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## CHAPTER SIX

# PARENTAL OPINION

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### INTRODUCTION

Gallagher (1989) indicates that beyond opinion surveys on integrated education and two studies by the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research, "*relatively little appears to be available on parents' opinions or attitudes to educational provision*". We know of no surveys which have looked at parents' attitudes to inter school contact as part of EMU programmes. The project's involvement with three Strabane primary schools gave us an opportunity to initiate work in this area. Given that Principals and teachers often express uncertainty about the way parents might feel about contact between controlled and maintained schools we were anxious to test opinion on a number of issues. These were identified in consultation with Principals from the three schools, and a short questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire was delivered via pupils to the parents of one P6 and one P7 class in each of the three schools. In this way questionnaires were given to the parents of almost a quarter of the pupils enrolled in the three schools, although we had no way of knowing whether one parent answered the questionnaire or whether the mother and father conferred on their answers. Out of a total of 185 questionnaires, 145 were returned giving an overall return rate of 78.4%. The return rate from the maintained schools (84%) was higher than parents from the controlled school (62%), but we feel both these are acceptable for comparative purposes.

The questionnaire identified six main issues. Firstly, we wished to see what general level of support there was from parents for the schools arranging contact between pupils. Secondly, we wished to see how frequently parents thought such contact should take place. Thirdly, we wanted to know what level of support there was for three broad types of contact (single day outings, work in each others' schools, and residential work). Fourthly, we wished to check out whether all schools had been equally successful in informing parents about their child's involvement in the project. Fifthly, we wished to give parents a chance to say what they think EMU is about. Sixthly, we wanted to hear what parents might wish to say about the introduction of EMU to the school curriculum as part of Education Reform.

We feel the questionnaire (Appendix I) had a number of strengths. Its design was simple, but a number of issues were clearly addressed. The return rate was good. This

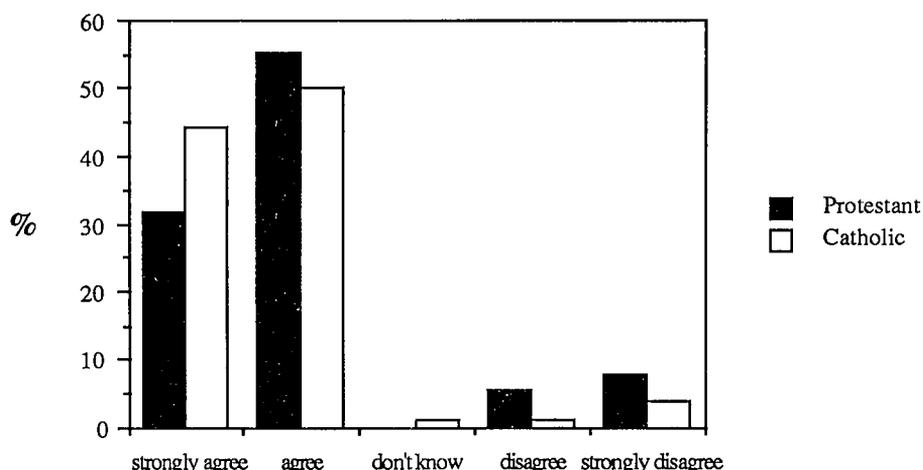
was in part achieved by asking Principals to distribute the questionnaires (in sealed envelopes) and tell pupils it was important for their parents to return them by the following day, or the day after at the very latest. The simple design of the questionnaire also meant that it was straightforward and took little time to complete. Perhaps the most important feature was that the questionnaire was given to parents from schools which had been actively involved in inter school contact for the past four years. Therefore, parents were not being asked hypothetical questions, but ones which asked them what they felt the schools in Strabane should be doing. We expect that parents are less likely to express an opinion simply to appear liberal when the questions are directly concerned with what is happening to their own child at school. However, there are also a number of limitations to what can be inferred from information gathered in this way and these are discussed at the end of the chapter. We will now look at each of the issues in turn. Where questions asked parents to indicate a strength of feeling a five-point scale was used giving a range, 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'don't know', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree'. Where appropriate the responses are given in the form of charts. These charts have been standardised for comparative purposes and give the percentage responses within any particular group. In places the labels Protestant and Catholic are used to distinguish between the parents of controlled and maintained schools. This is done to draw attention to the religious or cultural affiliation normally associated with such schools.

### 1 General Support for Contact

Parents were asked if Protestant and Catholic children in Strabane should have the chance to meet and work together as part of school activities. The responses are summarised by figure 6.1.

**Overall a majority (90% of all parents) agreed that Protestant and Catholic children should meet as part of school activities (40% strongly agreeing and 50% agreeing). The response showed slightly stronger support from Catholic parents, but the level of support from both sets of parents was remarkably high. Comparing the two groups, 87% of the Protestant parents support contact (32% strongly agreeing and 55% agreeing); and 96% of the Catholic parents support contact (44% strongly agreeing and 50% agreeing).**

Figure 6.1: Parental support for inter school contact by religion



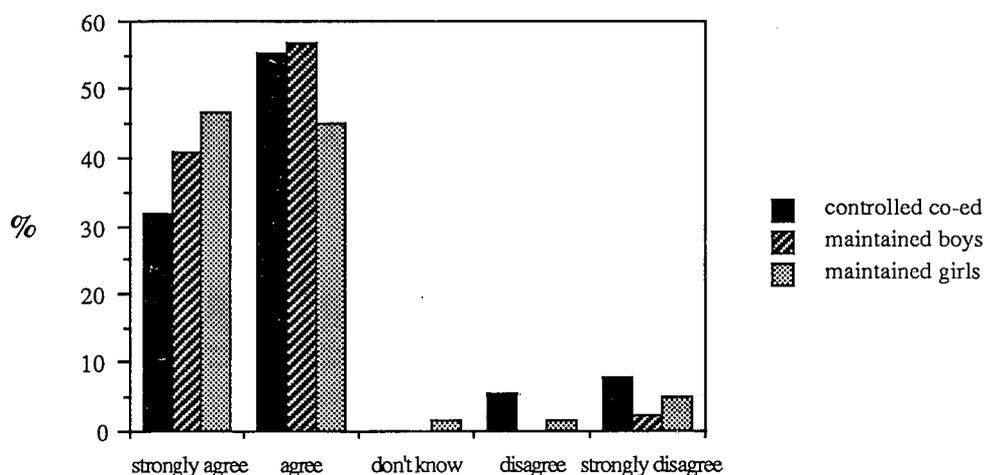
Overall a minority (7% of all parents) disagreed that Protestant and Catholic children should meet as part of school activities (2% disagreeing and 5% strongly disagreeing). There were differences between Protestant and Catholic parents. Comparing the two groups, 13% of the Protestant parents do not support contact (5% disagreeing and 8% strongly disagreeing); and 5% of the Catholic parents do not support contact (1% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing).

Taken as a whole the pattern of results seem to suggest that Protestant parents are slightly more lukewarm to the idea of contact than Catholic parents, and where they object parents are more likely to strongly disagree than simply disagree. However, it should be noted that the level of support was high from both groups and it is only when we look at the relatively small percentages of parents who do not support contact that the different climate of parental opinion which the schools have to work with can be seen. Both types of school have a minority of parents who do not support contact, but the controlled school has a larger minority of parents who feel this way. This may be partly explained by the fact that the controlled school is less likely to have a homogeneous community

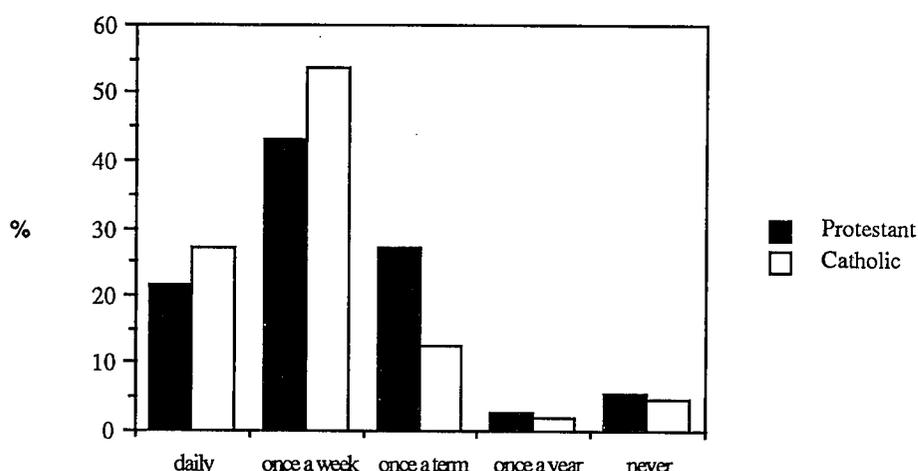
since it contains a wider variety of pupils who come from different religious denominations or cultural backgrounds. Even though the minority of parents who do not support contact is relatively small it does suggest that the decision to make contact a voluntary, rather than compulsory aspect of EMU, was a wise one (see report of EMU Working Party, DENI 1989). Had this not been the case controlled schools in particular would have had some concern about losing the pupils of parents who have strong objections to cross-community contact as part of school activity.

It is worth drawing attention to another point which suggests that the minority of parents who object to pupil contact should not only be thought of in terms of differences between Catholic and Protestant parents. Figure 6.2 shows how the strength of feeling against contact varied between the three schools. Indeed, if anything there is more similarity in the pattern of opposition to contact between the controlled school and the maintained girls' school. This suggests that the strength of opposition in any school may be more dependent on the particular circumstances of the school, rather than simply on whether it is 'controlled' or 'maintained'.

Figure 6.2: Parental support for inter school contact by school type



**Figure 6.3: Parents' desired frequency of pupil contact by religion**



## 2 Frequency of Contact

When the primary schools initially developed their contact programme for P4 pupils, weekly contact took place for a short period. Discussions with teachers had suggested that they considered this too frequent, not just because it was onerous, but it was also thought that contact which involved work in each others' schools might be perceived by parents as moving toward a form of institutional integration. We therefore wished to check out the frequency of contact which parents might find acceptable. Parents were asked how often they thought Strabane primary schools should arrange for Catholic and Protestant pupils to work together. A five-point scale was given covering the range 'daily', 'once a week', 'once a term', 'once a year', 'never'. The results are summarised in figure 6.3.

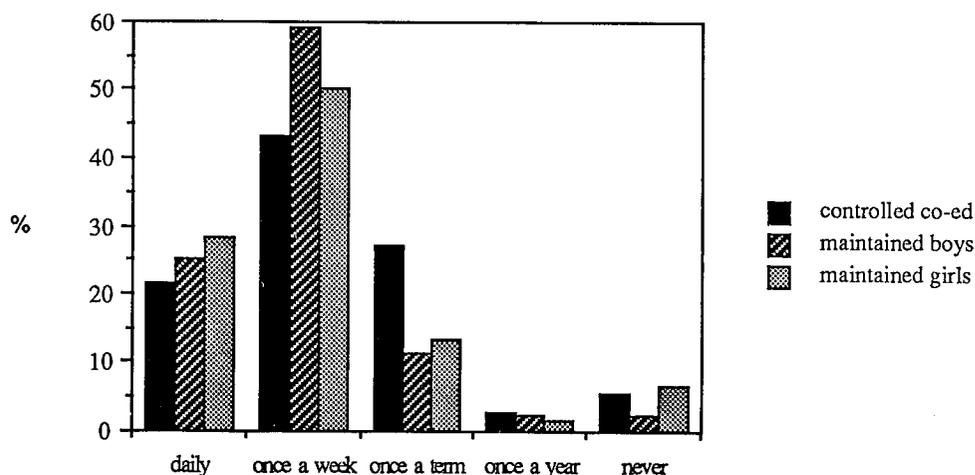
Overall a majority (75% of all parents) agreed that Protestant and Catholic children should meet at least once a week (25% daily and 50% once a week). The response showed stronger support for frequent contact from Catholic parents, but the pattern of support from both sets of parents was remarkably similar. Comparing

the two groups, 65% of the Protestant parents support at least weekly (22% daily and 43% once a week); and 81% of the Catholic parents support at least weekly (27% daily and 54% once a week).

Overall a minority (7% of all parents) thought Protestant and Catholic children should meet only once a year or never (2% once a year and 5% never). Feeling for this frequency of contact was similar in Protestant and Catholic parents. Comparing the two groups, 8% of the Protestant parents wished infrequent or no contact (3% once a year and 5% never); and 7% of the Catholic parents wished infrequent or no contact (2% once a year and 5% never).

An interesting picture emerges when the results of this question are compared to the first question about support. The 87% of Protestant parents who support contact seems to convert into 65% who would wish to see contact taking place on at least a weekly basis. The 96% of Catholic parents who support contact seems to convert into 81% who would wish to see contact taking place on at least a weekly basis.

**Figure 6.4: Parents' desired frequency of pupil contact by school**



The picture at the other end of the spectrum seems a little more difficult to explain. **The 13% of Protestant parents who do not support contact seems to convert into 8% who wish for infrequent contact (once a year or never).** Presumably some of the Protestant parents who did not express support for contact, nevertheless see contact once a term as acceptable. **The 5% of Catholic parents who did not express support for contact seem to convert into 7% who wish for infrequent contact (once a year or never).** Presumably, a few of these Catholic parents feel that agreeing with contact once a year is being supportive of contact. Therefore, the relationship between statements of support and the frequency of contact which such support suggests is not just as straightforward as we might think.

As before, there were differences between the individual schools (see figure 6.4).

### 3 Forms of Contact

Parents were asked three separate questions to see what level of support existed for three different types of contact. The first question asked parents how they felt about pupils from Strabane primary schools going on **joint field trips** to a local venue. The second question asked parents how they felt about their child **visiting other primary schools** in Strabane as part of their classwork. The third question asked parents how they would feel about their child going on a **residential (overnight) trip** within Northern Ireland with the other schools. Parents responses are summarised in the following table:

Parent responses (%) to different forms of contact

		strongly agree	agree	don't know	dis-agree	strongly disagree	%
Joint field trip in the local area	P	26	63	3	3	5	100
	C	42	51	2	1	4	100
Visits to each other's schools	P	21	66	5	5	3	100
	C	48	46	3	1	2	100
Residential trip within N.Ireland	P	21	58	13	0	8	100
	C	36	42	14	5	3	100

The majority of parents gave their support for all three forms of contact. **Joint field trips are supported by 89% of Protestant and 93% of Catholic parents.**

**Visits to each others' schools to complete projects as part of classwork is supported by 87% of Protestant and 94% of Catholic parents.** This is an important marker for the schools because it indicates the strength of support for this form of contact and, taken alongside

the fact that 65% of Protestant and 81% of Catholic parents desire at least weekly contact, it suggests that the schools could operate a programme involving weekly visits to each others' schools with some confidence.

**A residential trip within Northern Ireland is supported by 79% of Protestant and 78% of Catholic parents.** This is another important marker for the schools since a joint residential visit had been planned as part of the P7 programme for the first time in 1990.

The minority who disagree with these forms of contact remained consistently low, the strongest feelings of opposition being expressed by those Protestant parents opposed to a residential trip (8%). The responses do not make it clear whether any expressed opposition is simply due to the fact that controlled and maintained schools are jointly involved. It is possible that some parents may disagree with these forms of contact for other reasons, for example, the feeling that their child is too young to spend a night away from home.

Although these questions allowed us to gauge the level of general support for certain **forms of contact**, the information does not allow us to draw any conclusions about the way parents might feel about particular **types of activity**. For example, parents might feel comfortable with the idea of inter school visits for class projects involving joint computer work, but we cannot say if the same level of support would exist for a similar form of contact but which involves, for example, project work on conflict resolution. Responses to our questions do not allow us to draw any conclusions about what parents envisage children doing when they meet. We cannot say what percentage of parents would support the idea that either the activity or the material used when children meet should have an explicit community relations dimension.

### 4 Awareness of Involvement

Of the 145 parents who completed questionnaires, 75 had a child in P6 and 70 a child in P7. The schools had been working with the project for four years, initially beginning with P4 classes and building further up the school with each successive year. This meant that the P6 group were the pupils who had been involved from the outset. When the parental survey was carried out these pupils had already been involved in programmes for three successive years. On the other hand P7 pupils were just about to be involved in a linked contact programme as part of the project for the first time. We wished to see if parents were aware that their child had or had not been involved in the programme. The results are summarised in the following table:

**Parents' awareness of their child's involvement in contact**

	Yes	Don't Know	No
P6			
Protestant (n=23)	19	2	2
Catholic (n=52)	46	0	6
P7			
Protestant (n=15)	7	4	4
Catholic (n=55)	21	11	23

The results show that only eight parents of P6 children (2 Protestant and 6 Catholic) indicated that their children had not been involved in contact. The P6 children had been involved for at least three years and **this suggests that all the schools have been successful in communicating with parents about their child's involvement in contact programmes.** Neither does it indicate that eight children were involved without their parent's consent since a number of parents had specifically requested that their child not be involved in contact and the schools respected these parents' wishes. Such children would therefore not have been involved in contact even though most of their P6 peers were.

The responses from P7 parents cannot be so easily understood. P7 pupils were only about to participate in a linked programme as part of the project. Nevertheless, a number of parents in all three schools stated that their child had been in contact with pupils from the other schools. This might be partly explained by the fact that sometime in their school career their child may have been involved in inter school contact through a different scheme, for example, Book Week or the Ulster American Folk Park programme operated by the Western Education and Library Board. Some parents may have anticipated the forthcoming P7 programme, being unclear whether it had yet started.

We were also able to look at the earlier questions to see whether a separate pattern of responses emerged between the parents of P7 pupils and the parents of P6 pupils who had been involved longest. No significant differences emerged between P6 and P7 parents on any of the other questions.

### 5 What is EMU about?

We included an open-ended question to get some idea of what parents perceive the aims of Education for Mutual Understanding to be. Over half (58%) of the 145 parents responded to this question (45% of the Protestant parents and 63% of the Catholic parents). Of those who responded the majority variously described EMU to be about children working together, teaching Catholic and Protestant children about each others'

customs and beliefs, teaching children tolerance and respect of other peoples' beliefs. The following is a sample of the comments made by parents. It is worth pointing out that the parents of children at these schools represent a good cross-section of the socio-economic pattern in Strabane, a town characterised by high unemployment and strongly-held political views.

*"I think EMU is about schools joining together and working together and I think it is a very good idea" (P)*

*"Children getting together periodically on outside school activities" (P)*

*"EMU is both sides of the community working together and each side knowing what it is to be a Catholic/Protestant, i.e. learning this as children" (P)*

*"For children to learn to live with each other despite their religions" (P)*

*"Teaching awareness of the different cultures and traditions that exist in N Ireland to assist understanding of and appreciation of our difference" (P)*

*"Learning to understand each other - perspectives, traditions, religious affilliations, race, colour, handi-capped (physically, mentally), sex etc" (P)*

*"Learning to live with one another and accepting each other for what we are" (C)*

*"I think EMU is a way of getting Catholic and Protestant children to work together and to understand each other better" (C)*

*"It helps them to have respect for the opinions of others both social and religious-wise. For some children it is the only chance they might get to communicate with children of a different faith" (C)*

*"To respect each others point of view" (C)*

*"I never heard about it until now but I think it would be ideal" (C)*

*"An opportunity for all children in Northern Ireland to learn about their own culture and that of other traditions" (C)*

*"I think EMU is about making a child aware off what is going on in society. Getting together with people and learning about different traditions" (C)*

*"I think EMU should be about teaching children to have respect for people who have different backgrounds, beliefs, culture and values from themselves" (C)*

*"I think EMU is about learning together as Christians, and not asking if you are Orange or Green" (C)*

*"That children should be taught just because they go to different schools and Churches that they are different from each other" (C)*

*"I actually know a little about it, that each Protestant and Catholic child will know and learn about each other and the best way of doing it is by applying it into there school life and the outings which are being implemented at the minute" (C)*

*"EMU is to help in my mind to bring Catholic and Protestant together to help them to live in peace in the future which I think is a splendid idea" (C)*

*"I think EMU is about becoming aware of the traditions in Ireland (usually the 2 traditions - I am not sure if this includes possible class divisions as well). I would expect in the later school years that EMU will have looked at wider difference in the community (local and national - European and worldwide)." (C)*

*"I think EMU is about children finding out they are all the same, that they like and dislike the same things. Its the parents who put ideas in their heads" (C)*

*"Coparation with other primary schools" (C)*

*"EMU is the harnessing of the energy, wasted through the segregation of communities in NI, and directing it, through children, to improve the future for this country" (C)*

*"I thank that it will help the children alot" (C)*

A few parents expressed uncertainty or concern about some aspects of EMU.

*"I feel that too much is emphasized of Religion in NI. The R.C. Church seems to feel put under threat at the mere mention of Protestant. Religion and education are separate" (P)*

*"I am not sure that the motives underlying EMU are totally beneficial to the individual child - rather to benefit the school purse" (P)*

*"Something to do with Religion. Don't really understand it" (P)*

*"Is it about taking more interest in what goes on in school, and having more say in what goes on!" (P)*

*"I dont know what it is about But if it is about Catholic and Protestant I do not want to know" (C)*

*"The only thing that I strongly disagree with is the fact that the RUC are involved in some areas and therefore the childrens lives may be at risk. I also disagree with the political motives involved in setting up EMU" (C)*

*"EMU can only work if the parents agree with it I dont think it would work if parents or pupils were forced into it against their will" (C)*

*"I have no objections to try bring the communities together but I do not want my children to be involved in travelling to these projects with people other than their teachers" (C)*

The responses revealed that parents are clearly aware of the community relations dimension of EMU. It also showed parents to be aware of at least three broad facets of EMU aims - the simple mixing of children from different traditions; learning about each others' customs and culture; and teaching respect and tolerance for others. More often than not, responses referred to all three implying that parents see them as inter-related. The following table broadly summarises the responses.

**What is EMU About?**  
Percentage responses of parents.

	Protestant Parents	Catholic Parents
Protestant and Catholic children mixing to learn respect for other beliefs	37	56
Unsure what EMU is about	5	6
Anxious about certain aspects	3	2
Question was left blank	55	36
Total	100	100

## 6 Other Comments

A final question invited parents to write any other comments they wished to make about the introduction of EMU to the school curriculum. Twenty percent of parents wrote an additional comment. These fell into three broad categories - those who thought that EMU was generally a good thing; those who were unsure if giving EMU a formal place within the curriculum was necessarily the best way to proceed; and those who felt that such a move was unlikely to do much good.

**EMU as part of the school curriculum**  
Percentage responses from parents

	Protestant Parents	Catholic Parents
Generally thought to be a positive move	16	15
Unsure if it should be on the curriculum	3	6
Felt it was unlikely to do any good	0	5
Question was left blank	81	74
Total	100	100

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Parents who were supportive of EMU having a place within the formal curriculum made comments such as:

*"It has my full support" (P)*

*"Any measure that helps to promote community relations is worthy of support. Children have no prejudice until it is inculcated in them. Therefore an education program which can promote positive ideals is to be praised" (P)*

*"All schools should mix" (P)*

*"Only one comment! It should have been done years ago!" (P)*

*"I would be pleased. Children whose parents have a mixed marriage would be happier" (C)*

*"As parents, we are strongly in favour of EMU being part of the school curriculum" (C)*

*"I think they should do leisure activities first then get down to their own histories. Maybe then they'll understand the other side" (C)*

*"Our school have been involved in EMU for the past three years, only we didn't call it by that name. We just referred to it as school trips. I must say however, it has been working very well" (C)*

*"I agree with the EMU system" (C)*

*"I agree with the changes for children to learn about EMU" (C)*

*"I think this EMU should have been brought about earlier. It is sad to think how much opportunities the children have missed because of this" (C)*

*"I think it is something that should have happened long ago" (C)*

*"I just think it is right" (C)*

Some parents were unsure about EMU being given a more prominent place in the school curriculum by education reforms and expressed certain reservations:

*"I feel it is under-developed and priorities have been lost in an attempt to glorify what is basically a reasonable idea" (P)*

*"EMU should concern itself with teachers as well as pupils otherwise it becomes just another "WAFFLY" part of the curriculum - it needs to be highly structured with solid aims and objectives" (P)*

*"I think EMU is about giving children on both sides of the community a chance to meet and work together.*

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*Although I agree with EMU I also strongly disagree with integration of schools as a whole" (P)*

*"My child already attends a school which has Protestant and Catholic children working together every day and year. It would be better if religion was not brought into schools" (P)*

*"I would hope that the programme would be initially much wider than purely Religious differences or being too 'backward-looking' i.e. tending to highlight differences" (C)*

*"I would not like to think it would do away with Catholic schools. I would like to see more Protestant use Catholic schools" (C)*

*"It should be clearly stated by the Secretary of State that this is not a substitute for political movement which should be actively pursued by both British and Irish governments" (C)*

*"...the education system has always shown a positive attitude in this field. The government's Draft Order is therefore their own attempt to show on paper that they have tried to solve NI's problems. They are making Education out to be the cause and now the solution to 'the troubles' here. I therefore think to make this a compulsory cross-curricular theme is in some ways a damaging and forced effort to compel Catholics and Protestants to come together. In some respects it is an insult to the teaching profession and the good work that our teachers have always carried out with diligence and in a professional manner" (C)*

*"I feel the government may be placing too much importance on integration. Children should receive a good education - that should be government and schools priority. Children didn't create the situation in N Ireland, it was created by injustice and bad Government. Children shouldn't be used as pawns to try to solve problems or make it look as if the problem doesn't exist" (C)*

*"I disagree with political links and/or the RUC" (C)*

*"I don't see why it had to change. There is nothing wrong with the way things are" (C)*

*"I don't agree with it. Why should we want to understand Unionist (Protestant) views? They don't want to understand ours" (C)*

## SUMMARY

There are, of course, limitations to the sort of conclusions which can be drawn from opinion surveys of this nature which present no more than a snapshot at one particular time. It is well known that opinion surveys often reveal that most people wish to appear more

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liberal than their behaviour suggests. However, this survey asked questions to real people with real children attending schools which have been actively involved in the project. In one sense these parents have a vested interest since they could reasonably expect that their responses would encourage or dissuade the schools from taking actions directly affecting their child. We hope this has made the survey less prone to an overly optimistic or distorted picture of what parents think. Even so there is still likely to be some mismatch between peoples' attitudes and their behaviour.

The results, of course, apply to the particular case of three primary schools in Strabane and it would be unwise to generalise these to other contexts. Indeed the survey itself indicated that **differences in parental opinion will vary from school to school, perhaps depending more on the school's immediate environment and the local circumstances pertaining, than on whether a school is controlled or maintained.**

There are limits too in using single questions to address an issue, particularly when a number of respondents leave a question blank, as was the case with the final two questions. However, our priority was to keep the questionnaire simple, short and easy to complete. A more substantial questionnaire would, of course, include a number of questions on each issue so that responses could be cross-checked for consistency. Another concern is that it is impossible to put any interpretation on the views of those who chose not to return the questionnaire, although in this case these were relatively few.

By its nature this questionnaire asked broad, relatively direct questions not particularly designed to raise controversy. In part this was due to the fact that questions were negotiated with Principals who have a legitimate concern that questionnaires administered through the schools do not alarm parents. We had thought of a number of questions which might attempt to calibrate where the limits of parental support lay, for example, *'Would Catholic parents be happy for a Protestant teacher to take their child's class?'*, or *'Would Protestant parents be happy for children to learn something of the Irish language?'* It seems reasonable to expect that the more precise and specific a question then the more likely it is to say how far general support for contact activity will permit schools to go. In the end we felt that the questionnaire was perhaps an inappropriate way to try and get a feel for this sort of issue. It was reasonable for schools in the live situation to be concerned that these sorts of questions could suggest to parents that certain activities might be taking place or about to take place when this was not in fact the case.

The questionnaire should be viewed as a rather crude, but initial attempt to gain some broad insight into the climate of parental opinion with which the schools have to work. Given a different timescale we would have

wished to follow this up with more in-depth interviews with parents, collectively and individually, since this is obviously a more appropriate way of gathering information on sensitive issues. Indeed, without this qualitative information, we would wish to be cautious about survey data. A good example of this is the question about frequency of pupil contact. Given the number of parents who indicated that they thought schools should organise contact on a daily basis, the response demands deeper exploration. How do these parents see such frequent contact working in practice? Do they see a daily movement of pupils between the schools? Are they not concerned about the effects on other curriculum work? Are they expressing a wish that the schools could become integrated? Are they simply using the question to express a strength of support for contact work in general? None of these questions can be answered by a simple survey.

Nevertheless, the survey results paint an optimistic picture for the future of contacts between the primary schools in Strabane. **If indeed a quarter of parents expect daily contact (22% of Protestant parents, 27% of Catholic), and approximately a further half expect contacts to be once a week (43% of Protestant parents, 54% of Catholic), then teachers will have some cause to be concerned about how they can fulfill these parental expectations.** They should be to some extent reassured that the idea of doing classwork in each others' schools seems less controversial than teachers may have thought. Equally, schools will need to be aware that a minority of parents are not supportive of their children being involved in contact programmes. Schools need to decide what provision will be made for the children of these parents.

There has been a certain reticence on the part of schools to directly ask parents what they feel about cross-community contact. Intuitively teachers might recognise that within any parental body there will be differences of opinion and to ask questions directly often draws attention to minority opinions which might impede the development of work in line with the majority view. This may be an inducement to work away in a fairly anonymous fashion, hoping that everyone will fall into line. However, we feel it is courting disaster if schools are not seen to be seeking out parental opinion on EMU-related matters. We suggest that the sort of simple survey used in Strabane is one means, within most schools' resources, which would allow them to confirm the general climate of parental opinion, and also begin a more open dialogue with parents about what the school is trying to achieve. The result of a simple survey could be followed up by consultations with parents, perhaps forming the basis for a parents' meeting to discuss the general principles associated with EMU. **If contact as part of EMU is not to become a divisive issue then it is important that schools attempt to find ways where parents themselves can meet to express support or discuss concerns freely.**