Sharing Education in Northern Ireland: what lessons can be learned from understanding how teachers share in inter-school collaborations?

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In Northern Ireland there has been a significant increase in recent years in the development of shared education projects. These are funded initiatives intended to encourage schools to work collaboratively around meaningful educational goals in order to enhance opportunities for cross-community interaction and reconciliation. This paper is based on research carried out with teachers and senior leaders involved in one such shared education project. The research aimed to discover the nature of the social processes and interactions between teachers when engaged in inter-school collaborative activities in an effort to understand what it is possible to share in a context where communities and schools remain largely separated along religious lines. Using a grounded theory methodology a range of conceptual categories were identified as part of the sharing processes and, eventually, an ‘analytic story’ was developed around two core categories: framing and activity.

‘Framing’ is when actors within the inter-school collaboration activity made sense of their involvement through processes of representation and negotiation.

The ‘activity’ of sharing involved the implementation and outworking of the aims of the shared activity; it was sharing in practice: the decision-making, the giving, the taking, the organising of events, the meetings, the design of learning tasks, the leading, the creating, the planning and the teaching.

The evidence showed that these two concepts are fundamentally linked and are situated within a social context which places constraints upon and provides opportunities for sharing. The process of framing inevitably involved conflict and tension around competing aims, motivations, values and priorities; and while certain actions served to build bridges and create trust others consolidated difference and separateness. Using the language of the conceptual categories, the analytic story was employed to give a narrative understanding of the complex relationships and processes involved when the teachers engage in a shared enterprise.

Using this analytical lens to understand how teachers share provides a number of instructive lessons for schools involved in inter-school collaboration, not just in Northern Ireland, but potentially in a wide variety of contexts, and this paper concludes by providing some recommendations arising from the research in relation to: building strong partnerships; collaborative planning; teacher buy-in to school networks; teacher identity; and teachers’ construction of learning environments likely to enhance pupil collaboration.