

Challenges of Bridging Ethnic Divides in Northern Ireland: Non-Profit Organizations and Integrated Education



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Background

Historical: The two primary identities of those residing in Northern Ireland, 'Catholic' and 'Protestant', are not solely religious markers. They include an individual's national and political beliefs. These identities distinguish which side of the Anglo-Irish conflict people associate with.



Figure 1: Belfast mural commemorating the Unionists (courtesy of Sam Wennerlund)

Current: After the Troubles (1968- 1998), voluntary segregation was reinforced by Church authorities and the state in a **segregated education system**. The curriculum and religious element helps perpetuate divisions within the Northern Irish community.

Introduction

Integrated education: a form of education that allows both Protestant and Catholic children to attend school together and openly discuss reconciliation.

The non profit organizations entrusted with creating and promoting integrated education are

- The Northern Irish Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and Integrated Education Fund (IEF)
- However, in the 29 years the state has had a statutory obligation to provide integrated education **only 6% of schools are integrated.**

Aims

- To identify what organizations pose outside challenges to integration
- Understand which parts of the standard curriculum challenge the ethos of reconciliation

Methods

1. Academic journals, articles, and reports from bodies like **NICIE, IEF and Department of Education** were consulted
2. Anonymous **interviews** with staff members from NICIE, IEF and Queen's University Belfast were conducted.
 - Anonymity allowed for participants to be **honest about the social challenges** facing the growth of the integrated education sector.

Analysis

After the interviews, common ideas and observations were organized into major themes. The challenges identified were:

- Providing religious education inclusively
- Interference and competition from state initiatives
- Conservative backlash from Church Authorities

Figure 2: Children at an integrated school (courtesy of NICIE)



Results

Religious education:

- The legal obligation for schools to provide collective worship threatens inclusivity of different ethnic groups. The flexible religious education curriculum can lack advocacy for world religions

Lack of state support:

- Political parties like the SDLP and Sinn Fein have revoked support for integrated education and promoted closure of schools despite legal obligation to provide integrated education.
- Stormont has promoted competitive initiatives like Shared Education

Church backlash:

- Religious affiliations influence political party policies
- Religious figures on Boards of Governors have a vested interest in preventing the Transformation process. Parents therefore lack authority in the process.
 - **No Catholic Maintained School has ever Transformed**

Conclusion

These challenges arise mainly because of the close relationship between political parties and their affiliated religious denomination.

- Closer relationships with the Department of Education and Stormont can help grow the integrated sector and foster cooperation through shared projects.
- Parental initiatives like 'Integrate My School' funded by NICIE and IEF in order to facilitate Transformation.

Future Work: How parental initiatives to create integrated schools can relieve pressures on non-profit organizations.