

Education and Transitional Justice in Northern Ireland: some inconvenient questions for educators

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Introduction

This presentation is in three parts. Firstly, it follows the recommendation of the OCED-DAC Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations¹ to take context analysis as the starting point, so I begin with a very brief summary of the political context of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Secondly, I outline the main elements of the peace agreement signed in 1998. Thirdly, I highlight some of the challenges raised if education is to play a role in the post-conflict transformation of the society.

1. The political context

When an independent Republic of Ireland was established in 1921, the north of the island included a population who wished to retain the union with Britain (mostly Protestant descendants of English and Scottish settlers from the 1600s onward). As a result, the island was partitioned and the northern part remained part of the United Kingdom, although it also contained a significant minority of Irish Catholics who would have preferred to be part of a unified Ireland. These differences became a basis for discrimination that led to economic and social inequalities, and gave rise to a violent conflict from the late 1960s. Since 1969 more than 3,600 people were killed and 30,000 injured as part of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. More than half of the deaths were civilians, mostly males. Fatalities were inflicted on both communities (43% Catholics, 30% Protestants) and all parties to the conflict were responsible for some of the deaths - 59% caused by Republican paramilitaries, 28% by Loyalist paramilitaries and 11% by the security forces (Fay, Morrissey & Smyth, 1999). By the 1990s it was becoming clear that neither the use of violence nor a military response would resolve the issue and cease-fires in 1994 eventually created the opportunity for a peace process that led to a political agreement in 1998.

2. The peace agreement

The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement had three main elements. Firstly, it addressed the issue of sovereignty. As part of peace negotiations, the Republic of Ireland removed a territorial claim over Northern Ireland from its constitution and both governments recognised 'the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both'. For the first time the agreement also accepted that the future constitutional status of the territory will be determined by 'the wish of the majority of the people who live there'. So, the agreement deferred a decision on the ultimate sovereignty of the territory and both governments promised to respect the outcome of any future decision by the people who live there to 'self determination'. There is no detail in the agreement about the mechanism or process by which such a decision would be reached, but the implication is that it will be by some form of non-violent political process, possibly a referendum. In this sense, the agreement managed to 'transform' the conflict, but the dispute has

¹ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/45/38368714.pdf>

not been 'resolved'. There has been a shift away from the use of violence towards the use of democratic politics, but the fundamental issue about sovereignty has been deferred rather than resolved.

The second main element of the agreement was the establishment of new democratic institutions that share power between locally-elected politicians, to replace direct rule from London. A new legislative Assembly was created of 108 local politicians, elected by proportional representation and a forming a 12 member Executive body comprised of politicians from different parties. A First Minister and Deputy First Minister are jointly elected by members of the Assembly voting on a cross-community basis and Ministers are allocated to posts according to the d'Hondt system (parties select Ministerial posts in turn based on the number of seats held by each party). Decisions in the Assembly are made by a weighted majority to ensure cross-community support.

A third element of the agreement was confidence building measures. These included:

- The establishment of a Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and an Equality Commission with statutory responsibilities for anti-discrimination legislation related to Equal Opportunities (gender), Race Relations Act, Fair Employment (religion) and disability.
- *Decommissioning weapons.* An Independent International Commission was established to work towards the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons.
- *Demilitarisation.* The British Government made a commitment to demilitarisation and a return to 'normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland consistent with the level of threat'. Practical steps have included a reduction in the number of soldiers, removal of security installations and the removal of emergency powers.
- *Policing and the Justice System.* An Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland included proposals to address the under-representation of Catholics (7% in 1994) through a 50:50 recruitment policy, the creation of a new Policing Board with nationalist representation and a Police Ombudsman to deal with complaints about police conduct.
- *Prisoner releases.* Those affiliated to paramilitary groups claim that their actions were politically motivated and it was clear that a political settlement would not be achieved without their inclusion. In the two years following the Agreement 428 prisoners were released and over 300 prison officers have left the prison service.
- *Support for Victims.* There were concerns that those who had been bereaved or otherwise affected by the conflict would be neglected. Recommendations led to more than £18 million to support victims of 'the Troubles'.

Referenda on the agreement were held in May 1998. In the Republic of Ireland 94% of voters (56% turnout) approved of the proposal to amend the Irish Constitution. In Northern Ireland 71% of those voting (81% turnout) endorsed the Agreement.

These various components created a framework for the post-conflict transformation of institutions and relations between the different communities in Northern Ireland and created a new set of challenges in terms of the role that education might play in such transformation.

3. Challenges for educators

In broad terms the peace agreement marked a very important transition – an attempt to move away from the use of violence to bring about political change, to a commitment to power-sharing and democratic politics. This change of context has meant that questions are raised about the role that education can play in reinforcing and supporting such a transition. I concentrate here mainly on schooling and formal education, but obviously this is only part of the broader contribution that also needs to be made through youth, community and adult education.

In the context of Northern Ireland it is now more than ten years since the peace agreement has been signed. The level of violence has subsided, but conflict remains in many local areas through tensions over territory and cultural issues such as parades. There are challenges in terms of demilitarization through a reduction in numbers of soldiers and visible security, as well as the reintegration of former combatants into civil society. There are new political structures and power-sharing arrangements and the challenge of educating people how these operate and what it means to be a citizen within these new arrangements. There is a real shift in power relations within the society and the need for public education that promotes equality, non-discrimination and respect for difference. There are numerous victims and survivors of the conflict, many of whom still seek truth about past events or struggle with the legacies of the conflict and need recognition and support. A new generation of children has been born since the signing of the peace agreement and we no longer have any children in our primary schools with direct experience or memory of the conflict, but this raises questions about how we explain our recent past to successive generations and how we remember, commemorate or acknowledge the past.

Overall, these issues raise questions for educators at three levels. These concern the *governance and control* of the education system; education *structures*; and educational *content and processes*. Some more specific issues include the following:

- Governance and control of the education system may change to reflect changing power relations, politically and within society. Challenges include how to insulate education from political interference in appointments, equitable distribution of resources and procurement. Helpful strategies could involve more inclusive representation in the management and control of education services; better arrangements for transparency and accountability; and greater participation in school governance (e.g. mechanisms and potential benefits of involving children, parents and local communities)
- Transitional processes create opportunities for reform of education institutions and structures. For example:
 - Possibilities for decentralized control of education
 - Policies to address former segregation of education through schooling, teacher education (wealth, language, religion, gender..)
 - Even where schools remain segregated, there may be opportunities to introduce education initiatives that advocate sensitivity to diversity and inclusion of minorities
 - Education reforms in terms of administration (e.g. equality issues)

- Educational content and processes may also be the means by which new generations learn about recent conflict within their own society and explore possibilities for future transformation or reconciliation. Formal education might include areas within the curriculum that deal with the past, transitional arrangements and future challenges for the society. This gives rise to a series of extremely challenging questions for educators including:
 - The need to clarify why such work should be included in the curriculum (is it to seek truth, to understand conflict – what are the key reasons?)
 - How can the task be developed in a way that secures the support of parents and wider society. How is ‘legitimacy’ and ‘permission’ secured?
 - Epistemological questions. Is truth ‘objective’, ‘subjective’, ‘relative’, ‘inter-subjective’ – what position should educators take?
 - Conceptual issues. There are many complex and contested concepts associated with educational enquiry in this area (truth, justice, amnesty, reparations, forgiveness....). How can these be interrogated, clarified?
 - Where does this work sit within the current curriculum? Is it part of history, social studies, peace, human rights or citizenship education?
 - What skills do children need to learn to interpret evidence or assess the authenticity and credibility of multiple versions of the past (pedagogy, methodologies..)?
 - Are there gender differences in the way that young men and women relate to the past? What education environment do they need to learn about these issues (shared, separate..)?
 - Resources. What texts, artefacts, people, sites, multiple perspectives and resources of civil society are acceptable and most useful?
 - What approach should be adopted by schools in relation to memorialisation, remembrance and commemoration?
 - What opportunities exist to promote inter-generational learning?
 - What steps need to be taken to consult, engage and be sensitive to concerns of victims and survivors when developing curriculum?
 - What ethical and child protection issues (such as confidentiality, disclosure, psychosocial support) have to be considered?
 - How can teachers (who have their own loyalties or may have been part of the conflict) receive intensive training and support? What form of training is most appropriate?