Dissolving Boundaries

This case study is based on research into the Dissolving Boundaries (DB) Programme which used ICT and face to face contact to address post-conflict mistrust between young people in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI). With funding from the Departments of Education in Belfast and Dublin, the programme operated in 300 schools from 1999-2014.

Working in the context of a divided island seeking new political and social relationships, DB has influenced policy makers and practitioners that, through school partnerships and innovative teaching and learning approaches, ICT has an important role to play in helping teachers and young people come to new understandings within and beyond the Irish border.

Research led by Austin has had an impact in four broad ways.

1. **Impact on teachers**

According to the NFER report (2011, p.97), professional development in the use of ICT on the DB programme **'helped to develop teachers' skills and confidence in this area'** and this, in turn, was regarded as **'one of a number of significant motivators for teachers' participation in the project'**. Further, a Joint Inspection report by officials on both sides of the border in Ireland (2012), said that the professional development provided by the DB programme improved the quality of learning; key findings, such as the insights into what kinds of practice facilitated collaborative learning using ICT were disseminated in research reports to all teachers and used as the focus for professional development at annual planning conferences. The report noted that the DB programme **'has contributed to and utilised international research to ensure that it is focused on improving the quality of the learning experiences for the participants'**

2. **Impact on children's learning**

Data from the 2011 NFER report (2011), *Teaching Approaches That Help to Build Resilience to Extremism among Young People*, noted that **'pupils reported increased awareness and tolerance of pupils from the other side of the border.'** The data from the NI/ROI Joint Inspection report (2012, p.12), confirmed these findings. It noted that **'99% of the schools in Northern Ireland strongly agreed or agreed that the programme has led to 'a positive change in pupils' values and attitudes, eg. open-mindedness, acceptance, self-confidence, empathy and curiosity.'** Research by Austin and Hunter (2013) reported that, even one year after their involvement in the programme, students who took part were extremely positive about their experiences and far more likely to want to repeat such links compared to pupils in the same schools who had not taken part.

3. **Impact on educational policy**; **ICT accreditation and assessment**

The data generated by research into the DB programme has led to changes in the accreditation of ICT; a letter from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2012) has confirmed that since 2009, the scheme run for all schools in NI was amended to include 'exchange' because of the work of the programme. It stated, **'In 2009, CCEA introduced a revised version of the ICT Accreditation Scheme for pupils at Key Stages1,2 and 3 which, for the first time, included the**

requirement that ICT should be used for "exchange". This new focus was introduced as a result of the growing number of schools that were already using ICT for inter-school links through the Dissolving Boundaries Programme'. The ICT accreditation scheme will become mandatory for all schools in 2014 in NI (Source 4).

The Joint Inspection report (2012) recommended that **'the Department of Education should ensure that the outcomes of the DB programme are linked more clearly to the principles of the Cohesion, Sharing and Inclusion policy.'** These recommendations have resulted in a directive being issued in July 2012 by the Department of Education to the local education authorities in NI to take account of the work of the DB programme for cross-community relations and the delivery of the 14-18 curriculum (Source 5).

4. Impact on global policy and practice

Israel

The DB programme's use of ICT has had a direct, medium-term impact in developing a similar project in Israel, based on links between Orthodox Jewish schools, secular Jewish schools and Arab schools (Source 6). In explaining the design of their own project they noted that **'A number of computer-mediated communication (CMC) projects have been carried out among diverse populations, specifically populations in conflict, based on the contact hypothesis. Probably the best documented one is *Dissolving Boundaries*, ... between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Austin, 2006)'.** The authors further noted that **'Austin and Anderson (2008) claim that a new paradigm is emerging that can bring together insights from both social learning theories in education and insights from social psychology'.**

An interim evaluation of the Israeli project showed that the year-long links were building trust between pupils and key recommendations in this evaluation were put into practice in 2013. This led the Ministry of Education in Israel to expand the programme in 2013-14 (Source 7).

England

Similarly, research into the effectiveness of the work in Dissolving Boundaries has had an impact on the Schools Linking Network (SLN) in England, an organisation set up after the race riots in Bradford in 2001 to foster better race relations between young people in schools. As a consequence of a presentation on DB, the Director of SLN wrote in December 2011: **'While we have always used ICT to introduce pupils to each other, we have not until now used it to develop on-going collaborative work. SLN has now put in place a clear ICT strategy which we will be able to offer to schools across the UK to support our on-going programmes'** (Source 8).

In terms of the impact of the DB programme compared to other initiatives, the Centre for Cross-Border Studies was commissioned by the Department of Education in NI to review all cross-border educational programmes. Having assessed all the evidence available, it commented that DB was **'the single most outstanding example of mutually beneficial cross-border cooperation... between schools anywhere in Europe, let alone Ireland'** (Source 9).

Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland educational cooperation

The financial support of the two Departments of Education for DB since 1998 has enabled them to partially fulfil the obligations of strand 2 of the Belfast Agreement which placed a responsibility on the two governments to establish areas of mutual cooperation. The programme has been discussed on several occasions at the North-South Ministerial Council, most recently in February 2013 when a joint communique noted the launch of a DVD **'featuring both Education Ministers'** which showed how ICT was being used to promote community cohesion and that **'experiences gained within the Dissolving Boundaries Programme have assisted in the development of a similar programme in Israel'** (Education Joint Communique, Source 10).

Action within Northern Ireland

In October/November 2014, a dissemination event for policy makers, inspectors and stakeholders in the main churches, education advisors and teachers drew together some of the implications of the 15 years' work of Dissolving Boundaries for 'shared education' between schools within Northern Ireland. A summary document has been issued to every school and a submission made to the Education Committee's enquiry into shared and integrated education. Good practice in the use of blended learning for inter-school links has been built into an initiative running in 2014-2015 called 'epartners' which links schools together within Northern Ireland. It is coordinated by the University of Ulster and involves university students acting as mentors within schools.

Research Outputs

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