



Promoting Social Cohesion through Shared Education: A Case Study from Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This presentation considers how the education systems of divided societies have been shaped in response to the experience of ethnic and religious conflict. The analysis identifies two competing priorities in such contexts – the development of social cohesion and the protection of cultural, ethnic and religious identities - and explores how these may be reconciled through a model of 'shared education'. Drawing on recent quantitative and qualitative research evidence and the experience of shared education in Northern Ireland, I reflect on the value of a school collaboration model for promoting peace-building. I will argue that the sustained, curriculum based, inter-group contact afforded by shared education has impacted the attitudes and behaviours of pupil and teacher participants, and has had benefits at wider community level. Focusing specifically on the latter and located in social cohesion and generative processes theory, I will argue that distinctive features of shared education, including the legitimisation of intergroup differences and the emphasis on educational outcomes, as well as a conducive legislative and policy framework have enhanced its potential to contribute to peace-building in a society that in many respects remains deeply divided.

Keywords: Education systems, identity, curriculum.