

Political and religious conflict of northern ireland



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Background: The internal conflict

The political and religious conflict in Northern Ireland has had a long history of being passed from generation to generation and is a culture where being part of one group has acquired anger towards member of another. The problems began when the British granted independence and partitioned the island, dividing the Irish people and imposing a different British identity on the North. From 1690 to 1916, there were many political debates and religious battles which centred on opposing views of the area's status as some people (Protestant Unionist communist- British) believe that it should remain part of the United Kingdom, while others (Catholic Nationalist community- Irish) believe that it should leave United Kingdom and become part of the Republic of Ireland.

On April 24th 1916, Irish rebels seized various strategic buildings in Dublin and the battle between the British and the rebels raged on for 5 days. The rebels were forced to surrender and the British sentenced them to death.

From 1919 to 1922, there was a war of independence between the Irish and the British. The IRA (Irish Republican Army led by Michael Collins) used violence in the attempt to force the Britain to negotiate, resulting in the introduction of a partition (Government of Ireland Act) and the formation of two parliaments, one in Dublin(Irish free state) and one in Belfast(under the law part of UK- British). Unfortunately, this resulted in the escalations of more violence as the Catholics opposed to the partition of Ireland and another civil war occurred. The newly formed free state army carried out violent exchanges with former IRA comrades, resulting in the death of Michael Collins and the imprisonment of over 1000 Irish rebels without trials.

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After a brief bombing campaign in England by the IRA, the Irish Free State executed five IRA leaders and introduced internment (the imprisonment or confinement of people without trial). This managed to stop the violence temporarily until the year 1969. However, during this period, the Catholic minority suffered discrimination over housing and jobs which further fuelled bitter resentment among them.

In 1969, the Catholics held a Civil Rights protest and demanded to be treated as equal citizens. The police force of the day (Under the instruction of the Unionist Government of Belfast) attacked the Catholics and the Protestant Unionist communist set up counter protests. The Catholics were burned out of their homes and this led to escalating violence. As the violence continued, the British Army went on a mission to Northern Ireland in an attempt to restore peace. Unfortunately, the attempt was counterproductive and ended up bringing more conflict as instead of helping both the Protestants and the Catholics make peace with each other, the British saw both parties as its enemies. This led to some members of the two originally conflicting parties to collaborate against the British Army.

As the violence continued, the British Government working with the Unionist Northern Ireland government introduced internment (the imprisonment or confinement of people without trial) and nearly 2000 people were arrested and held without trial in a bid to prevent further attacks on the British troops. This increases support for the IRA and their numbers grew quickly. This situation is worsened in 1972 when British soldiers shot dead 13 men and injured 14 others. After that, thousands of people joined the IRA and violence increased. Since then, the Protestant and Catholics engaged in several wars

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which involve bombs, guns and other forms of violence, claiming the lives of thousands.

In the early 1990s, negotiations took place between 8 political parties and the British and Irish governments, leading to the “ Good Friday” agreement, which consisted of setting up of a power-sharing executive, with ministerial posts distributed by party strength, and elected assembly, However, the protestant community said that they will only be convinced when they see evidence that the IRA had destroyed its weapons.

As a result, negative social impacts including poverty, lack of educational, health services are basic concerns of people living in Northern Ireland. In this report, we will be looking at the problems on education among young people living in Northern Ireland closely.

Social effect: Segregated Education

Although The Troubles may be an internal conflict amongst the grown-ups, young children and teenagers were also affected. The internal conflict has made the environment unsuitable and robbed them of the chance to receive proper education.

Due to the conflict, it is difficult for students from either background to study in the same school. Hence, Northern Ireland has had two separate, religiously based educational systems since its foundation in 1921.

The state system is mainly attended by Protestants students where British history is taught. They also learned to be loyal to Britain when they sing the British national anthem. They only played British sports like rugby, hockey

and cricket. Nothing about the Catholics or the history of Northern Ireland is taught from a neutral perspective.

The Catholics attend all grant maintained schools which are operated by the Catholic Church and administered through the Council of Catholic Maintained Schools. They are taught Irish history, Irish language, Irish culture and Irish sport like hurling. They also learned to be loyal to Republic of Ireland when Britain is viewed as a foreign country in class. Nothing about the Protestants or the history of Northern Ireland is taught from a neutral perspective.

As a result, there is hardly a chance for Protestant and Catholic children to interact with each other or to understand and appreciate each other's values and beliefs. As a result of segregation and different curricula, students of the two groups cannot understand each other and even develop a sense of prejudice due to the effect of their teachings. With tensions and conflicts between the two groups, it gives no chance for intercommunity interaction and hence provides no opportunity for them to build a common or national identity.

Moreover, due to the segregated form of education, Protestant teachers could only be employed by Protestant schools, since Catholic schools were worried that the Protestant teachers would teach the students the Protestant version of the Irish experience and that they would teach their students the "wrong" values and beliefs. As a result of the Troubles, the Protestant students could not study in an education system free of prejudice since they were taught the idea of being superior to the Catholics since young.

On the other hand, the needs of the Catholics would not be seen as important as the Protestants' since they were the minority. Therefore, Catholic teachers would find it hard to be employed as there were not as many Catholic churches around. If the Catholic teachers would to depend solely on this profession, problems in earning themselves a living would likely arise in the long run. Furthermore, Catholic students would find it hard to enroll in schools as well as most schools in Northern Ireland operate based on the Protestant education system, to cater to the needs of the major Protestant students.

With this segregated form of education, consisting of both teachings by different groups of teachers, generations of Protestant and Catholic children will grow up to become suspicious and intolerant of each other even in adulthood, as education plays a vital part in one's life and a country's future. When the history is taught at young, it is hard for him to change this first impression and mindset even after he grows up, leading to conflict between the two communities.

Solution: Integrated School

Despite this form of segregation, a small percentage of children attended the integrated schools, where the aim is to allow more interaction between the Protestant and Catholic children. However, these schools are not popular and only attracted about 5% of the total school-going population, a disproportionately concentration among those from a very small ethnic minority in Northern Ireland.

Although there have been various policy initiatives ranging from “ reform of the curriculum to integrated schools over the years” (Cox et al, 2000, p. 166) to promote multiculturalism between the communities, feelings of insecurity and lack of trust for the opposite community can be reasons to why these initiatives are ineffective in overcoming community division. Moreover, the habit of continuing with what is familiar makes them give in to staying within their own communities easily. As a result, instead of sending their children to the integrated school, Protestant state school or Catholic Church would instinctively come in as their first choices. All these contribute to slowing down the peace-building process and the low attendance rate at integrated schools.

Integrated schools are indeed important in bringing multiculturalism into the society, yet the role played by mainstream sectors should also be acknowledged. As these mainstream sectors are where more than 90% of the students in Northern Ireland go every day (eg. Protestant schools and Catholic churches). They are important too in promoting mutual understanding, culture of tolerance and respect for diversity to the schooling population.

With more professional development programmes for teachers, and the belief in young people themselves to make a difference in peace development process, community division can be eventually overcome. Even though the peace-building process cannot bring about prosperity to children growing up in poverty immediately, nor can it reduce the rate of unemployment significantly, much can still be achieved over time.

Social Effect: Unsafe environment

The impact of the conflict on students from both Protestant and Catholic communities could be detrimental sometimes. Between 1969 to 1998, 257 young people under the age of 19 died as a result of the conflict. (S Ewart, 2004) This shows that the internal conflict not only affects adults who are responsible for the quarrel that broke out, but innocent young children are also drag into the conflict, regardless of whether they have a part in it. The death of so many young people clearly shows that it is not a safe environment for them to live in, let alone study in.

Under an unsteady learning environment, it is highly possible for a child in Northern Ireland to be poorly educated or even uneducated. When such situations occur, they can hardly find a job. Especially with the two groups having prejudice over one another, chances to be employed are very limited, especially with the Catholics. According to statistics, there is a 13.6% increase in the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland in the past year. (BBC, 2010). With a high rate of unemployment, people in north Ireland will start to blame the other group for their misfortune and this result in a greater misunderstanding. Under these circumstances, more riots will take place and it will become nearly impossible to develop a sense of belonging. This will then further worsen the tension and conflicts between the Catholics and the Protestants and the cycle will repeat itself.

Also, schools had been bombed in chaos and even had to close down due to the fierce conflicts between the two groups. In such an unsteady studying environment, students from both groups could encounter difficulty focusing on study as they are all in fear. Some of them might not dare to go to home,

hindering their education, while even those who do attend schools are deprived of the normal social development a student should have. They will face misunderstandings or problems which cause effects that will follow them into their later life. (Cunningham, K., 2009)

Other effects cause by the riots could be for example, the loss of one's family members, witnessing violence and murders, and experiences of rioting and bombs, which are common causes of psychological and emotional trauma. The child will develop an unstable mindset and not be able to focus on his or her education. The emotional trauma that child received would prevent him from healthy mind growth and this will further affect his future.

The pattern of violence in Northern Ireland has changed from street rioting, bombing to single acts of assassination on the opposite community, many of which were witnessed by young people. One example would be a whole classroom of school children watching their school teacher being shot dead during lesson. This could directly impact the children's learning interest and even built up fear, hatred for the opposite community, worsening the tension and conflict between Catholics and Protestants.

Social effect: Unemployment among school leavers

Asking which school an individual has attended is sufficient enough to identify his or her religion. This practice of labeling was widely used for discrimination by employers that it was adopted as the basis for monitoring employment ratios. (Cox et al, 2000, p. 166)

The different kinds of education in Northern Ireland

Types of schools

1. Controlled Schools
2. Catholic Maintained Schools
3. Other Maintained Schools
4. Voluntary Grammar Schools
5. Grant Maintained Integrated Schools

1. Controlled Schools

Controlled schools are the most common amongst the different types of schools. Nearly half of the schools in Northern Ireland are controlled schools. They are considered Protestant schools as the board of governors who are increasingly taking over the ownership of controlled schools from the Education and Library Boards are largely represented by Protestant Churches. The board owning the controlled schools had the responsibilities of meeting the recurrent costs and has total control over the employment of teachers.

2. Catholic Maintained Schools

Catholic maintained schools are the second common type of school. They account for slightly less than half of the schools in Northern Ireland and are owned by the Catholic Church. The Education and Library Boards meet the recurrent costs of the schools, and Council of Catholic Maintained schools have the control over the employment of teachers.

3. Other Maintained Schools

These schools make up a very small percentage of the schools in Northern Ireland. They are owned by the Protestant Church. The Education and Library

Board are responsible for meeting the recurrent costs and have control only over the employment of non teaching staff.

4. Voluntary Grammar Schools

Voluntary grammar schools make up a relatively small percentage of schools in Northern Ireland, and are neither Catholic nor Protestant. They are owned by school trustees and the board of governors of the school employs all teaching and non-teaching staff.

5. Grant Maintained Integrated Schools

Grant maintained integrated schools are the least common type of schools in Northern Ireland. They are neither Protestant nor Catholic, and are owned by school trustees. The recurrent costs are met by the Education and Library Boards.

Analysis

As we know, the conflict on Northern Ireland has caused its people to be segregated. It has also impacted the education of the students as the education system also divides the students into Protestant and Catholics. As we can see, almost all schools in Northern Ireland are either Protestant or Catholic. Integrated schools are almost non-existent in Northern Ireland as they make up a very small percentage of schools in Northern Ireland.

As we can see, the Education and Library board does not have the control of the employment of teachers. Instead, the owners of the school have the power to decide the employment of teachers. This is to make sure that the teachers in the schools support and have the same beliefs as the owners of the schools. As such, the teachers will teach the students that their group is

superior to the other and that the other group is their enemy who should be killed.

The students receive such education since young and will hence grow up with the mindset that the two groups can never live in harmony. This will result in a never-ending war between the two groups as they try to exterminate the other group.

Also, as the Protestants are the majority in Northern Ireland, they are able to hold better jobs and are better off than the Catholics in general. As such, there are more Protestant schools than Catholic schools, and the Controlled schools, which are Protestant, have the ability to meet the recurrent costs. The Catholic Maintained schools, however, have to rely on the Education and Library boards to provide them with funds.

The Controlled schools would be able to provide their students with better facilities than the Catholic Maintained schools as their funds come from themselves and they would be willing to spend more. The Education and Library board provides the Catholic Maintained schools with funds, and the amount of money they receive would be less than what the Protestants are willing to spend on Protestant schools. This because the Education and Library boards are part of the ministry and the Protestants, who are the majority in Northern Ireland, was slowly taking over the ministry. Naturally, they would minimize the funds given to the Catholic schools in hope of forcing the schools to shut down so that their children would have no school to go to and they would be unable to education their children the “ Catholic way”.

As such, we can conclude that the education system in Northern Ireland is largely affected by the internal conflict between the Protestants and Catholics. The education system teaches the students to hate and kill each other, and the students do not receive proper education that will benefit their future. Instead, they are taught how to destroy the future of Northern Ireland. Also, we can conclude that the Catholics are disadvantaged when it comes to education as they are generally less well off and cannot afford to provide their students with better facilities in school, and that the ministry has no control over the education system.

Readiness of students for employment

As we can see from the graph, the Catholic students generally achieve less than their Protestant counterparts. This can be attributed to the fact that there are more Protestant schools than Catholic schools, and also probably because the Protestants can afford better education for their children.

We can also conclude that the education system was not effective as there was significant percentage of students who do not have any qualifications after going through the education system. This can be attributed to the fact that the schools focused more on teaching their students to hate the other group and hence did not provide their students with proper education. The main purpose of schools in Northern Ireland was teach the students about the internal conflict, hence the students were unable to do well academically as there was not much focus on the main subjects like mathematics and science.