
CHAPTER THREE

EVALUATION - TYPES OF CONTACT

SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The nature of schools as institutions is perhaps an over-riding reason why, in the past, pupils from controlled and maintained schools in Northern Ireland rarely met or worked together. Longer serving members of the teaching profession will recall a time when there was more cross-over in enrolment patterns, particularly in rural areas where village schools existed. Even when the system moved to a more segregated pattern inter school contact was the exception rather than the rule, until comparatively recently. Schools themselves have evolved into fundamentally autonomous institutions, concerned primarily with issues directly affecting the school, its status, its reputation and the achievements of its pupils. The threat of declining rolls, the pressures of curriculum change, and a sensitivity to community opinion do not create the ideal climate for change.

The continuation of community conflict has caused us to look again at the role of education, as one aspect of institutional life in Northern Ireland. A focus on the relationship between education and community relations has come about partly through a growing concern for the likely effect of educational segregation on our children. This has been fuelled by policies from the current government which encourage schools to accept a more prominent role in fostering better community relations. It is evidence of teachers' concern for the children whom teach that, despite pressures which encourage them to look institutionally inwards, so many have responded to the challenge of working within the structural segregation of the system to generate an 'integrated' experience for pupils.

Early exhortation in this direction came with the publication of DENI Circular 1982/21 and more recent measures have included extra resources, curriculum reform and legislative changes which ensure that all schools now have a statutory responsibility in this area. From the outset the Western Education and Library Board responded positively. By November, 1982 the Board had adopted a policy statement which it reproduced in the advisory service's Publication No 4 (WELB, 1984) and circulated to all schools in its area. An adviser was given responsibility for mutual understanding and this led to the appointment of a field officer in 1986. A proliferation of activity between schools followed and has led to the situation where approximately 75% of schools in the Board area can

now claim to have participated in some sort of activity which brought children from maintained and controlled schools together (Bullick, 1990).

A BROAD BASE OF PRACTICE

The rest of this chapter looks at the broad base of practice which has been generated between schools in the Western Education and Library Board area. The diversity is such, that attempts to categorise the forms of contact which have taken place is not simple. We have therefore chosen to address this by responding to four simple questions which often come up when proposals for contact are discussed. These ask, 'How might pupils meet?', 'How long should contact last?', 'Where will it happen?', and 'What kind of things will children be doing?' Where appropriate we refer to examples we have encountered between schools within the Western Education and Library Board area, and have drawn on the experience of teachers to suggest the relative strengths and weaknesses of various approaches. A section is also included outlining some of the practical steps which an Area Board can take to increase the possibility that inter school contact takes place. Much of this is based on the experience of field officers working as part of the Board's support structure. Finally, attention is drawn to the implications which inter school work can have for the style of teaching used by teachers when working with pupils on EMU. This emerged as a universal issue, equally important for teachers in primary and post-primary schools.

HOW CAN PUPILS MEET?

An over-riding issue concerns whether it is more profitable, in EMU terms, for pupils to encounter each other in large groups or small. Large groups of children attending the same event can certainly go some way toward encouraging the perception amongst pupils that the schools, as institutions see contact as legitimate. The sheer scale of large groups coming together can generate an impressive sense of unity, allows individuals the comfort of the relative anonymity which a large-group encounter provides, yet keeps open the possibility of inter-personal exchanges taking place. However, the scale of large-group encounters inevitably means that the experience of contact is unpredictable and some teachers (e.g. Dunlop, 1987) have indicated that this can have counter-productive effects, especially if incidents occur which reinforce negative stereotypes or prejudices

toward the 'other group'. Large-group encounters, for example travelling together to see a theatre production, may at first glance seem relatively simple to organise, but teachers soon find themselves looking at how they can plan things so that the herd mentality is eroded and pupils are encouraged to mix. This may involve thinking carefully about the way pupils are seated on buses, how tasks can be introduced which induce children to work with new people, and may include 'ice breaking' type activities before the excursion takes place.

Many teachers are convinced that the quality of contact improves if a situation can be created which allows pupils to interact in the more intimate atmosphere of small groups. Even so there are question marks about the way inter-personal contact can hope to influence inter-group attitudes. There are a number of ways to achieve small group sizes. One is to twin classes so that two teachers work simultaneously with a mixed group of pupils. Advantages are that the teacher/pupil ratio remains the same, although total group size is larger, and the possibility of class work on a common project is created. Joint classwork on a routine basis strongly encourages pupils to perceive the work as a normal part of their school experience. Disadvantages are that teachers need time to plan lessons together and there may be difficulty in finding accommodation where two classes can work comfortably. Where space permits each teacher could work with a mixed class in a separate room or the project could involve field work (for example, a pond study or environmental trail). A weakness is that twinned work can become very class-based where the whole group of children are expected to progress at the same pace. More child-centred approaches can be encouraged where the introduction of material and classroom organisation recognise that children work at different speeds.

Another way of creating a climate for small group work is the use of residential, where children spent a few days away from home, usually at a venue designed to accommodate school groups. The experience of living and working together is a valuable one. It gives children the opportunity of relating to each other as human beings rather than as representatives of a group. Uniforms, cultural symbols and normal routines are temporarily removed allowing sharing and trust to be emphasised. Voluntary support is often available and this can create the possibility of smaller groups of perhaps 6-10 pupils. An important aspect of residential work is that it represents 'time out' for teachers and pupils in that new rules, relationships and ways of working can be explored. This can be an exhilarating experience, though it should not be overlooked that, once the residential ends, all concerned return to their former environments where the trappings of cultural symbolism and rules of behaviour continue to exist. This can leave pupils feeling disillusioned about the experience, so it is important that 'de-briefing' and follow-up work takes

place. A good deal of pre-planning is required for residential, they are costlier than school-based work, and participation is voluntary with parents often asked to contribute toward costs.

Generally speaking then contact can be brought about through **joint outings**, **twinned classwork**, or **residential work**. Each has strengths and weaknesses and most teachers would consider using programmes which involve a variety of these forms of contact. Teachers will often initiate contact through large-group outings and follow this up with more sustained contact through classwork on a joint basis or a residential trip.

HOW LONG SHOULD CONTACT LAST?

The contact hypothesis suggests that an ingredient of successful joint work is that it should be sustained. There are two concepts bound up in the single notion of a 'sustained' programme. One is the concept of 'duration', meaning the length of time which children are together on any particular occasion. The other is 'frequency', meaning the number of occasions when contact takes place. Is the experience of six hours of concentrated contact different from the experience of one hour's contact on six separate occasions? Both result in the same 'contact time', but we have found no research evidence which suggests which part of the continuum, 'short, frequent - long, infrequent', is likely to have most impact on children's attitudes toward each other.

Common sense suggests that 'contact time' is not the only variable at work. Impact may be more dependent on exactly what takes place when pupils are together than on either the duration or frequency of the contact. Nevertheless, conventional opinion reveals considerable scepticism about the likely impact on pupil attitudes of isolated, one-off contact. This suggests that that teachers have intuition about this issue and that some minimal level of contact may be important. We can therefore learn something from what teachers have to say about the value of contact, its duration and its frequency.

Few teachers are confident that one-off special events such as concerts, visits to museums provide anything more than a minimal experience of contact when set against the total educational experience of pupils at school. This is not to say that the activities are not valuable in themselves, but rather that their frequency is important. Even if the frequency is increased there is concern whether pupils will experience any coherent relationship between different events. This suggests that planned contact needs to be explicitly linked in the minds of pupils by a coherent theme, representing a coherent programme of activities rather than a succession of isolated events. For example, a series of three such 'isolated' events in a single term might give a total contact time of 15 hours for the term.

In the school context it is unlikely that the duration of joint classwork would be less than the normal class period. However, given the novelty of the situation most teachers would feel that little worthwhile could be done in sessions lasting less than an hour, and even this does not allow for the extra time needed for transportation and settling pupils into a new environment. This seems to take us nearer to the idea that the minimal contact encounter should take up either an afternoon or morning session. Obviously some teachers will be concerned how this will impinge on other curriculum work they have planned. The next question is, how often it is practical to operate these kind of contact sessions before they begin to be regarded as disruptive to normal school routine. Our experience suggests that six to eight sessions over a single term approaches a point beyond which teachers would find unacceptable. This contrasts sharply with the expectations of parents discussed later in the report (see Chapter 6, Figure 6.3). A series of six such sessions might give a total contact time of 9 hours in a single term.

For teachers, one of the attractions of residential work is that it gives pupils a concentrated experience of contact over a short space of time. Besides other benefits, children on a residential will live and work together for upwards of 30 hours.

Discussing the interaction of children in terms of 'contact time' has a certain dispassionate quality about it, but it throws into stark relief the limitations on what teachers can hope to achieve in the limited time which various options present. An 'idealised' programme might link pupils through an outing in the first term, six class-based sessions in the second, and a residential experience in the third. In total this would represent about 44 hours out of a total year's educational experience (i.e. approximately 3.5% of the teaching time available in a school year).

It also opens out an issue about how children learn and how attitudes are formed, clearly of central concern to those who feel contact has a role to play. Amongst educationalists there is no consensus view on how children learn, except that the process is complex. The developmental theories of Piaget emphasise continuity and progression, whilst more recent work (Skemp, 1979) highlights the importance of novelty and the discontinuity of experiences. Teachers will have their own views about the way children's attitudes are formed and these will be reflected in the programmes they create. Much of the practice in schools is predicated on a theory of learning which implies that repetition and reinforcement are important features. This developmental view suggests that children assimilate knowledge in a fairly uniform way, passing through progressive stages so that new experiences build on what has gone before. It tends to support the view that each experience of contact will reinforce earlier ones and that programmes involving regular and frequent contact have most impact

on the way children's attitudes are formed. This is hard to reconcile with discussions we have had with teachers themselves about the effects of past educational experiences on the attitudes they hold. Their accounts suggest that the process of attitude formation is much less uniform, less progressional, relying rather more on the impact of key formative experiences, a traumatic event, a relationship with one individual. This may account for the confidence placed in residential work, and its popularity with children. The novelty of a residential may itself be sufficiently formative for people to remember the experience and the attitudes associated with it.

WHERE SHOULD PUPILS MEET?

Experience so far would suggest that meeting places for contact should relate to one or more of the characteristics represented by three main options. These are, a neutral venue, in the local environment, and in each others' schools. These options are not exclusive of each other.

1 A neutral venue could be the local leisure centre, a library, museum or other educational centre. Neutral venues have been particularly popular when schools are beginning to establish links and with schools which find it difficult to identify a partner school in the neighbourhood. They have the advantage that they are not identified with one community or the other and this avoids issues of territory and symbolism. Disadvantages are that they usually involve additional costs, need to be booked and often the group is dependent on the programme of another agency. Being outside the normal classroom environment means that the teacher and pupils do not have the same recourse to materials and equipment so it is more difficult to develop routine work on a curriculum project through a programme based solely around neutral venues.

2 Work in the local environment, for example a study of local buildings, can allow a regular pattern of contacts to be established and travelling time is reduced. It has the advantage that teachers have more control over the type of work carried out and pupils may even develop a sense of common ownership about the locations used.

3 Work in each others' schools provides the opportunity for routine and accumulating project work. The venue provides ready access to resources and classroom facilities. It also introduces the notion of 'hosting' with pupils being encouraged to develop appropriate social skills. This option provides a symbolic message to parents and the local community about the commitment of both institutions to co-operation, and part of its hidden curriculum is that pupils are allowed to see for themselves that the other school is not a mysterious place. Dunlop's (1987) account of class exchanges as part of the Schools Cultural Studies Project shows that it

was clearly ahead of its time. This describes how work in each others' school can be the catalyst for discussion between older pupils on religious belief and cultural symbols. He cautions that, when considering inter school visits, problems can arise from weak planning, an inequality of numbers from each school and if the process is seen to be too one way. Indeed, the 'Why do they never come to us?' syndrome did emerge as an issue in our work in Strabane.

WHAT KIND OF ACTIVITY IS BEST?

The development of practice in EMU has thrown up a range of activities which teachers have used in organising contact between pupils. The following headings give an idea of the diversity which has become characteristic of work in this field:

1 Sporting Links

These have always been popular although they have tended to be competitive in nature which may be good for school morale, but runs contrary to the more co-operative attitudes which EMU seeks to develop. More recently teachers have looked at how co-operative games can be used since they are more dependent on the interaction of pupils and less on a winner and loser. Examples of teams organised on an inter school basis are rare, even though team sports within the local community may draw their membership on a cross community basis. Opportunities exist for youth groups and local sports clubs to liaise with schools along these lines. The existence of different sporting traditions within the two cultures still seems a relatively untapped source for EMU programmes and there is room for imaginative work along these lines. Projects which research playground and street games can provide an opportunity to explore similarity and difference within the cultural traditions.

2 Quizzes

Inter school quizzes have a long tradition, generally organised as after school activities. The RUC community relations branch has been active in this approach, although their involvement is not always welcomed in all areas. Again, the competitive nature of a quiz may not sit too comfortably with the underlying aims of EMU, although mixed teams are always used.

3 Special Events

The characteristic feature of special events is that they take place on one occasion. Examples include visits to educational centres, a joint carol service, conferences, debates, joint sports day, a joint display. These usually involve a good deal of organisation and, linked together, a series of special events can represent a programme on a particular theme such as music or the arts.

4 Activity Holidays

A number of successful ventures have linked schools through activity holidays such as outdoor pursuits or the skiing programme operated by the Western Education and Library Board. They have the advantage of being action orientated with many of the activities necessitating teamwork, and pupils have the opportunity of living and working together for a period of time.

5 Electronic Mail and Computer Projects

The growth of Information Technology has meant greater access to computer equipment and schools are now required to integrate it into all aspects of curriculum work. The potential for sharing and exchanging information has increased and the use of links between schools using electronic mail is developing. Electronic mail has proved particularly useful where face-to-face contact is difficult, and it can be used to augment and sustain contacts already established. There are examples, such as 'live adventuring' developed in Derbyshire, where a dialogue can be established between pupils. Software packages exist to enhance work in particular curriculum areas and this can lead to joint project work, e.g. packages which allow pupils to create two-dimensional plans of historical sites which can be made up into three-dimensional models. The availability of word processing and desk-top publishing packages means that teachers can jointly produce professional teaching booklets and worksheets, and the pieces of work from different schools can be jointly reproduced. There are examples of inter school newsletters and joint magazines. This obviously helps raise the profile of EMU work within the community and improves communication between the school and home.

6 Work in the Local Environment

Field work in the local environment often involves nature study, but can be much wider. Examples exist of projects on pollution, conservation and environmental protection. Traffic surveys, map work, artwork, studies of local buildings and architecture have all provided a useful focus. Extended work in local history has included interviewing older people in the community, exploring the inscriptions on graveyard tombstones and projects on sites of historical interest.

7 Educational Trails

It is possible to create an educational trail on virtually any theme. Examples include forest trails, shoreline trails, trails back through time, trails exploring each others' schools, and trails with a cross-cultural theme, such as the trail around the city walls produced by Londonderry Teachers' Centre. Most pupils enjoy the treasure hunt aspect of trails with booklets containing blank sections to complete, and it is relatively easy to group pupils so that they need to help each other.

8 Curriculum Projects

The main concern for teachers is to ensure that their involvement in contact activities does not adversely affect time available to cover the many other aspects of a crowded curriculum. The introduction of EMU as a cross-curricular theme is designed to encourage teachers to include EMU-related activities as part of the way they teach the main areas of study. In theory at least, this should mean that contact can become an integral aspect of any curriculum-based project. There are many examples of this kind of curriculum-based work. In the primary school thematic approaches are normal and naturally tie in work about identity, relationships and cultural development. In the post-primary school work tends to be more subject specific and joint curriculum projects have been actively encouraged by schemes such as the Schools Joint History Competition. Curriculum projects do require extra energy from teachers in coordinating activities, but their advantage lies in the relevance they have to what the school would normally be teaching. There have been a number of curriculum projects which have specifically aligned their aims with the general aims of EMU, such as the Schools Cultural Studies Project, the Religion in Ireland project, the CRIS project, materials developed by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace/Irish Council of Churches and the European Studies project. Their strength lies in the fact that materials have been produced which deal explicitly with EMU-type issues, but a weakness may be that schools feel a lesser degree of ownership of the programmes, not having developed the material themselves.

9 Workshop Programmes

Workshop programmes are one way of developing contact so that pupils work in small groups. There are examples of workshops which bring in specialists for work on themes such as drama, art, music, computers. Residential programmes will often use this way of working and there are many voluntary agencies, such as Corrymeela and the Quaker Peace Education project, which assist schools in running workshops on themes concerning cultural traditions and conflict resolution.

IS CONTACT ENOUGH?

The main issue common to all these forms of contact is, do they help children to develop greater understanding of each other and their respective cultural traditions? Is working together on a computer project, for example, sufficient to achieve this? Most teachers would claim that it is no more than a beginning, an opportunity to build confidence and trust. Being largely concerned about relationships and process there is a tendency for programmes in EMU to concentrate on achieving a common task with EMU aims as part of the latent agenda. It is our experience that few teachers are comfortable with programmes with an explicit commu-

nity relations focus, although the situation could change as confidence grows. This has led to charges that the whole ideological basis for EMU is suspect, being based on a liberal, humanist tradition which is vague and 'woolly' in its language. If this is the case then it is more a statement about the extent to which it has been possible to turn aspirations into practice, than a reason to abandon the cause. The issue of the value of contact is one in need of further research. Now that EMU is part of the formal curriculum, future developments may include the emergence of initiatives which attempt to establish a process of evaluation.

HOW AN AREA BOARD CAN HELP

The Area Board is a primary source for basic support. However, as well as providing in-service and field support an area Board can take other effective measures which increase the likelihood of contact between schools developing. The project's working relationship with the Western Education and Library Board has provided us with first-hand experience of the way a Board's strategy can encourage contact. The following are some examples.

1 Conferences for Pupils

The Board planned and hosted a series of conferences in each council area for senior pupils from post-primary schools. Actual themes for the conferences varied, but the question of community relations was a frequent subject of debate. Prior to each conference selected pupils were given training in leading group discussion and over 1,300 pupils participated in the series. The strength of each conference lay in good organisation with four distinct elements of assembly, introduction, discussion and plenary session. The use of pupils as discussion leaders meant that any consensus on particular issues was not teacher-led. The conferences allowed schools to express a sense of unity on a grand scale and tested the climate of opinion toward mutual understanding in various localities. Its fundamental weakness was that the series did not form an integral part of an on-going programme of inter school contact and, though a wealth of goodwill was generated, much of this was dissipated by lack of follow-up.

2 Invitations to a Linked Programme

The Board operated a scheme in conjunction with the Ulster American Folk Park which invited primary schools to participate with partner schools in a history project. Over 600 pupils were involved and met on average six times during the project. An open day for parents was held at the end of the programme. At the end of the year 18 of the 20 schools expressed a desire to continue working with their partner school during the next school year. The scheme's strengths were in offering an enjoyable, pre-packaged programme at a specialist venue which is a living, working museum.

This is particularly attractive to smaller schools which welcome extra support. Some weaknesses were identified, such as the long travel time involved for more distant schools. In some cases aspirations to maintain contact were more difficult to realise once the programme finished.

3 Linked Scheme in Swimming

The Board operates a swimming scheme which allows for ten weeks instruction for P7 classes. Where schools were willing to share transport and pool facilities the programme was extended for a further 3-6 weeks of recreational swimming and sometimes culminated in a swimming gala. About fourteen schools took advantage of this. Its strength is that contact is created through an uncontroversial activity, parents recognise value in the instruction received, and sometimes it can lead to other contacts being established. A weakness is that schools may take advantage of the scheme purely to gain extra swimming time with little or no interest in developing EMU further.

4 Book Week

During National Book Week the Board's Youth Services offer an intensive programme of specialised events to promote reading, enjoyment of books and use of the library. Where possible schools are encouraged to participate with a neighbour school. Activities included visits from authors, book fairs and visits to libraries. There is clear educational value in the approach and such meetings can be the launching pad for further contacts.

5 Links Through the Small School Support Scheme

Extra curriculum support for small schools through a peripatetic team of specialist teachers is particularly important to the Western Board because of the large numbers of small, rural schools in its area. The situation where a teacher may travel in and out of the same village twice in the same day to give similar support to two different schools has been looked at to see where opportunities for joint provision might operate.

6 Joint Access to Transport, Resources and Funding

By looking at the way it makes certain facilities and resources available it has been possible for the Board to suggest shared provision in certain areas, for example support from the music service or access to computing facilities. Encouragement to submit joint applications for transport and other funding has involved relatively little amendment to administrative procedures whilst the implications at school level are considerable.

All these illustrate how, by reviewing how its services are delivered and identifying particular goals, a Board can considerably enhance the possibilities of contact

between schools in its area. There are obviously difficult issues to face. An Education and Library Board has a responsibility to make its services accessible to all controlled, voluntary maintained and, with certain limitations, voluntary schools in its area. There are natural concerns that this access should not be in a form which coerces schools into contact. The Western Board's arrangements reflect the view that inter school contact is encouraged rather than compulsory.

CONTACT AND TEACHING STYLE

The commitment of teachers has a large part to play in determining the strength or weakness of any of the approaches mentioned. Teachers, as well as pupils, are being asked to find new forms of working together and this inevitably draws them away from their traditional experience of working alone with a class in the confines of the classroom. Movement out of the classroom, to work alongside another teacher with unfamiliar children, calls for considerable adaptability on the teacher's part. For some this is uncomfortable and many would prefer to remain insulated from the experience. Even planning a programme with a colleague can be potentially threatening, involving, as it does, putting ideas into the open and inviting critical comment. EMU's concern with process and relationship means that less formal styles of teaching are required which cast the teacher more in the role of participant than authority figure. Recent developments in active tutorial skills have tried to support movements in this direction. Teachers are likely to hold strong opinions about how they teach and the way they teach, and there will be occasions when this simply leads to disagreement or tension. Coupled with this is a caution about what can be expected as education accepts a more active role in community relations. The tendency in the past has been to ignore or pretend divisive issues in the community do not exist, and teachers are wary of how these can be handled if they arise in the classroom. Some consideration might be given to the lessons learned from earlier projects, such as the Schools Cultural Studies project and the Humanities Curriculum project, about the way controversial issues can be handled with mixed groups. We hold the view that work of this type cannot avoid raising issues for teachers which involves them in re-examining their own emotions and feelings about the 'other community' in Northern Ireland.

SUMMARY

The past twenty years has seen a broad base of educational practice emerge in Northern Ireland. This has led to the situation where it is now not uncommon for schools to bring Catholic and Protestant children together as part of school activities. Such activities can be encounters in large or small groups.

Currently, inter school contacts fall into three broad generic forms, group outings, work in each others' schools, and residential work. These are sometimes augmented and sustained by links through electronic mail. Each approach has virtues and weaknesses.

A sustained experience may be provided by frequent, short contacts, or by less frequent, but concentrated contact. **It is not clear how the effect of contact may be related to its frequency and duration. Our experiences through the project have led us to estimate that, in practice, it might be possible for schools to operate programmes involving 44 hours of contact if a combination of approaches are used. This represents approximately 3.5% of the teaching time available in a school year.**

Choice of venue for inter school contact is an important consideration. A programme of inter school contact will have different characteristics depending on whether it uses a neutral venue, work in the local environment, or is based in the schools themselves.

Activities which provide the focus for contact are diverse and wide-ranging and various examples have been given. Each has strengths and weaknesses and the kind of activity chosen may reflect the extent to which a community relations dimension is explicit.

As well as providing in-service and field support, an Area Board can take effective measures to increase the likelihood that inter school contact takes place. Such measures include initiating schemes which encourage schools to cooperate, and providing services to schools on a linked basis.

Inter school contact raises issues about teaching style. These could be addressed by **pre and in-service work to build confidence in three main areas - team teaching, the development of skills to promote active learning, and experience of how controversial issues can be handled within the classroom.** All of these involve teachers re-examining their own feelings and emotions towards the 'other community' in Northern Ireland.

