
CHAPTER EIGHT

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Inter School Links project extended over the four-year period 1986-90. The primary purpose of the project was to investigate how controlled and maintained schools could develop co-operative relationships so that children from the two main cultural traditions in Northern Ireland could meet and work together as part of their formal education.

An account of the initial two years of the project is given in a previous report (Dunn and Smith, 1989). Project work during that period was described as school-based and interventionist, involving negotiation and consultation with schools in a particular community. This led to schools in Strabane adopting a structured framework for inter school co-operation. A number of suggestions and recommendations were then made which we felt would strengthen the development of inter school contact and encourage schools to see the work as an accepted and integral feature of the school curriculum. Publication of the first report, *Inter School Links*, coincided with government proposals for major legislative and curricular reforms in the Northern Ireland education system. These reforms give greater prominence to cultural development within and between schools through the introduction of two curricular themes (Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage) for all schools in Northern Ireland. The situation has therefore been dramatically changed to one where all schools now have a statutory responsibility to develop work in this area.

This report, *Extending Inter School Links*, has dealt with work carried out during the last two years of the project. During this time the project was extended in three ways.

A process of CONSOLIDATION took place whereby inter school links were strengthened and more deeply entrenched within the original community of schools.

A process of DISSEMINATION took place whereby the experiences of the project became available to a wider audience. Work was initiated with schools in two other communities to investigate how readily they could adopt a structured framework for inter school contact.

A process of EVALUATION began by looking at the strengths and weaknesses of various forms of contact, the impact on pupils of a particular programme, the perceptions of teachers, the attitudes of parents, and the prospects of links enduring.

Over time the project has gradually moved from an early emphasis on development with schools toward a consideration of research and evaluative issues. The concluding part of this report therefore identifies the main research findings from which a number of recommendations are made.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In Northern Ireland there are many expectations of what can be achieved by encouraging contact between Protestant and Catholic children. These range from the extravagant to the cynical, from expectations that contact will bring an end to violence to suspicion that it is a distraction from the 'real' issues of social division. This project has allowed us to explore what schools find feasible in practice, and we hope our findings give some guide to what it might be reasonable to expect from inter school contact. The main research findings are summarised under eight headings:

1 Forms of Contact

Whilst a broad base of practice in cross community contact between schools has emerged most seem to be variations on three generic forms:

- (a) Single day contact, usually outside the school on an educational visit or fieldwork;
- (b) Contact in each others' school, sometimes involving work in mixed classes;
- (c) Residential work usually involving children living and working together away from home over a number of days.

Whichever form of contact is used there are logistical problems to be overcome and consideration given to the relative value derived from contact within large groups or small groups. Teachers generally view small groups to be the more desirable since interpersonal contact between pupils is more likely, but current teacher/pupil ratios make this the more difficult to achieve in practice.

2 How Much Contact?

It is not clear whether it is the 'duration' of contact or the 'frequency' of contact which contributes most to a 'meaningful' experience for children in EMU terms.

A varied programme might consist of an educational outing in the first school term, six class-based sessions in the second, and a residential in the third. Given the pressure to cover other aspects of the curriculum, teachers may find this achievable. Even so such a programme would still only represent 44 hours of contact, i.e. 3.5% of teaching time available in the school year. This puts a realistic perspective on what it may be possible to achieve through contact alone.

3 Venues for Contact

There appear to be three broad options open to teachers organising contact:

(a) Neutral venues, often outside the local environment such as museums and residential centres;

(b) Common venues, usually a location in the local community such as a leisure centre which may encourage pupils to regard the venue as common territory or a shared space;

(c) Each others' territory, which often means visiting each others' schools and can encourage notions of hosting.

Teachers expressed a concern about the amount of time which can be taken up by travelling to and from venues. If contact is to become accepted as routine and regular the use of local venues is more economical of time. The use of each others' schools is more economical of cost, although some schools experience accommodation problems or lack suitable space for joint classes.

4 Types of Activity

The types of contact activity currently operating under the banner of EMU are too diverse to categorise. However, there are a number of dichotomies which may apply to the emphasis of any particular activity:

(a) social - educational

Recreational activities may have a greater social dimension than those which are focused on completing a particular educational task;

(b) intergroup - interpersonal

Contact can be organised so that the experience is essentially one group encountering another, or this may be broken down to increase the chances that pupils from different traditions encounter each other as individuals;

(c) curricular - extra curricular

Curricular activities are more likely to take place within the school day and involve 'normal school work', whilst extra-curricular activities may be regarded as excep-

tional or peripheral, often organised after school on a voluntary basis;

(d) intellectual - emotional

Some activities depend more on pupils assimilating and organising information, perhaps depending on material derived from a particular discipline. Other activities will depend more on the more affective aspects of relationships encouraging children to express feelings and share experiences;

(e) explicit - implicit

Activities may focus on issues which have a bearing on relationships between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland, its historical development or work related to conflict. Alternatively, pupils might meet simply for the experience of working co-operatively through an activity such as drama with no direct reference to issues affecting community relations.

Such dichotomies are not fixed or mutually exclusive, and they do not suggest that any more value should be placed on an activity simply because it sits closer to one end than the other. Rather, it may be useful for teachers to consider how the type of activity they use lends itself to their specific objectives for contact and whether it is likely to generate the sort of outcomes they have in mind.

Our experience suggests that Education and Library Boards have a role to play in initiating schemes which provide schools with opportunities for contact, and these can be supplemented by decisions which offer certain support services on an inter school basis.

5 Impact on Pupils

An investigation of the impact on pupils of cross community contact used a number of evaluative techniques with 12 year-old children studying a common history programme in Strabane. We were able to look at differences between Catholic and Protestant children, differences before and after the programme, and differences between children who had contact and children who did not. There were three dimensions to evaluating the programme:

(a) Identity

National allegiance was considered as one aspect of pupil identity. This was looked at through a question about the capital city of the country and the analysis of 454 essays entitled 'My Country' written by pupils.

Over sixty percent of all essays contained some reference to the current conflict, violence or the existence of two cultural traditions in Northern Ireland.

Snapshots before the programme suggested that pupils' overall evaluation of their country was more positive than negative, whilst after the programme their overall evaluations were more negative than positive.

The most frequently mentioned negative feature of the country was violence, mentioned by fifty percent of both Protestant and Catholic pupils.

The results confirmed earlier research showing there are significant differences between the national allegiance of Protestant and Catholic children, although the extent of such differences seems related to the technique used to detect it.

The most frequent labels which children used to identify their country were 'Ireland' or 'Northern Ireland'. Labels suggested by earlier studies such as Ulster or Britain were used by only a small number of pupils.

The most important finding was that the history programme had no significant effect on the identity labels which children chose for their country or the city they identified as its capital. The evidence is that the programme had little effect on existing national allegiances. If anything the experience of contact seems to have helped some pupils clarify their national allegiance. The programme had not been designed to erode pupils' national allegiance or sense of cultural identity, our finding should provide reassurance on this issue.

(b) Awareness of the 'Other Community'

The programme included a specific exercise which was designed to encourage pupils to make use of a common data base in identifying the most common surnames in their town. Our findings indicate that this had no significant effect. Even after a common data base was generated, pupils still perceived the most common surnames to come from their own cultural tradition.

Results also suggest that the programme may have helped the Protestant pupils who experienced contact become more aware of Catholic schools in the town. This was attributed to a numerical imbalance where the Protestant pupils formed a minority within the contact group. We suggest that numerical balance is an important aspect of achieving a sense of equality between the two traditions.

(c) Understanding and Uncertainty

We found that the history programme made some impact in communicating to pupils historical concepts or knowledge, such as the historical usage of the term plantation, a sense of time, reasons for emigration and knowledge of different groups which settled in Ireland during its past. There was some evidence to suggest that pupils were able to apply this knowledge to make

personal judgements about the influence which different settler groups have had on present society in Northern Ireland.

Results suggest that a possible effect of the programme was to create a degree of 'uncertainty' in some pupils' minds on some issues. For example, pupils became more suspicious of the implications of the term 'native' and their responses before and after the programme suggested that a degree of uncertainty had been generated about who might be regarded as the indigenous people of Ireland. This need not mean that pupils were confused, but could indicate that a degree of uncertainty is part of a process which develops critical thinking.

Pupils' own comments about the programme indicated that they enjoyed the joint educational outings best.

Seventy five percent of both Protestant and Catholic pupils saw value in meeting pupils from the other schools, and twenty five percent recognised a community relations dimension to the contact.

A smaller percentage of pupils (11% of Protestant and 3% of Catholic) expressed views which suggested that they felt embarrassed or awkward about meeting pupils from the other schools, although most of these still felt the experience had been worthwhile.

6 Teachers

Our interviews with teachers revealed concerns about resources, funding, staffing and the time involved in generating inter school contact.

Ambivalent feelings were expressed about the movement of cross community work to a more prominent position within the school curriculum. Our findings were consistent with a study carried out by the field officer (Bullick, 1990). This indicated that, even though many teachers are suspicious of the political motivation behind recent reforms, most still recognise the educational value of work developed under the auspices of EMU.

Our findings suggest that teachers feel more comfortable with a low profile approach which does not make explicit reference to community relations issues.

Discussions with teachers indicated that they would welcome inservice support which:

(a) provides experience of working with a mixed group of pupils alongside another teacher;

(b) provides experience of styles of teaching particularly appropriate to EMU;

(c) gives experience of how controversial issues may be handled in the classroom and with mixed groups;

7 Parents

Research findings on parental opinion were limited to a survey of parents from three Strabane primary schools. We are therefore cautious about extrapolating the findings to the general population of parents.

There was some evidence to suggest that the climate of parental opinion is more dependent on the immediate school environment than on whether a school is controlled or maintained.

Responses from Strabane parents indicated that:

- (a) The climate of parental opinion within the two cultural traditions is characterised more by its similarity than its difference;
- (b) There was considerable support for inter school contact from parents in both communities (87% of Protestant and 96% of Catholic parents strongly agreed or agreed with contact);
- (c) A minority of parents (13% of Protestant and 5% of Catholic) were unsupportive or disagreed with contact;
- (d) A majority (75% of all parents) felt that schools should arrange for contact at least once a week (25% daily and 50% once a week);
- (e) A minority (7% of all parents) felt that children should only meet once a year or never (2% once a year and 5% never);
- (f) A majority of parents agreed with the three generic forms of contact. Joint field trips were supported by 89% of Protestant and 93% of Catholic parents. Visits to each others' schools were supported by 87% of Protestant and 94% of Catholic parents. Residential trips involving an overnight stay in Northern Ireland were supported by 79% of Protestant and 78% of Catholic parents;
- (g) Virtually all of the parents surveyed were aware if their child had taken part in cross community contact as part of the schools' participation in the project;
- (h) Responses from parents showed considerable awareness of what EMU is about and most comments suggested that they regard contact between pupils to be worthwhile;
- (i) Although most parents expressed general support for inter school contact some, in common with teachers, also expressed concern regarding political motivation behind the introduction of EMU to the school curriculum.

8 Long Term Prospects

Our speculations about the long term prospects of inter school contact becoming accepted as an integral feature of the school curriculum are qualified by statements which draw attention to the logistical difficulties and internal resistances which schools have to overcome. Studies suggest that a realistic timescale for curriculum change to take root in schools is likely to be measured in decades rather than years.

Nevertheless, we are reasonably confident that the framework for contact developed by Strabane schools has become institutionally based and should prove to be fairly resilient.

Our experience of transporting the framework to other communities was limited by time and the inability to maintain a sustained presence on the ground through lack of resources. This confirms our view that the pace of development cannot be short-circuited and demands an approach which is tentative and sensitive. We found it unrealistic to expect schools to internalise new sets of institutional relationship in anything less than a three-year period and only then with sustained support and resources.

We have suggested that future development of contact as part of EMU will not develop uniformly across all schools despite the introduction of a common curriculum. This is partly because schools need to respond to the particular circumstances of their local climate. Some schools simply exhibit more of the characteristics of an innovative institution than others. Another factor may be the priority which different Education and Library Boards give to this aspect of the curriculum and this will be reflected in the level of support they offer schools.

Our discussions with teachers suggest that they have considerable doubts about whether schools could operate a universal system of inter school links so that every pupil in every school has the opportunity of a meaningful and sustained experience of contact. The general feeling is that this would be logistically unattainable and prohibitive in terms of cost. However, this was not presented as an argument that the development of contact should be abandoned.

Our experience of working with Strabane schools allowed us to estimate the amount of time that schools may find they can devote to inter school contact in practice. We estimated this to be 44 hours (about 3.5% of the teaching time available in a school year).

We suggested that statutory, curricular reforms do not, in themselves, guarantee that inter school contact will increase, and this is more likely to depend upon three things:

(a) the capacity of individual schools to overcome external constraints and internal resistances and take on a reconstructionist role in incorporating innovation;

(b) the development of appropriate support structures and inservice training by Education and Library Boards;

(c) the provision of funds to meet the additional costs of inter school contact, channelled through a central agency, through Area Boards, as an integral part of individual school budgets, or a combination of these.

We drew on our experience with Strabane schools to estimate the overall cost to the education system if 3.5% of all schools' activity is concerned with inter school contact. This estimate suggested costs would be of the order £1 to 5 million (roughly 0.2-1% of the annual recurrent expenditure on education in Northern Ireland), which suggests that the £0.65 million currently provided through the Cross Community Contact Scheme would be insufficient.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research findings from the project have led us to make recommendations under four general headings:

1 The Future Climate for Inter School Contact

Our experience suggests that attitudes amongst teachers and parents are ambivalent towards the way current government policy has cast a spotlight on the role of education in developing better community relations. On the positive side there is considerable sympathy for the notion that schools should be active in this area, and substantial support for them taking steps to implement practical schemes. On the negative side people are wary and culturally suspicious of a political agenda which suggests that education is being used to develop an integrationist social policy. Opportunities for local development of inter school contact will therefore be affected by the pervading political climate and we recommend that government is sensitive to this.

2 Support and Inservice Training

Now that schools have a statutory responsibility to develop EMU and Cultural Heritage through the curriculum it is likely that co-operative contact between schools will increase. Legislation also places the responsibility for curriculum support with Education and Library Boards. We recommend that:

(a) Education and Library Boards are encouraged to co-ordinate their plans for EMU so that there is consistency in the level and type of support received by schools in different parts of the province. They will also need some working agreement on how support will be provided for schools which create links across Board boundaries;

(b) Education and Library Boards review their staffing arrangements to convince themselves that these reflect the priority they attach to inter school contact, and are sufficient to discharge their statutory responsibility in supporting EMU as part of the Northern Ireland Curriculum;

(c) Education and Library Boards are encouraged to put forward their views on how the funding of inter school contact may be administered, bearing in mind that a resolution between central, regional and local funding needs to be found.

3 Funding

We recommend that the Department of Education review the increased level of funding which will be necessary to reflect the 3.5% of time which schools might devote to inter school contact.

We recommend that the Department of Education pursue a policy which achieves a combination of funding routes to support inter school contact.

We recommend that the balance between central, regional and local funding is arrived at after consultations with Education and Library Boards and school Boards of Governors about their needs and priorities in relation to inter school contact.

4 Evaluation

There will be natural concern to assess the impact of EMU. There are two aspects to this. First is a need to evaluate the impact of the policy on the education system as a whole. We recommend that such an evaluation is based less on the notion of policy compliance at different levels, but more on an appraisal of the variety of aims, priority and practice which the policy generates throughout the system. Second, now that EMU is part of the formal curriculum there is increased concern to evaluate the impact of EMU activities on pupils. We recommend that teachers are given support which encourages them to build elements into contact programmes which allow them to monitor and assess their impact on children over a long period of time.

We also suggest that schools might consider the use of simple surveys to confirm parental opinion on inter school contact and assist them with planning. We recommend that further research investigates parental opinion in more detail.

5 Comparative Studies

The function of education in divided communities is a universal issue and considerable experience has now been accumulated locally. We hope that researchers are encouraged to develop working relationships with those in other countries who are looking at similar issues.

