

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> Ulster University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Education (23)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Transforming an unsustainable education system: An evidence base for instigating, informing and influencing fundamental policy change in Northern Ireland		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Una O'Connor-Bones	Senior Lecturer	1999 - present
Dr Jessica Bates	Senior Lecturer	2009 - present
Dr Stephen Roulston	Lecturer	2010 - present
Professor Alan Smith	UNESCO Chair	2000 - present
Dr Matthew Milliken	Research Assistant	2019 - present
Dr Sally Cook	Reader	1998 - present
Dr Ulf Hansson	Research Associate	2011 - 2016
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Despite the profoundly important effects of political change on life in Northern Ireland (NI) since the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement was signed in 1998, NI continues to be a divided society with a system of segregated education that reinforces and perpetuates division. Having created the evidence base, stimulated debate and set the agenda for reform, Ulster University education research is now an agent of policy change. The work on Transforming Education has identified key issues that are included in the forthcoming Independent Review of Education, while Community Conversation work has had a catalytic impact on the communities involved. Research by the UNESCO Centre at Ulster University proved the case that segregated education in NI is neither compatible with the need to build cohesive communities in a shared society nor economically sustainable as a teaching model. Ulster's contribution to the research base has brought about a crucial shift in the parameters of education policy development in NI [11]. Ulster researchers have played a vital role in creating the space for change, by raising public awareness and deepening understanding in an area characterised by contested views [12]. Through the development of a new mechanism for civic engagement and agreement, the UNESCO Centre has had direct impact on decision-making in individual schools and at national policy level [13]. Ulster research continues to lead the agenda for transforming education and to provide the tools to achieve that goal.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>NI is still in transition and heavily segregated along ethno-sectarian lines, particularly in housing and schools, where the separation of children from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds for their education remains the norm. Education has the potential to address division, but change at individual, community, policy and societal levels requires high quality research evidence, combined with skill, sensitivity and tenacity to translate it into impact.</p> <p>This impact case study describes the pivotal expansion of the Ulster University UNESCO Centre's previous work (REF 2014), from focusing on curriculum reform as a mechanism for a stable and shared society, to engaging at systemic policy and planning levels. Throughout this REF period, researchers built a critical evidence base that interrogated some of the key policy decisions hindering cohesive educational reform. Ulster's research focused on integrated schooling, sustainable schools and systemic change. The Centre's outputs provide a comprehensive body of work, critiquing policy decisions on the structure and delivery of education and contributing to the development of a more equitable and sustainable, single education system.</p>		

Research by Smith and Hansson [R1] investigated and highlighted fundamental policy tensions centring on where and how children are educated, the effects on social cohesion and the economic implications of a segregated system, concluding that “*more effective processes for ascertaining parent and community preferences for schooling are required as part of area-based planning*”. Smith and Hansson recommended further examination of the exemption of teachers from Fair Employment equality legislation in NI and of the Certificate in Catholic Education for NI teachers. These key recommendations underpin Ulster’s work in this REF period.

Roulston and Hansson [R2] provided a deeper understanding of the limitations of policy directions that have reinforced and sustained segregation rather than promoting structural educational change. Roulston, Milliken, Cook and Hansson’s research [R3, R4, R5] challenged commonly accepted but unsustainable features of NI educational structures, including inherent division along denominational lines, the financial and societal cost of school duplication, and the negative impact of these on learners and teachers and on the prospects of community reconciliation. Roulston and Milliken have distilled and presented their academic research in a series of accessible briefing papers and infographics as part of a public-facing Transforming Education (TE) project. Their ongoing research is funded by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), the Community Foundation NI and the Ireland Funds.

Bates and O’Connor-Bones’ research [R6] focused on civic engagement in divided societies where school provision remains a sensitive and contentious topic at community level. To bridge the gap between individual, community and policy perspectives on school provision in NI, the researchers developed the innovative Community Conversation Toolkit. Grounded in the collaborative principles of deliberative democracy and participatory dialogue that are particularly constructive in a post-conflict context, this was a uniquely practical and dynamic response to the absence of parents’ voices in the Area Planning process for school provision in NI. The interactive and participatory design of the Toolkit gave individuals and communities a stronger voice in key decisions affecting them. It also provided statutory stakeholders responsible for public policy and decision-making with an evidence base which they used to inform their work. The innovative methodology of the Toolkit has been used in a series of Community Conversations, giving parents and school communities their first opportunity to openly share their views on future school provision in their area: “*Researchers at Ulster University ... have been pioneering a new project aimed at engaging the community here about the future of their schools – public meetings, group sessions, and online questionnaires are giving the community a greater say in agreeing a more sustainable model*” (BBCNI *Spend it Like Stormont*). The researchers have applied the methodology in specific Community Conversation projects in different (rural and urban) locations and school-specific contexts (e.g. over- and under-enrolment). This body of work was funded by the IEF, with funding from Building Change Trust and the Big Lottery Fund, running from 2017 to 2020.

**3. References to the research** Outputs can be provided by Ulster University on request.

**R1:** Smith, A & Hansson, U (2015) *A Review of Policy Areas Affecting Integration of the Education System in NI*. A report commissioned by the IEF. UNESCO Centre, Ulster University. 63 pages.

**R2:** Roulston, S & Hansson, U (2019) Kicking the can down the road? Educational solutions to the challenges of divided societies: A Northern Ireland case study. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*.

**R3:** Milliken, M, Bates, J & Smith, A (2020) Teaching Across the Divide: perceived barriers to the movement of teachers across the traditional sectors in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Educational Studies*.

**R4:** Roulston, S & Cook, S (2020) Isolated together: proximal pairs of primary schools duplicating provision in NI. *British Journal of Educational Studies*.

**R5:** Hansson, U & Roulston, S (2020) Integrated and Shared Education: Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist Party and Educational Change in Northern Ireland. *Policy Futures in Education*.

**R6:** Bates, J & O’Connor-Bones, U (2021) Community Conversations: deliberative democracy, education provision and divided societies. *SN Social Sciences*, 1, 45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-020-00048-8> [DELAYED OUTPUT]. This research output is also supported by the following reports:

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Bates J, O'Connor-Bones, U (2018) *Community Conversation Toolkit*. Funded by the IEF. UNESCO Centre, UU.

Bates, J et al. (2018) *Carnlough and Glenarm Community Conversation: Gathering views on local primary school provision*. Commissioned by the IEF.

R2-R6 have been subject to blind peer review by international editorial boards.

#### 4. Details of the impact

The New Decade, New Approach agreement that restored devolved government in NI committed the NI Executive to an independent review of education, to be carried out in 2021. The Chair of the Committee for Education, Northern Ireland Assembly, underlined how Ulster's research findings and recommendations had informed and impacted this review, "*The ground-breaking, formative work by Ulster University researchers on the Review of Educational Structures, Community Conversations, and Transforming Education has reflected many of the core challenges identified in the Terms of Reference for the Independent Review and their outputs have been pivotal in informing and influencing discourse on these fundamental issues in politics, policy and wider society*" [C1].

##### I1: Impact on education policy debate and discourse

Smith and Hansson's work [R1], commissioned by the IEF, has been integral to informed political debate on concepts of integrated and shared education structures. The evidence Smith provided to the NI Assembly's Committee for Education (2015) identified the deficiencies of a consolidated segregated school system [C2]. This evidence was cited both in the Committee's final report and in the report by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. These provided the basis for recommendations in the Response to the Department of Education Consultation on 'Shared Education Draft Policy and Legislation Consultation' (2015) [C3]. Smith's evidence also stimulated debate in the media (e.g. '*Ulster's shared education 'error': We can't afford to burn £44m on policy says expert*') that put pressure on the Department of Education to take it into account [C4].

The TE project undertaken by Roulston and Milliken has increased the impact and reach of that research, examining and illuminating issues contributing to the ethno-religious segregation of education [R1-R5]. The project produced twelve briefing papers and associated infographics that have been presented to stakeholders including NI's political parties, the Department of Education, teaching unions, the Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. The vital contribution of the briefing papers and underpinning research to critical engagement with the systemic challenges facing education and the drive to find policy solutions has been widely recognised:

"*From the DE's perspective the UU work is both timely and valuable*" [C5, Head of DE Transformation Programme Directorate].

"*In my work as an elected representative and as my party's spokesperson on education I can genuinely say that the research undertaken... has informed and aided in the development of several areas of policy*" [C5, MLA Sinn Féin].

"*The continuing use of a Catholic-specific teaching qualification in Northern Ireland is a barrier to fair employment that should be removed, [Ulster Unionist MLA] has said.*

*The Ulster Unionist MLA was commenting after a new University of Ulster (UU) report found there has been 'limited progress' in complying with a previous Department for Education recommendation that: 'CCMS (Council for Catholic Maintained Schools) may wish to consider reviewing the requirement for the certificate for all [Catholic] nursery and primary posts.'*" [C4, Ulster Unionist MLA, The News Letter, 4 March 2020]

"*The reports ... have been extremely beneficial to me as Chair of the [Community Relations Council], and as a director with the IEF... Rational, well-researched reports like these help people like me draw the attention of other people, senior figures in government, public agencies and the political world, to the issues and their impact, and more importantly to what needs to change.*" [C5, Chair of Community Relations Council, NI]

"*The work of ... Ulster University in outlining the impact of and attitude to the exception of a sector to the Fair Employment and Treatment Order, 1998 has been very helpful in understanding some of the structural issues within the system.*" [C5, NI Commissioner for Children and Young People].

Informed by the “*very useful analysis*” in the TE work and associated research, Sinn Féin, NI’s second largest political party, which had actively opposed the repeal of this exception, passed a motion at its 2020 Annual Conference mandating the party to support a review of the exception [C5]. As a direct result of engagement with the TE paper (based on R3) on the exemption of teachers from Fair Employment and Treatment Order (FETO) legislation, the teachers’ union (NASUWT) debated and subsequently strengthened their policy of opposition to the FETO exemption [C6].

The TE paper on isolated pairs of rural schools has led directly to the creation of a new, Community Foundation for Northern Ireland-funded project – Future Schools – which aims to enable local communities to develop feasible solutions to issues of school sustainability. Belfast law firm Phoenix Law used the briefing paper on school governance to prepare a case as part of a judicial review of the compatibility of religious education in NI schools with human rights legislation: “*Our angle, similar to your study, is that the current regime inspires division and segregation.*” [C7]

By targeting and tailoring their work, UNESCO Centre researchers have achieved impact through influence in NI’s executive, legislative and judicial settings, as well as in its teaching profession. Ulster research is intrinsic to policy development in NI: “*This work has had a significant impact on the wider political and policy discussion relating to the role of integrated education in post-conflict NI.*” [C8, Head of Communications, IEF]

### **I2: Impact on public awareness and understanding by creating the space for change**

Ulster’s research has provided an impetus for public debate and progressed parental preference for children of different denominations to be educated together. The disjuncture between parental, community and policy agendas highlights the need for better understanding of the rationale and process for sustainable education. Ulster researchers have both led the discourse and provided the research evidence base to underpin the case for change. Smith’s work on making the case for systemic structural change, Roulston and Milliken’s TE project, and Bates’ and O’Connor-Bones’ Community Conversations have all generated considerable media attention, raised public awareness and understanding, and stimulated wider discussion at community, policy and political levels [C4]. The TE papers in particular have been extensively covered online, in social media and on traditional media platforms, and have reached a total estimated audience of over 500,000 (based on combined viewing, listening and readership figures).

Over the current REF cycle, Ulster’s research has increasingly set the news agenda. Researchers have been regularly interviewed, precipitating debate that has featured across a range of prime-time news and current affairs programmes on BBC Radio Ulster and commercial channels, as well as on BBC Newsline, NI’s flagship TV news programme. In print, research findings have been featured in the main regional press, including Irish News, News Letter, and Belfast Telegraph. A 2020 piece about the TE project by Milliken and Roulston for NI’s high-profile political blog Slugger O’Toole (‘A challenge to the separation of schools’) generated one of the highest response rates to a posting (3,710 readers, 539 comments). One of these comments summarised the resulting discourse, “*A child learns what it is exposed to. And if a child is never exposed to Them then it will never learn to see Them the same way it sees Us*” [C4].

### **I3 Impact on civic engagement and decision-making**

The Community Conversation Toolkit developed by Bates and O’Connor-Bones [R6] has strengthened the voice and visibility of school communities. It has provided the impetus for community-led sustainable school solutions and has given statutory bodies responsible for Area Planning crucial evidence to inform and support their decision-making.

The Education Authority (EA), the statutory body responsible for delivering education services across NI, says that the Toolkit has enabled “*whole communities to meaningfully engage with education planning, and in particular with Area Planning, and contribute to more effective and informed policy implementation.*” [C9]

The Community Conversations mechanism embeds civic engagement in education, rectifying the exclusion of parents and communities from decisions on their children's schooling. The phased approach of the methodology is of particular benefit in areas where education remains a sensitive and contentious issue. The Toolkit has enabled equitable debate and increased opportunity for collective advocacy. School leaders have said that they trust the underpinning work as "*independent research that gives parents a voice*" and that they recognise the mechanism's power to "*shape the strategic response and ensure that future primary provision reflects the community's preferences.*" [C4]

The rural Glenarm/Carnlough Community Conversation [R6] brought together parents and community representatives from across the religious and political divide. Parents valued the opportunity to contribute to independent, non-partisan conversations about school provision in their area: "*If it was just a discussion organised by the EA, I think it might have been too formalised and more confrontational ... Most people seemed to naturally come to what seemed to be a sensible conclusion, so I thought it was very good to get that discussion flowing with the independent intervention from the University*" [C10, Parent Participant]. The Community Conversation contributed to the decision of Seaview Primary to apply for Integrated status, the first Catholic primary school to propose integration. Parent participants said that the Community Conversation increased community confidence - "*I think it gave us the confidence to move forward because there then was evidence*" [C10, Parent Participant] – and that the independent aspect of the research added integrity to the process: "*within the community it was seen to be independent and neutral and it allowed people to feel freed up to talk and I think people really did, at all levels, engage in the process*" [C10, Parent Participant]. The work undertaken by Ulster was cited multiple times in the school's Development Proposal for integration, including the statement that following the publication of Ulster's work on the Conversation, "*interest in an integrated school in the village of Glenarm expanded exponentially.*" [C11]

If NI is to have an education system that is sustainable and inclusive, serving to unite and renew a still-divided society, school provision must be transformed. That this transformation has begun is testament to the impact of Ulster's research.

##### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

**C1:** Email from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education.

**C2:** Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education, Minutes of Evidence from Professor Alan Smith, UNESCO Chair, Ulster University, 4 February 2015.

**C3:** Equality Commission NI response to Consultation on Shared Education Draft Policy and Legislation Consultation, March 2015.

**C4:** Media items relating to researchers' work on shared and Integrated education, Community Conversations and the TE briefing documents.

**C5:** Testimony for the TE project from key stakeholders.

**C6:** NASUWT communication.

**C7:** Solicitor personal communication.

**C8:** Letter from Head of Communications, Integrated Education Fund, emphasising the impact of the research undertaken by Education staff at Ulster and how it is transforming educational structures in NI.

**C9:** Testimony for the Community Conversation Toolkit from the Integrated Education Fund, the Education Authority and Building Change Trust.

**C10:** Community Conversation impact on a school community: Seaview Primary School Focus Group Report and interview with Principal.

**C11:** Seaview Primary School Development Proposal.