GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Northern Ireland: The Tight Gag of Place

Article by Shelley McKeown Jones
June 14, 2022

As places where state narratives are conveyed, schools play a pivotal role in shaping the mindsets of young people in divided societies. But there is also a limit to their potential to reshape attitudes built up over generations. Political structures and power-sharing arrangements designed to mediate between warring sides often create barriers to real reconciliation. As a result of the failure to find a common story, the past is often put to one side, leading to loud silences which further sharpen different identities, sustaining a climate of tension and mistrust.

Two cases, from opposite ends of the European continent, shed light on the role and potential of schools: in both Northern Ireland and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the persistence of sectarian outlooks and a lack of political will to overcome them have hindered progress towards unity. In these parallel interviews, Shelley McKeown Jones and Sabina Čehajić-Clancy explore how the words, stories, and lessons spoken in classrooms every day can contribute to building stronger and more cohesive societies everywhere.

Green European Journal: Over 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement, tensions between the two main communities in Northern Ireland continue to flare up in sporadic outbreaks of violence. These often involve people too young to have any real memory of the conflict. What explains these enduring divisions?

Shelley McKeown Jones: Put simply, the divisions in Northern Ireland stem from a historical conflict between two groups in society surrounding the constitutional state of the island of Ireland: the Catholic/Irish/Nationalist community and the Protestant/British/Unionist community. Despite being over 20 years since the signing of the peace agreement and relations significantly improving, unfortunately Northern Ireland remains a divided society – evident through segregated neighbourhoods, separate school systems, and a fractured political system.

Even though we aren’t seeing the same levels of violence now as in the 1960s and 1970s, the legacy of the conflict and associated identity markers distinguishing “us” and “them” remain very visible in today’s Northern Ireland: in murals, flags, and painted kerbstones, as well as “peace walls” separating communities. What this mean is that young people growing up in Northern Ireland are experiencing a fragile peace. Relations are better than at the height of the conflict but, at the same time, youth continue to be exposed to intergenerational narratives about the history of the conflict that can sometimes reinforce traditional divisions.

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How is the Northern Irish educational system affected by the persistent spatial and institutional segregation? Have there been attempts to bridge the divides between communities?

In Northern Ireland, there is a complicated and almost parallel, separate schooling system running, with most young people attending either a Catholic or a Protestant school. There are five school management types: primarily Protestant-background schools (called controlled schools), primarily Catholic-background schools (called maintained schools), voluntary grammar schools, planned integrated schools, and other maintained schools. People usually send their children to schools that are aligned with their own community – out of habit or tradition. Historically, there's been a narrative that if you're of a particular ethno-religious affiliation then you need to learn about what that means. And so the segregation continues over the generations.

More and more people, however, are interested in sending their children to integrated schools. Integrated education came about in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. There was a bottom-up group called All Children Together that campaigned to educate young people from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds together. The very first integrated secondary school was Lagan College, founded in 1981. The aspiration at the time was that this should be the future of our education system. Fast- forwarding to today, however, only around 5-7 per cent of young people attend integrated schools; the majority still attend religiously separate schools. Despite its potential to make a difference, integrated education has been held back by a lack of funding support. It has encountered opposition, often because people are worried about funding being taken away from the controlled and maintained schools. Things, however, are about to change thanks to the 2022 Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland), which commits additional funding for integrated education.

With the aspiration for everyone to be educated together still unrealised, what are the alternatives?

This is where it's useful to look at what happens in cross-community, non-formal educational programmes and to think about how children attending separate schools can be brought together. In the past, sports programmes and other activities brought young Catholic and Protestant people together. More recently, a lot of money has been put into Shared Education, which tries to find ways of bringing Catholic and Protestant schools together so that young people can interact and learn together without the institutions being formally integrated. There is a broader question here about the role of education in promoting peace. For some people, education is a place where you take your academic subjects – English, maths, science – so you can go out into the world and get a job. For others, education is more than that. It's where you prepare yourself for the world, as a member of society and not just as an individual. The question is to what extent schools can and should do this, and how.

Some people believe education can fix everything. But the reality is that at the end of the school day, young people go home to often segregated communities. To have a real effect

on society, the things they learn about need to ripple out beyond the school gates. And so, the question for me is: how do we transform society through peace education?

Should a greater focus be placed on peace education in school curricula rather than on attempts to bring together young people from the different communities?

I think you need both. My view is that contact is key because once you get people in a room together, they can start to learn about each other and challenge stereotypes. The problem is that even when you've got people together, they don't necessarily interact in a meaningful way, or it might even be negative. So you need to go beyond the simple act of bringing people together – whether that's in an integrated school, Shared Education, or other non-formal education programmes – and let them get to know each other first. Once they get to know each other on a personal level, over a period of time, those difficult issues around group identities and difference can start to be addressed. Until that happens, they're never going to really understand each other's perspective because they won't have that depth of knowledge about the other person or the other "side".

But it's complicated – facilitating meaningful interactions in conflict or post-conflict settings requires a number of things. One challenge is finding space for this in the curriculum, when schools are already highly pressured in terms of grades and outcomes. Where does peace or the integrated relations agenda fit in alongside the more "academic" subjects? For me, peace education needs to be part of the ethos of the school and embedded in what the teachers are modelling across all subjects. There are ways to do that, for instance, by using examples in maths, English, or science classes that feature intergroup relations or get people thinking about difference in some way. I strongly believe that young people need to be prepared to cope with diversity when they go out into society, and while that isn't easy to do in mono-cultural environments where there is potentially no contact, it is possible through the school curriculum and I think it is our duty to ensure this happens. So, these two aspects need to go hand in hand: contact and thinking about it from a whole-school ethos perspective.

What structural changes are needed for this type of education to foster less essentialist ways of thinking?

One of the most crucial aspects in my view is supporting teachers. Many might not be prepared for difficult conversations about community relations and violence in their classes. Conflict resolution and peace education should be a compulsory part of their training; how to build supportive environments in schools in relation to religious and ethnic difference. They need to be comfortable with this side of teaching, otherwise they might be reluctant to approach these conversations.

The second aspect to consider is how we implement peace education in schools. My view is that peace education, or some kind of community relations focus, should be embedded across the curriculum rather than being a separate subject of study. It ought to be an orientation or ethos for the school as a whole, something that is present within every aspect of its work: the school's mission, the teachers it recruits, the activities and trips it offers, the materials teachers use and the stories they tell. Where do the children go, what are they exposed to, and what are they encouraged to think about? Such an approach

requires investment on multiple levels: investment in a system of education where not only students but also teachers are supported in engaging in this process.

Should history be taught differently in order to give young people and children alternative narratives about Northern Ireland's recent history?

The question here is, whose history are we telling? How can we tell a common story when there are multiple, often opposing, communities? It's difficult when there is no objective history; you risk a watered-down version to avoid disagreements. This is often the reason for avoiding talking about these historical conflicts entirely. I didn't learn about any of Northern Ireland's history when I was at school. There is a Seamus Heaney quote that epitomises Northern Ireland: "Whatever you say, say nothing." Whatever do you, do not talk about the conflict, because that would be uncomfortable.

Peace education should be an orientation, part of the ethos of the school as a whole.

For real peace education, you need to talk about the conflict, otherwise you'll never address the issues behind it. Why did it happen, and what does it mean? But we also need to think about the best way into those discussions. It takes time. One way might be, for example, teaching about another, similar context elsewhere and then drawing parallels closer to home.

Identity, particularly among young people, can often be social and dynamic. Is this the case in Northern Ireland, and if so how can it help inform the way that educational spaces attempt to overcome divisions?

Identity is very much context dependent for everyone, including young people. We all emphasise certain parts of our identity depending on the situation we're in. Religion might not be salient at school but very important at home or in the community, for example. For young people in Northern Ireland, the reality is that they're growing up in a place where there is a legacy of conflict, where competing identities are everywhere around them.

My experience is that lots of people in Northern Ireland either self-categorise or are categorised along traditional lines. Of course, this can be important to monitor for equal opportunities for jobs, for example, but it makes it almost inescapable, and at times it can feel like everything is divided, politically and geographically. Speaking to young people in classrooms, the traditional Catholic-Protestant divide seems less salient. What is interesting is that there are more and more young people – at least, the ones I speak to when I go into classrooms – who are saying "other" or "neither" when you ask them about their identity. Historically, people would typically say they're Catholic or Protestant, even if they're not religious, because they've been brought up in a certain ethno-religious background. Research often ignores those who don't identify with either community, but we need to understand why the traditional identities no longer seem relevant, and whether they have given way to new identities.

Often young people are seen as victims or troublemakers rather than peacemakers, but, in my experience, they are very thoughtful and articulate. In my research, I've seen that they

are often more open and keener to talk about community relations than older people. When I ask them if they interact with people across different groups, they say that they don't know who's Catholic or Protestant and that their friends are just their friends. Maybe that's what happens when people are bit younger. As you get older, you become more aware of who is part of which group, who belongs in which space, and what those differences are. Sometimes the barriers lie with the older generations.

Are there initiatives in other divided societies that could be successfully implemented in Northern Ireland?

There are great things going on in other places that are, in some ways, quite similar to Shared Education in Northern Ireland. Examples include bilingual schools in Israel and Palestine and bicommunal programmes in Cyprus. They often work according to the principle that promoting better contact between groups in conflict will help improve things in society. But each society needs to find its own way, taking into consideration the context, the culture, and the nature of the conflict.

For me, some form of contact is the key principle, be that through direct meetings between individuals or groups or indirect contact through learning about other communities in schools. The ideal would be direct contact: educating people together, in whatever way possible. Contact is crucial, and education is just one place to do that, albeit one with a captive audience.

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Published June 14, 2022
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/northern-ireland-the-tight-gag-of-place/

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