SCHOOL COLLABORATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND: TRANSFORMING OR REINFORCING DIVISIONS?

Caitlin Donnelly
Queens University, Belfast, UK

As in the rest of the UK, there has been a concerted effort by education policy makers in Northern Ireland to promote collaborative arrangements between schools. There is now a legal guarantee that all pupils post 14 will have the opportunity to avail of a wider range of subjects and it is expected that schools will work with others in their locality to deliver this more broadly based curriculum. The institution of these collaborative arrangements is creating a new dynamic in education not least because it has opened up the potential for new relationships to develop between schools that have hitherto operated in isolated silos for either religious or academic reasons. The purpose of this paper is to explore how post-primary schools are responding to the new collaborative arrangements. Drawing on qualitative data derived from 6 partner schools representing the different school types (Catholic, Protestant, Grammar and Secondary) the paper shows that teachers and pupils are, for the most part, the opportunity to study at different schools is fostering in pupils a greater interest in and engagement with school. However the paper also reveals the complexity of the collaborative process and somewhat surprisingly [given the long history of political and communal tensions in Northern Ireland] shows that academic selection is a greater barrier to the development of inter-school relations than religious ethos. The opportunity to collaborate across religious boundaries was, albeit cautiously, welcomed by Catholic and Protestant teachers and pupils who saw the more porous school structures as offering a possibility to create the types of shared community spaces that have not been widely available in Northern Ireland. However, the perceived distinctions in grammar and secondary schools seemed to dissuade pupils from taking subjects in the ‘other’ sector. It is concluded that although collaboration is a useful mechanism to extend curricular choice and enhance the educational experience, where status differentials pertain between schools, relations between pupils and teachers can be structured by notions of superiority and inferiority and this may paradoxically lead to a restriction rather than an extension of curricular choice for pupils.