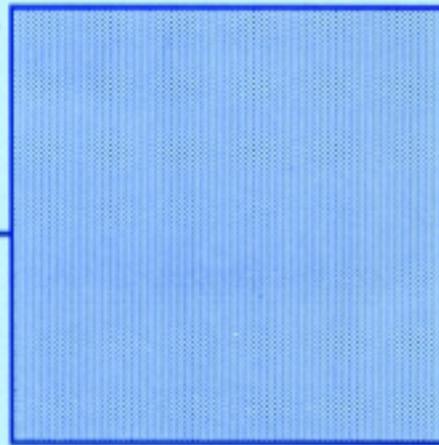
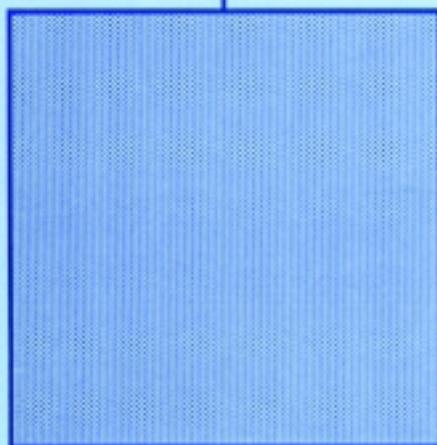


EXTENDING INTER SCHOOL LINKS

An evaluation of contact between
Protestant and Catholic pupils in
Northern Ireland

Alan Smith and Seamus Dunn



University of Ulster
Centre for the Study of Conflict



Extending Inter School Links
by A Smith and S Dunn

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PREFACE

Research for the Extending School Links project was carried out between 1988 and 1990. It builds on the Inter-School Links Project (Centre for the Study of Conflict, 1988), which sought to encourage innovative approaches towards cross-religious contacts between schools. This later project consolidated and further disseminated the approaches developed in the first project, and set out to develop systems of evaluation for inter-community work of this kind.

The Centre wishes to record its appreciation to:

The Department of Education, Northern Ireland, which funded the project.
Mr Seamus Dunn, Project Director.
Dr Alan Smith, Research Officer.

The liaison committee which guided the project, comprising:

Frances Bowring-Carr, Department of Education
Dave Brittain, Department of Education
Eric Bullick, Principal, Denamona Primary School
Anita Currie, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Margaret Geelan, Field Officer (1988-89)
David Stevens, Irish Council of Churches
Jack Walls, Western Education and Library Board.

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John Darby,
Director, Centre for the Study of Conflict.
October, 1990

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

The *Inter School Links Project* (1986-90) evolved from earlier research studies: *Schools Apart?* (1977), which had indicated that the education system in Northern Ireland could be genuinely regarded as segregated in that there was little evidence of crossover between maintained and controlled schools. *Schools Together?* (1984), which had interviewed teachers working in the two systems and suggested that, whilst almost all expressed a conviction that large scale integration in education was unlikely in the foreseeable future, there was considerable regret about the likely consequences of the segregated nature of the system. The report concluded that the time was right for a project which might test whether such goodwill could be converted into sustained co-operation between controlled and maintained schools so that pupils would have the chance to meet and work together.

In 1986 the Department of Education for Northern Ireland agreed to fund such a project and this became known as 'Inter School Links'. An account of the first two years is given in an earlier report (Dunn and Smith, 1988), and briefly summarised below:

THE INTER SCHOOL LINKS PROJECT (1986-88)

The purpose of the project was to investigate ways of improving the level of contact and co-operation between controlled and maintained schools in a community in Northern Ireland.

A central theme of the project, like many initiatives in community relations, was linked to the contact hypothesis. Arising from earlier American work in psychology (Allport, 1954) this posits that, where inter-group rivalry exists, conflict between the two groups may be reduced if certain conditions are met. In an educational context these conditions have been summarised in the following terms (McWhirter, 1983):

- 1 Contact per se will not necessarily improve inter-group attitudes and, if the conditions are not right, may even worsen them.
- 2 Contacts should be of a relatively enduring and intimate nature rather than transitory and casual.

- 3 Social and institutional support for the contact is important.
- 4 Contact should involve co-operative activity working toward a common goal.
- 5 The groups participating in the contact should be afforded 'equal status'.

Earlier research (Dunn, Darby and Mullan, 1984) had also posited a slightly different set of conditions on which work could be based:

- 1 Children need to be brought together systematically and on a long-term basis. Short-term activities without development are of limited value.
- 2 Children must be brought together for a valuable and well-planned purpose, and not just to learn to like each other.
- 3 Risk-taking should be avoided since, when things went wrong, it is difficult to recover.
- 4 Travel outside the region is important since, in Northern Ireland, venues and context have so much hidden meaning and local symbolism.

The Inter School Links project had a **development** aspect and a **research** aspect. Development involved working with teachers in schools, facilitated by the appointment of a Field Officer by the Western Education and Library Board. A Research Officer was also appointed by the University of Ulster, Coleraine to monitor, report and evaluate the development of the project.

Project Rationale

The project was characterised by three significant features, all of which contributed in an important way to its development. Firstly, it was **interventionist** in that it arose from an initiative originating outside the schools and this meant that a good deal of sensitivity was required. Secondly, it attempted to be **consultative** so that teachers were encouraged to develop a sense of ownership about the directions it eventually took. Thirdly, it anticipated that some form of **structured** approach would be necessary if linkages between schools were likely to endure. In a sense this meant 'institutionalising' contact between the schools.

The project worked with 3 primary and 5 post-primary schools in Strabane, a border town in the west of the province. Its first phase was exploratory and avoided presenting the schools with a prescriptive approach. This allowed trust and confidence to develop, although no clear strategy seemed to be emerging and, some inconsistencies arose over the way contact was taking place. Later, the project attempted to deal with this looseness of structure, and suggestions were made which led to the adoption of a framework within which inter school contact took place.. This framework responded to inconsistencies and criticisms already encountered.

A Planned Structure

The following principles emerged as the basis for a planned, structured approach to links as part of an Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) programme between schools in the same local community:

- 1 A link is created **between each year group** in the community of schools. This increases the chance of every child having the opportunity of contact, and allows schools to develop accumulating experience;
- 2 Each link should involve a **form of contact** between pupils which schools find practical and acceptable;
- 3 Each year-group should be linked through a **planned programme** rather than a 'one-off' event;
- 4 The programme should only entail the **frequency of contact** which schools and parents find acceptable;
- 5 Each linked programme should focus on some topic of work perceived to be **central to the curriculum** work of the school rather than based on a peripheral activity;
- 6 Schools should gradually phase in the full programme of links, a year-group at a time, according to **an agreed time scale**;
- 7 The long term aim should be that, once established, the full set of links between the community of schools will represent a major element of the implementation of a **policy on Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU)**.

Although this set of conditions is more prescriptive, the schools accepted the need to identify a framework within which the teachers themselves would control the pace and type of work undertaken. As a result the primary schools opted for linked programmes between the four upper primary year-groups, phased in over a four-year period. The post-primary schools agreed to develop joint study units in history for Forms 1, 2 and 3, phased over a three-year period.

EXTENDING INTER SCHOOL LINKS (1988-90)

In 1988 the project applied for and received funding for a further two-year period. This was partly to allow the full set of linkages to come to fruition, and partly to allow the work to be evaluated. This report describes progress during the extended period (1988-90). During this time the project extended in three main directions:

Consolidation

The project continued to be involved with the two clusters of primary and post-primary schools in Strabane to build up the full set of links between year-groups. In each cluster a teacher acted as co-ordinator, organising meetings and providing a point of reference for the Western Education and Library Board and the Department of Education, Cross Community Contact Scheme. Chapter 1 describes their progress and identifies some of the helpful features and residual concerns.

Dissemination

Having identified some underlying principles for inter school work in Strabane, we were anxious to see if these could be adopted by schools in other communities. With this in mind two further sets of schools within the Western Education and Library Board area were approached - primary schools in Limavady and post-primary schools in Enniskillen. Chapter 2 describes work undertaken by these schools and contrasts their experiences with the Strabane schools. Mention is also made of other activities which helped disseminate the project's work to a wider audience.

Evaluation

A major concern for the extended project was how we could begin to tackle a number of issues related to the evaluation of inter school contact. A start was made by focusing on five areas of evaluative concern:

1 Types of Contact Activity

A broad base of practice had been built up and we felt the project would soon be in a position to comment on the relative strengths and weaknesses of various forms of contact activity.

2 Impact on Pupils

We felt it was important to look more closely at the experiences pupils were deriving from the contact programmes.

3 Teachers' Perceptions

The climate of change within education was encouraging all teachers to accept EMU as part of their profes-

sional responsibility, rather than a voluntary activity. We wanted to see how teachers' practical involvement with the project affected their views of EMU, what problems they encountered and the difficulties they see as EMU moves more formally on to the curriculum.

4 Parental Opinion

The project sought permission from schools to survey directly parents about their opinions. The intention was to gauge the level of parental support, assess the frequency and type of contact which is acceptable, and gain some insight into what parents feel EMU is about.

5 Long Term Prospects

An evaluation of the project's 'success' in terms of the extent to which established links endure partly depends on what happens in future years. However, we felt the accumulated experience with the schools would allow us to make some comment about future policy, resources and support structures.

These five concerns are discussed in Chapters 3-7. The final chapter draws together suggestions and recommendations which emerge from the project's work.

N.B. Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) is one of six cross-curricular themes which become part of the statutory curriculum for all schools in Northern Ireland by virtue of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. Guidance materials for teachers have been issued by the Northern Ireland Curriculum Council and state that, "*through EMU pupils should:*

- *learn to respect and value themselves and others;*
- *appreciate the interdependence of people within the local community, the European community and the wider world*
- *know about and understand what is shared as well as what is different about their cultural traditions;*
- *appreciate the benefits of resolving conflict by non-violent means".*

Whilst contact between schools is not compulsory, teachers are encouraged to provide pupils with the opportunity of joint activities in that, "*Pupils should have experience of EMU activities with respect to at least one of the following:*

- *exploration, within the classroom, of contemporary controversial issues complemented by relevant visitors and visits;*
- *the exchange of materials, especially those reflecting cultural difference, using all forms of communication systems, with the possibility of visits to common ground and to each other's schools;*
- *joint work, extending ultimately to international contact and including the exploration of controversial social and political issues, both local and general."*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In all, the project has involved about 60 teachers and Principals from schools in Strabane, Limavady and Enniskillen (Appendix A). We are indebted to their patience and enthusiasm at all stages in the project. We hope the reservoir of experience they represent will not be lost to the system.

We are grateful to the Chief Officer of the Western Education and Library Board, Mr Michael Murphy, for his whole-hearted support of the project's aims, and to the Board's officers, field staff and Teacher Centre organisers without whom the development work could not have taken place. The early advisory support of Victor Carson was carried forward by Jack Walls during the extended project, and Eric Bullick's initial work as Field Officer was ably carried forward by his successor, Margaret Geelan. We also received active Board support through Michael Kennedy at Strabane Teachers' Centre and, more recently, from his counterpart, Tony Murphy in Enniskillen.

The project also benefited from involvement with people from a number of voluntary agencies and educational centres including Norman Richardson of the Peace Education Resources Centre, Jerry Tyrell and his colleagues from the Quaker Peace Education Project, and staff and volunteers at the Corrymeela Centre. We would like to express our gratitude to a number of students on placement with the project. Marion Lewis who was actively involved in assisting teachers to produce history material and, more recently, Frank Houghton and Peter Doran who helped with interviews and data analysis as part of the evaluative work.

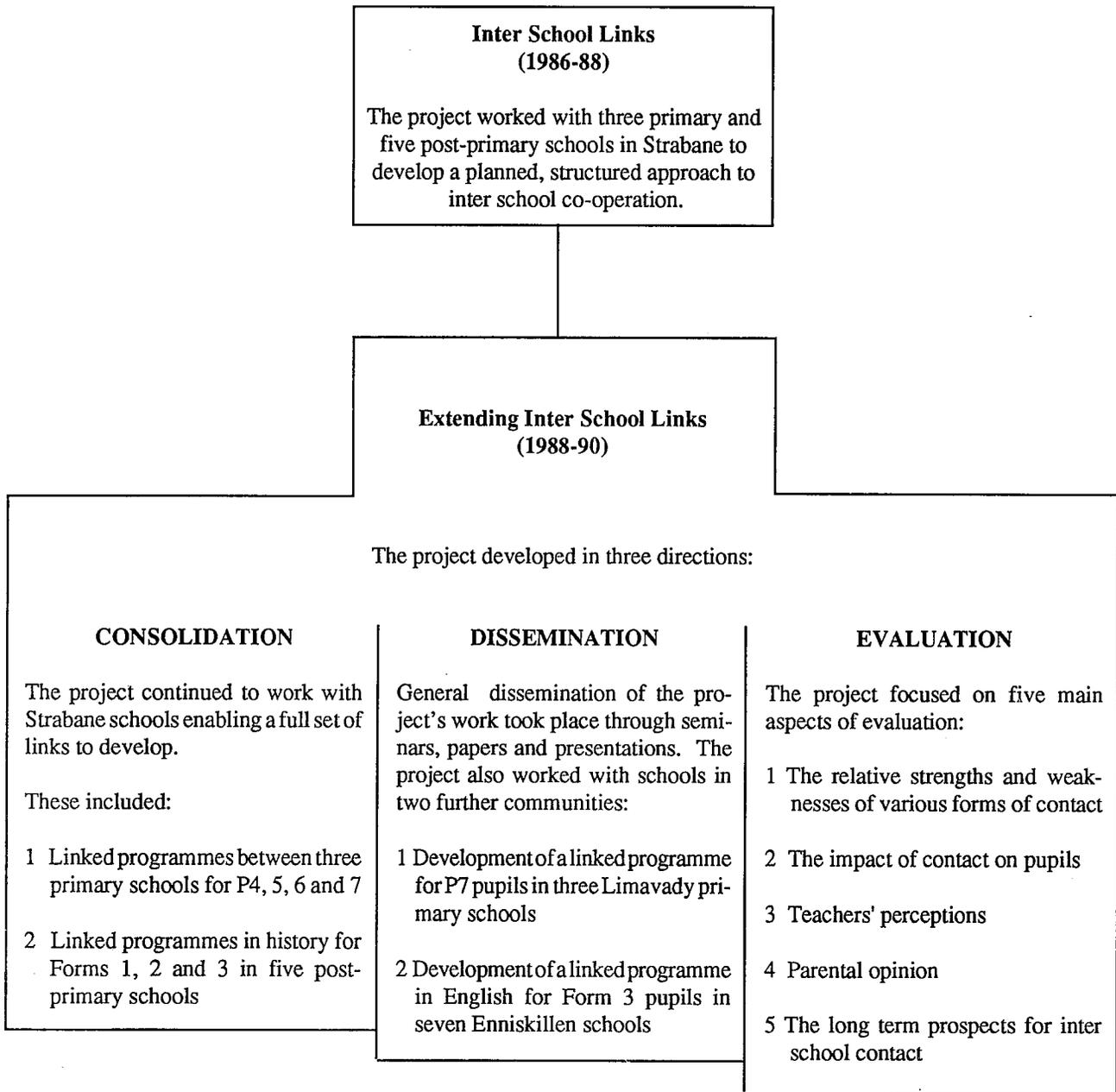
Our thanks are due to the Department of Education for Northern Ireland who funded the project and particularly to Dave Brittain and Marie Brown whose support through the Cross Community Contact Scheme was direct and effective.

When the project was extended a new liaison committee was constituted. It met regularly to provide counsel, help and advice and we are extremely grateful to all members for their patience and support. Members were:

Frances Bowring-Carr, Department of Education
Dave Brittain, Department of Education
Eric Bullick, Principal, Denamona Primary School
Anita Currie, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
Margaret Geelan, Field Officer (1988-89)
David Stevens, Irish Council of Churches
Jack Walls, Western Education and Library Board

An earlier version of this report was circulated to the schools involved, members of the liaison committee and external referees. We are grateful to all of these for suggestions and advice.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT



UUC Project Director: Seamus Dunn
Research Officer: Alan Smith

WELB Board Officer: Victor Carson (1986/88)
Jack Walls (1988/90)
WELB Field Officer: Eric Bullick (1986/88)
Margaret Geelan (1988/89)