
Its History, Impact on Students, and Role in the Peacebuilding Process*

In May of 2003, I had the opportunity to travel to Northern Ireland as part of a student group to study peacebuilding under the advisement of Dr. Joseph Thompson, professor of Political Science at Villanova University. During this trip, I engaged in a twofold study of Northern Ireland's integrated schools - through both research at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast and conversations with members of the community. This year, I have continued that research through my senior honors thesis; I am currently studying the ways in which political forces have shaped the integrated schools movement in Northern Ireland, and how this has affected the ability of these schools to serve as instruments of peacebuilding. I now present my original research findings as the first chapter of my thesis. This chapter provides a brief history and overview of integrated education in Northern Ireland, as well as a discussion of the impact of integrated schools on their students. In addition, it contains a brief analysis of the type of role that integrated schools play in the peace process of Northern Ireland. I mention my personal conversations<sup>1</sup> from my stay in Northern Ireland frequently in my writing, for they afford a crucial supplement to my traditional research.

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*What is Integrated Education?*

According to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), integrated education is defined as "bringing together in one school pupils drawn in roughly equal numbers from both the Protestant and Catholic traditions along with young people from other cultures. There will also be a mix of backgrounds in the teaching staff and governors, ideally reflecting a balance of representation" (Blakeman 4). Integrated schools are also coeducational and all-ability. In contrast, the vast majority of Northern Ireland's controlled (state-run) and Catholic schools, which are single-sex and either grammar or secondary. There are two types of integrated schools: grant-maintained integrated (GMI) and controlled integrated (CI). The first category includes integrated schools that are officially recognized and aided by some degree of government funding (O'Connor xii). GMI's are under the control of a Board of Governors, which oversees the school and ensures that "the management, control, and ethos... are likely to attract equal numbers of Protestant and Catholic pupils" (O'Connor xii). The latter category includes the state-run integrated schools. The CI's are funded like any other controlled school in Northern Ireland, and their teachers are employed by the state. For a school to be classified as integrated by the Northern Ireland Department of Education, its student body must have a minimum balance of 70:30, with the 30% being the smaller minority religious group in a given area<sup>2</sup> (Blakeman 9).

*The History and Growth of Integrated Education*

Public discourse regarding integrated education began in the 1970's. By examining the newspaper articles from this period, one can gain a sense of the heated debate regarding integration which took place during this period. Further, the volume and content of the anti-integration articles indicate that the movement's opponents dominated the debate. For example, on February 16, 1975, the *Sunday Independent* ran a two-part series of articles, the first in support of integration and the second one against. "The Case Against Integrated Schools" presents a variety of arguments by various politicians, educators, members of the clergy, and other community members wholeheartedly against the integration of schools. This article took up two pages of a full-page spread and used an excess of bold lettering for effect. Similarly, on October 20 of 1975, *The Irish Independent* published an article entitled "Dangers in Forced Integrated Education," delineating the thoughts of the former chairman of the Community Relations Commission in the North on integrated education (Walshe 1). Although he believed that the system of education was a primary factor responsible for the Troubles<sup>3</sup>, he argued that any attempt to integrate the schools quickly would be the cause of still more division. His main justification for this position was that so many people in Northern Ireland had no contact with people in the "other community."<sup>4</sup>

Whereas these types of anti-integration articles were very common in the 1970's, a shift is visible in the decades that followed. During the mid-late 1980's and the 1990's, most of the news articles published on the

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<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, those from my visit to Hazelwood College, an integrated school in Belfast.

<sup>2</sup> Formerly controlled schools seeking controlled integrated status may be recognized with only 10% Catholic students, but the expectation is that in time, that number will increase to at least 30%.

<sup>3</sup> This is a point with which many politicians, sociologists, educators, as well as everyday citizens, would disagree.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast, today this same reason is used as a major factor necessitating integration (not necessarily forced integration, but integration nonetheless).

issue of integrated education were written in favor of the movement.<sup>5</sup> This trend, presumably, was an expression of the growing public acceptance of the integrated schools movement. Not surprisingly, this increased acceptance coincided with the beginning and growth of the integrated sector. Northern Ireland's first integrated school, Lagan College, opened in 1981, established by the campaigning parent group, "ACT" (All Children Together). Four years later, three additional integrated schools opened in Belfast. Since this time, growth has been fairly steady; at least one or two new integrated schools have been established every year since 1981 (Smith 9).

As of April 2002, there are 47 integrated schools spread throughout Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup> The growth of integrated education is apparent in the fact that today there exists a primary school within a reasonable distance from the home of any given family in Northern Ireland<sup>7</sup> (Fraser 14). Also indicative of the growth of integrated education is the sheer rise in the numbers of pupils since the founding of the first integrated college. Lagan's first class, only 23 years ago, was comprised of 28 students (Connor 3). In 2001-2002, 15,069 students attended integrated schools (O'Connor 188). However, this figure still comprises only 4.4% of Northern Ireland's school age population. At one point, the Integrated Education Fund (or IEF) sought the enrollment of the integrated sector to reach a full 10% (or 35,000 students) by 2008. More recently, that goal was changed to 10% by 2010. Today, it is clear that the enrollment of integrated schools in 2008 will likely fall far short of either goal. This is problematic because today, the demand for integrated education greatly exceeds the number of slots available in existing schools. In 2000, over 1,000 interested students were unable to gain entrance to an integrated school (Monaghan 2). The Hazelwood students mentioned that there are large numbers of prospective student who are denied acceptance since the school cannot possibly accommodate the vast numbers of applicants.

Disappointing though this lack of space might be in one sense, it is promising in another. That is, the demand that has created this problem demonstrates the growing popularity of integrated education, as well as a substantial shift in attitudes regarding integration since its inception. When the first integrated schools were opened in the midst of the Troubles, few parents had the desire to send their children to such a school, and most lacked confidence in the safety or quality of education these schools would provide. With time, though, public acceptance of integrated schools has grown, as evidenced by the shift (during the 1980's through the present day) towards positive media coverage on the subject. Likewise, parental demand has grown substantially over that time, and thus has driven the growth of integrated education. Furthermore, since the demand for integrated education continues to exceed its availability, it seems inevitable that more schools will continue to be created.

Despite this growing acceptance of and support for integrated schools, one must note that a degree of opposition does remain. Some of this opposition comes from the teachers at controlled schools, who seem to take integration as a personal insult. A teacher at Brownlow High, a controlled secondary school with some Catholic pupils argued, "We're not bigots... why do we need Catholic governors and more Catholic teachers?" (O'Connor 166). A physics teacher at a secondary school in Downpatrick<sup>8</sup> gazed at me with disapproval when I mentioned my research on integrated schools. He told me that his school had a "good number of Catholics – almost 20%," but "we just don't call ourselves an 'integrated' school." He made a common argument: state schools are not exclusively for Protestant children – they are indeed open to Catholics, should they choose to attend. This point is often made by opponents of integrated education in an effort to convince their audience that Northern Ireland does not need specially designed or officially designated integrated schools.<sup>9</sup> This argument will often be followed by an accusation such as: "If the Catholic Church didn't insist on their own separate schools all would be well, because then Catholic children would come to state schools" (O'Connor 65). However, such accusations do not reflect the reality that Catholics in Northern Ireland do not always feel welcome or comfortable in their local state-run school. At these schools,

"pupils process daily past flags and emblems of Britishness and meet on ceremonial occasions for assemblies led in prayer by ministers ordained in some Protestant denomination, concluded by the British national anthem. Most, if not all of these schools... are unselfconsciously, and in some cases markedly, British and Protestant in ethos, staff and school customs often reflecting an unthinking, unquestioning unionist outlook. The norm is Protestant: Catholic students might be welcome but need not expect to see their community reflected in the school's everyday life" (O'Connor 85).

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<sup>5</sup> The Linen Hall Library in Belfast has kept a complete collection of news articles pertaining to integrated education. My examination of this collection served as the foundation for this statement.

<sup>6</sup> This number, from 2002, was the most recent one I could find (O'Connor 188).

<sup>7</sup> Although this is not yet quite true of secondary schools.

<sup>8</sup> Whom I met at a Habitat for Humanity dinner in Downpatrick.

<sup>9</sup> O'Connor 65

This largely Protestant nature of the state-run schools is one major reason that integrated education is so important to Northern Ireland. Simply put, a setting must exist in which Catholic and Protestant children can comfortably attend school together. Thus, as Richard Haas points out,<sup>10</sup> the goal of the integrated education movement is to establish enough schools to ensure that every family that seeks an integrated education for their child has that option.

### *The Benefits of Integrated Education*

To provide perspective on the benefits of integrated education from a young age, it helps to consider the alternative – continued segregation in education and in society. According to Derek Wheeler,<sup>11</sup> “Keeping people apart makes you imagine what the other people are like. People on the other side of the fence are demonized – they grow horns and tails and you lose out on the opportunity to interact.” In Belfast, I had the opportunity to converse with a group of teenage students in a Catholic youth group. They spoke candidly, telling me that while all of them know Protestants on an acquaintance level, neither they nor their families are friends with any people of a Protestant background. They cited their separate schooling as the primary reason for this, as they have never really had the chance to get to know Protestant students.

Although these students made no disparaging comments about the Protestant community, the levity with which they treated the subject demonstrated their acceptance of the segregation of their city’s population. The possible repercussions of this sentiment are alarming. If these students and others like them consider it normal for the two communities to remain divided, then they are also likely to accept the constant struggle between opposing political groups in their country. In other words, the students raised and educated in very homogenous environments are more prone to accept that a segregated, conflicted society is normal, a fact of life, rather than something that could or should be changed.

Now that we have considered the ways in which separate education affects its students, we are better equipped to measure the effects of integrated education. During my visit to Hazelwood College, the administration randomly selected six girls and two boys from the school’s hallways between classes to talk to me. These conversations, I believe, capture some of the central benefits that integrated education offers its students. Overall, the students told me that they consider themselves at an incredible advantage over their peers - their friends and neighbors who attend either Catholic or state schools. While the latter have little understanding of what a person of the other religion is like, Hazelwood students have ample opportunity to build friendships based on common interests and shared experiences, without limiting those friendships to people of their own faith. The students at Hazelwood all held the same opinion on this matter: separating yourself from others because of religious differences can be justified as long as you remain separate. But, as soon as you allow yourself the opportunity to meet someone of a different religious background, you realize that the wall you have built around yourself is potentially very harmful. You are shutting yourself off from getting to know a whole new group of people who are “just people, just like me.”<sup>12</sup>

Though the students I spoke with did not mention this particular subject, it is worth noting that integrated schools not only bring together different religious groups, but also do so for the various economic classes of Northern Ireland. A former student of Lagan College articulated the significance of this often overlooked attribute of integration:

“Lagan College... was across the board classwise. I grew up in Malone and all my friends came from Malone<sup>13</sup>... The fact that I was meeting people from west Belfast, Twinbrook, and also Ballybeen estate, Tyllycarnet... it told me that people were people essentially wherever you go. That sounds very facile but it was very important to me, that you could go to west Belfast and people were just like you, and you had something in common with them: that divisions along geography and class lines weren’t important. To me it wasn’t religion: I didn’t care if someone was Catholic or Protestant. But before I went I did sort of care about what sort of class people were. And my illusions were utterly shattered: so I found that middle-class people can be utterly idiotic, and working class, or what New Labour call low-paid people were, well, people were people. Where else in Belfast would I get that?” (O’Connor 146-147).

This statement shows that even students raised without religious or ethnic prejudices can benefit from attending an integrated school, because of the economic diversity often found in such a setting.

In the future, it seems that integrated schools will offer even greater benefits to their students and communities, because of the ethnic diversity that is beginning to arise in Northern Ireland. Even as recently as

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<sup>10</sup> In his Address to Business and Community Leaders of Northern Ireland, given in on November 20, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Director of the North Belfast Community Action Unit, Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, who spoke with my group in Belfast

<sup>12</sup> The phrase used by two or three of the students I spoke to.

<sup>13</sup> The middle to upper class, residentially integrated area of Belfast.

2001, the city of Belfast was 99% white (Alvarez 1). In recent years, however, immigrants have begun to come to Belfast from Asia, India, Pakistan, China, and other countries in search of jobs (Alvarez 1). Sadly, these newcomers have encountered a cold and often violent reception by some citizens of Northern Ireland. There were 212 racist incidents recorded between April and December of 2003, and the level of violence has worsened since that time. Recent incidents have involved everything from physical threats to pipe bombing of houses (Alvarez 1). This trend of violence suggests that while the integrated schools were originally designed to bring together Catholic and Protestant children, today and in future years, these schools have the potential to serve a broader purpose. The children of rising numbers of new immigrants will need schools to attend, and they may well be neither Catholic nor Protestant. An integrated school that practices and teaches about diversity is likely to be a desirable option for these families.

Overall, integrated schools offer students a chance to learn to think in different terms than many citizens of the region who live their lives in relatively separate realms. They provide a setting in which children and young adults can meet and form relationships with people of different backgrounds. These students can then develop their own judgments about “them”<sup>14</sup> based upon experience - rather than simply believing what they have heard or inferred from statements made by their parents, families, neighbors, and friends. Integrated schools cultivate within their students the development of healthy beliefs about others. They also promote change on a larger scale. That is, students with an integrated education are then more inclined to challenge the systems that keep a fuller peace from being achieved, by working in their own ways toward reconciliation and community building. Of the eight students selected to speak with me, for example, one showed an interest in pursuing politics. She is neither a nationalist nor a unionist and believes that she could do a better job than anyone currently in office. All of the students, though, in their own ways, indicated that the way in which they will conduct their lives and relationships is different (more understanding and tolerant) than it would be had they not had the experience of attending an integrated school.

Clearly, integrated education presents vast benefits to its students, particularly when contrasted with the adverse effects that separate education can have. Thus, the Hazelwood students asserted that integrated education was most necessary at an early age. Children benefit from it most when they begin from the primary school level. Once they reach the university level, or even the secondary/grammar school level, their opinions have been deeply formed. As children, though, they are receptive to everything, and if they are put together with a diverse group of children, they will accept that as the norm. Many of these students began integrated school at age 11 and now have younger siblings in Hazelwood Primary, and they believe that those siblings will have an educational experience superior to their own. They do not have to unlearn old stereotypes, but rather are forming healthy viewpoints from a young age. They interact with children from diverse backgrounds, form friendships with them, and in time, will teach their own children the same lessons they have learned.

I use the comments made by these students neither to glorify integrated schools nor to vilify controlled and/or Catholic schools. Rather, I do so in order to lend insight as to what students in integrated schools think about the education they are receiving. Much of the literature available regarding integrated schools details what teachers, politicians, and other adults think about integration. Although this information is of course valuable, the words of the students themselves are crucial in any attempt to evaluate the impact of integrated schools on their students. If we understand what they are learning, then we can make better predictions as to what sort of impact they will make during their lifetimes on their communities, both local and national.

Parents’ opinions regarding integration are also of great value, partly because they regularly engage in conversation with their children about their school experiences. In addition, they bring to any discussion of integrated schools an adult understanding of the Troubles, how things have improved, and what changes they observe taking place in their communities. Although I did not have the chance to speak with many parents with children in integrated schools, my research has afforded me with some understanding of their perspectives. In an interview in 1992, one parent of a student attending an integrated school emphasized the importance of early education in the formation of ideas about different groups of people (a statement which mirrors ones made by the girls at Hazelwood). “If children grow up together they realize there is nothing to be afraid of. If children are forever separated, under the influence of an older generation, they perpetuate the kind of myth which grows up about different religions” (Agnew 17).

#### *Integrated Schools and Peacebuilding*

In *The Elusive Quest*, Norman Potter describes the current situation in Northern Ireland:

“The legacy of a generation of violence has left scars of bitterness and fear among citizens of all religious and political persuasions; cultural differences between unionists and nationalists are as pronounced as they have ever been and continue to create tense situations, especially during the marching season;

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<sup>14</sup> The members of the other primary religious group (for Catholics, Protestants, and for Protestants, Catholics), as well as those of any background different from their own: religious, ethnic, economic, etc.

housing and educational segregation between Protestants and Catholics in working-class areas of Belfast, for example, is virtually complete and shows little sign of changing; and, in general, a climate of mistrust exists” (Potter 3).

From our discussion thus far, we can conclude that integrated schools have a tangible, positive impact on the way that individual students think about similarity, difference, community, etc. But, what role can and do integrated schools play in the peacebuilding process of the Northern Ireland?

Many of the parents interviewed (in the same 1992 survey discussed previously) gave their thoughts on what impact integrated education might have on the peace process. According to one parent, “It will make no difference whatsoever unless it is widespread.” (Agnew 19). Another made a prediction regarding the number of years it will take for integration to impact the peace process.

“For integrated education to have any noticeable effect on political change I would say not before forty or fifty years. That’s how long it will take for our youngsters to be educated now and for them to grow up into teenagers and mature adults and to have their political views changed from the stereotype of the loyalist on the Shankill and the nationalist on the Falls” (Agnew 19).

These parents make a key point: integration needs to exist on a much larger scale than it is currently before being capable of producing a noticeable difference in the social and political dynamics of Northern Ireland.

A casual, American observer could find sufficient similarities between Northern Ireland and the United States (i.e. historical discrimination and violence between two groups of people in one country) to argue that integrated schools will eventually be *the* answer to establishing peace in the Northern Ireland. The line of reasoning might proceed as follows: “An official peace has been established. The level of violence is the lowest in decades. But, the two communities, especially their schools and neighborhoods, are still very much separate. Some people still paint their sidewalks and hang flags from their telephone poles to designate their political affiliation.<sup>15</sup> To get the two groups to hate each other less and get to know and respect each other more, the most important step is simply to put them in regular contact with one another. What better way to ensure that this happens than to educate the children together so that they do not develop a hatred or fear of people different from them? And if the U.S. experience is any indication, fifty years is a reasonable, if slightly optimistic, prediction.”

When making comparisons between Northern Ireland’s situation and that of the U.S., though, one must tread carefully, always considering the differences between the two. Thus, a brief discussion of those differences is in order. Integration in the U.S. came as a result of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education* that segregation was unconstitutional. Nearly fifty years have passed since that decision. While the United States has yet to reach the ideals so eloquently described by Martin Luther King, (and while many schools are still largely segregated on a de facto level) in this time, an indisputable change in attitudes toward African Americans and other minorities has taken place. Today, racism – in any form, from disparaging comments to physical violence - is no longer socially nor legally acceptable. Most Americans would agree that the integration of public schools has played a substantial role in this transformation.

Unlike in the United States, segregation of schools in Northern Ireland did not come about as the result of one *racial* group legally excluding another from certain public schools, instead confining them to their own (inferior) schools. Rather, education in Northern Ireland is a case of willful segregation; two *religious* groups that have undergone years of political struggle have established largely separate education systems. During the 1830’s, this dual school system served to allow the Catholic community to build itself up in Northern Ireland. Since that time, separate schools have been considered a way to ensure respect for both religious traditions. However, today it can be argued, “the boundary between Protestant and Catholic has been frozen by the parallel school system” (Wright 5-6). For this reason, some community members who were eager to chip away at that divide began the movement toward integration. Although no court order has mandated widespread integration in Northern Ireland,<sup>16</sup> integration has begun and grown significantly in the last twenty years through the will and efforts of the citizenry.

Considering these different reasons for segregation and attempts at integrated education in the two countries is an important way in which we as Americans can begin to gain a perspective on the role that integrated education plays in Northern Ireland’s peacebuilding efforts. Another way in which we can grow in our understanding of the role integrated schools play is by examining the scope of integrated education in the context of Northern Ireland’s overall educational system. How many integrated schools exist today? At what rate

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<sup>15</sup> Scenes common in certain parts of Belfast.

<sup>16</sup> The Education Reform Order of 1990 did “place a statutory duty on the Department of Education to ‘encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education’ ” (Ingram 1).



is that number rising? How many students do these schools educate? And, how many students do they have the potential to educate in the near future? The rate at which integrated schools are being established is regular, but still fairly slow. Right now, there are over 1,200 non-integrated schools (including primary, secondary, and grammar) in Northern Ireland. There are approximately 47 integrated schools, educating less than 5% of the population. Now, integrated schools can only become so widespread so quickly. At the rate of two new integrated schools per year, it would take another 453 years for enough schools to be established (or transformed) so that every child in Northern Ireland could attend an integrated school. These calculations serve to demonstrate the slow rate at which integration is expanding, and the incapacity of integrated schools to educate all of Northern Ireland's children.

Even so, these calculations are a bit unrealistic, first, because they involve too large of a time frame, and secondly, because Catholic schools will always exist in Northern Ireland, regardless of how many integrated schools open. That is, even if most Catholics felt completely comfortable sending their children to integrated school, there would still be a significant number that would choose Catholic schooling. The United States is evidence of the validity of this prediction. U.S. public schools teach students of various religious denominations, but some Catholics still choose the Catholic school system for personal and religious reasons. Likewise, people of other faiths choose different religious schools for their children. Let me emphasize that there is *nothing wrong* with parents having or choosing a religious alternative to the state schools. However, in the situation of Northern Ireland, parents historically have sent their children to Catholic schools not simply because of a personal choice, but often out of necessity, as they these schools were the only ones in which their children and their beliefs would be respected. The longstanding segregation of the school system has caused many parents to believe that the state schools are "really" Protestant schools, where their children would not fit in.<sup>17</sup> Integrated schools, thus, are important to the country, for they provide a sound alternative to Catholic schools for these parents to educate their children. Moreover, the growth of this sector is crucial – so that in time every family that wants integrated education for its child can have it.

While integrated education is certainly a highly effective step toward greater reconciliation and peacebuilding among a small percentage of Northern Ireland's citizens, it seems that it alone will not (at least for many, many years) have a substantial impact on the peace process. Practical considerations<sup>18</sup> render other measures necessary in order to reach a greater percentage of Northern Ireland's citizenry *sooner*. For example, programs must be put in place to bring together groups of adults in either community (e.g. the programs that will be run at St. Clements Retreat House in their new reconciliation center). In addition, there is a need for more programs that bring controlled and Catholic schools into contact on a regular basis, so that the children in separate schools will have the opportunity to know each other. Another idea, one which will perhaps meet greater opposition, would be programs that educate students in separate schools about the fundamental similarities in their Christian beliefs, so that they might realize they are not as different as they might otherwise think.

Acknowledging the necessity of these types of efforts does not imply any shortcoming in the integrated school system. Doing so simply indicates that the people of Northern Ireland (as well as the international community) should avoid harboring unrealistic expectations for these schools and rather, understand and respect what function they truly do serve. In an effort to bring greater clarity to this matter, in 1985, the spokesman for the Belfast Charitable Trust for Integrated Education said:

“ ‘ We don't think we are going to solve the whole Northern Ireland problem by having our children educated together. We aren't making any big claims like that. We just think it would be a step towards developing understanding between the two communities and breaking down some of the prejudices we have. It's not only the children we hope to bring together, it's the parents too' ” (O'Connor 181).

These hopes for integrated education are being increasingly fulfilled with time, as the rising number of integrated schools educates a greater number of students and brings together greater numbers of families. The continued growth of integrated schools, along with the widespread implementation of the types of measures discussed above, has the potential to involve members of both communities in the peace process. This will achieve the greatest possible success, as cross-community ties are made on the personal level. If Northern Ireland is ever to achieve a real and lasting political peace, that peace must first be developed within the hearts and minds of individuals. Integrated education is one of many important elements of the peacebuilding process of Northern Ireland.

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<sup>17</sup> As discussed earlier, this is a legitimate concern, for the state schools often possess a British and Protestant character.

<sup>18</sup> Money, and all that is invested in the current dual school system – teachers, students, buildings, books, et al.



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