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## CHAPTER FIVE

# TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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### INTRODUCTION

This chapter is derived from field notes, conversations, interviews and group meetings with teachers during the lifetime of the project. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with teachers in Strabane midway through and toward the end of the project, and on occasions tape recordings were made of group meetings which took place to review contact programmes operating between the schools. Interviews also involved teachers who were not involved in the project thereby increasing the likelihood that the views of those not necessarily sympathetic to inter school contact could be included. The views of teachers are also placed in a wider context, where appropriate, by reference to a survey carried out by the Field Officer (Bullick, 1990). This survey involved a substantial questionnaire sent to all 254 schools in the Western Board area to which 65% of schools responded. The questionnaire was mainly completed by Principals and concerned the support they had received, and other issues pertaining to EMU and inter school contact.

We were interested to see whether teachers' perceptions of inter school contact had changed during the course of the project, what benefits they had derived from their involvement, what concerns or difficulties they identified and, more recently, how they viewed impending changes which give EMU a more prominent place within the curriculum.

### CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

When the project first began, it took note of earlier work which suggested that the development of inter school contact was likely to be dependent on the involvement of teachers who are particularly committed to cross community work. There is undoubtedly much to be said for the quality of work which can be generated by those who enthusiastically volunteer to become involved in inter school work. Motivation is not a problem and such people are more likely to devote time and energy to making their initiatives work. When we first approached schools in 1986 we requested schools to identify teachers who might be receptive to work involving cross community contact. This brought together a group of teachers from primary and post-primary schools who were both enthusiastic and committed. Whilst a number of worthwhile contacts emerged from this it soon became clear that there were

certain problems with the approach. The contact activities which took place in the initial phase still tended to be relatively isolated events and peripheral to the curriculum. Teachers had little else in common to structure contact around beyond their own commitment to the improvement of cross community relations. Bearing in mind that one of the project's aims was to see whether links of an enduring nature could be generated, a decision was made to develop a more structured approach. This meant that consequent invitations to teachers were based on which year-group they taught in the primary school or subject area they were teaching in the post-primary schools. Therefore the teachers who became involved subsequent to this change in direction could not simply be described as enthusiastic volunteers. Some shifts in attitudes to the programme were reported by teachers. One said the initial impression was "a feeling that we were being put upon", and another, "I had early reservations, now I believe it might play a bigger part than I thought at first". A number of teachers felt that early expectations had been over ambitious and that too much was being imposed on staff, but these concerns seem to have subsided as teachers began to exert more control over pace and direction.

*"The programme is now manageable - too much was expected at the outset"*

*"Prior to the project I had not any real idea what the other schools were like. I assumed they were similar. Having got into this I have seen a wide variety of styles, for example, in management"*

*"Staff felt the workload was too much initially, now it is fine"*

Interviews of teachers involved with the programme from the outset suggest that attitudes to the work have moved in two ways at the same time. Firstly, teachers have become less sceptical of the value or importance of the work e.g., "I now feel that teachers have a relationship of growing importance to carry over to the children". It seems that creating a situation where teachers are trying out contact and learning from actually doing it is much more conducive to attitudinal change than intellectual arguments or moral exhortation. A case of change in behaviour being the forerunner of attitudinal change, rather than the other way round. Secondly, teachers have become more sensitive to the

difficulties and limitations of the work e.g., "we still have much to try and adjust as we learn, but progress has been made already". Shifts in attitude are evidenced by statements, such as "I have very vague feelings that it seemed like a good idea", to "Contact with other schools is valuable in its own right. I doubt its long-term effects on the community, but if it helps one child to break out of the ghetto mentality then it has been worth it". Involvement seems to have allowed teachers simultaneously to develop a positive attitude toward EMU whilst becoming more openly critical of what it can achieve. **This suggests that developing a positive attitude and expressing sharper criticism are not the incompatible changes in attitude one might think.** On the contrary, fairly uncritical involvement in any area of work tends to suggest that a certain amount of self-delusion or tokenism is taking place. EMU's prominence is still relatively recent. **Because its language is reconciliatory there may be a natural reticence to express criticism for fear of being regarded as extreme. Yet paradoxically, some of EMU's most ardent practitioners are those who feel most comfortable about pointing out its limitations.** As EMU develops, and more practitioners become involved, we would expect this trend to continue.

In the wider context Bullick's survey of all schools in the Western Board area suggests that teachers' awareness of EMU has considerably increased with 85% of respondents indicating they have been aware of EMU for the past two years and 45% percent claiming to be aware of the work which EMU involves for the past four years. This was in part attributed to the Board giving inter school contact a higher profile and providing a presence on the ground through the appointment of a Field Officer. However, awareness of EMU has also been heightened through publications sent to schools with 63% of respondents having read the EMU Guide (NICED, 1988), 56% the cross-curricular Working Group Report on EMU (DENI, 1989), and 72% the Cross-Curricular Themes Consultation Report (NICC, 1990). Interestingly 18% of respondents indicated that they had initially become aware of EMU through the media, indicating the special interest which EMU has for the wider community.

Bullick's survey suggests that a fairly receptive climate currently exists for the further development of EMU with 68% of respondents convinced of the value of EMU, 16% having no strong feelings either way, and 13% remaining to be convinced. An interesting aspect was that a number of the project schools featured in the group which remained to be convinced of the impact which EMU can have on community relations. A possible explanation is that intense involvement through the project has magnified the complexities which these schools now see. Perhaps, too, the schools have had to think harder about what can be achieved to improve community relations through education, in stark relief to the apparent intractable

conflict which exists. Some activists suggest a 'burn out' factor may come into play in this type of work where expectations are initially high yet results are difficult to discern.

### THE VALUE OF CONTACT ?

Interviews revealed that most of the Strabane teachers felt that the benefits of contact between pupils "were not easily quantifiable - for the first time children are mixing with non Catholics - a high proportion come from one hundred percent segregated estates". Some suggested that it is more realistic to think that "seeds are being sown for better relationships which may bear fruit in the future", or "Meetings are valuable. If they are enjoyable and interesting, later in the teens, if they are in a confrontation, they might think back to meeting and appreciate the good and positive thinking towards another religion, class and culture".

**The most commonly mentioned benefits from contact concerned new relationships with staff from the other schools.**

*"I would now call into the Convent. If there was something I needed I would not hesitate because co-operation has now improved. When I first went to one of the maintained schools I would have been aware of the religious pictures etc. Now this is not so obvious - I've got to know the school and it's now a school as opposed to a Catholic school. The same might also happen with the children, hopefully"*

*"Staff have developed closer relationships with the staff of each others' schools. Three-school planning now takes place between Principals with meetings together and a well-established pattern"*

*"Teachers have developed good relations between them, learning not to jump in with both feet"*

*"Inspectors to the school have noted changes, a more open approach with improved communication within the school"*

*"It breaks the rut. It's refreshing and enjoyable working in a team and the input of new ideas adds richness"*

*"It adds to the tone of the school, the tenor, contributing to mutual understanding and relations between staff"*

The interviews with teachers showed that a number perceive EMU to be largely about 'friendships'. The majority of teachers referred to this when asked to suggest what indications they could give that the contact programmes were having a beneficial effect on children.

*"Maybe my expectations are too high. From what I can see on trips, I have not seen happening what I was*

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*looking to see happening, that is, friendships developing even on a very small scale."*

*"No friendships appear to have been struck up over the three years"*

*"On an outing a child from an extreme end said to me, 'I made a friend from the County primary school today'"*

*"It is not enough to form friendships"*

A preoccupation with friendship as an indicator of 'success' seems to be prominent in teachers' minds, particularly in the primary schools. **It implies that the development of tolerance and respect for others' views is dependent upon, or evidenced by friendships being formed, yet need this be the case? Whilst friendship may be helpful, we are unconvinced it is essential in developing understanding and insight into the way another person thinks or feels.**

## CONCERNS AND DIFFICULTIES

Teachers raised a number of issues during the interviews and these are summarised below:

### 1 Demography

A common comment highlighted some of the feelings which arise when contacts are being established within a community where one tradition is in the majority.

*"Here the Protestant side is overwhelmed. The ghetto is back to front - untypical. We can't gain enough from it in Strabane. I could see them saying the Catholics have it all their own way"*

*"The target area was wrong, another controlled school is needed"*

Practical problems obviously arise when symmetry in numbers does not exist and this limits the extent to which work through the schools is reinforced by experience in the community.

*"There is not much potential for continuity because Protestants are in the rural districts of the area"*

Existing pressure on the minority may lead to caution and the feeling that there is a reluctance to engage with the majority.

*"The number of Protestant pupils coming to the Catholic school diminished over time"*

Yet despite what many teachers see as an unfavourable demographic climate the schools have still been able to generate substantial contact programmes and a few teachers suggested that **the very existence of a major-**

**ity/minority pattern can have a positive effect in sensitising the majority community to minority concerns.**

*"At first we thought there was resistance from the controlled side, but now we see how they have a different situation to work with. The controlled school is more subject to parental influence and power, there are pressures from different churches and the political views of other staff may have been at play"*

*"We didn't want EMU to appear as a cultural invasion into their background"*

### 2 Parents

Opinions varied on the extent to which parents had been kept up to date with developments, although the results of a parental survey reported later suggest that the schools have been uniformly successful in communicating with parents about contact programmes. There was some suggestion that the controlled school relied on more formal communications to parents and maintained schools relied on a less formal grapevine.

*"Parents were always informed. We have taken it on as part of the school process with an 'opt out' option for parents"*

*"Parental contact has been weak. They have not been given a clear picture of what it is apart from the booklet. This is partly because we are not sure of what parents may think. One or two might think it is a sellout. However, the play went excellently and has opened up the school to more of their people and only good can come of that"*

*"Not one parent has approached me with negative attitudes"*

Teachers in both types of school clearly carried the notion that the body of parents in controlled schools was characteristically different from the body of parents in maintained schools. Most of this is supposition, but the general tenor was that the parents in maintained schools are a fairly homogeneous group and the Catholic tradition they shared with the school meant that a certain amount of support could be taken for granted. **Parents in controlled schools were seen as a more heterogenous group which means that consensus is less likely to exist, leaving school policies vulnerable to dissent from vocal minorities.**

*"In most State schools parents resist indoctrination, that is challenges to their own point of view, in other words education must perpetuate the myth"*

It was suggested that other factors come into play when parents are considering whether they wish their child to visit the other schools.

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*"Their parents have reservations about letting the children into our area. There is a class factor. One group is going up in the world, one group sees itself going down"*

There was general agreement between teachers that lines of communication between the school and the home could be improved.

*"We need more consultation with parents. If they are not involved then education is limited in achieving anything"*

Some teachers suggested that communication with the home should be extended to include greater parental involvement in EMU-related activities.

*"I think if there was something to involve parents ... it would be difficult. When parents see how well the children behave, if they met parents from the other schools, it might be that a more sympathetic attitude is adopted towards people from different parts, but this is very delicate. Perhaps parents could be used in supervision. A sympathetic parent, for example, could come along on trips, begin like that. Parents with expertise might be used and involved in a fishing trip, crafts or a project of some kind"*

### **3 Workload and Staffing**

There is natural concern amongst teachers that involvement in contact as part of EMU will impose an extra workload for planning, in organisation and in the time involved in contact itself. Interviews suggested that, whilst contact is seen as valuable, it is not fully integrated in teachers' minds with what they regard their 'normal' work to be. It is still perceived as different and distinct.

*"There is extra work on teachers, and assessment for the National Curriculum makes this work feel like an extra burden"*

Concern was expressed too about the disruptive aspect which contact activities introduce to the traditional school day.

*"I have heard complaints about the number of people leaving school on the days of EMU activity resulting in loss of teaching time"*

**The contact aspect of EMU makes it quite different from the way most teaching takes place and therefore susceptible to the notion that it is not 'real' teaching, but a sojourn into some other type of activity. If teachers perceive it this way then there is little prospect of EMU being fully integrated into the curriculum.**

Another issue was a reservation whether the educational authorities were being realistic about the amount of teacher cover which would be required if all schools seriously took on board the notion of building linked programmes between different year groups.

*"There is a need to increase the amount of substitute cover available if the programme is to be fully implemented and meaningful. At the minute substitutes are allowed for ten days, but twenty would be more adequate to allow for proper planning with the whole schools involved"*

### **4 Resources or Bribes?**

The availability of extra resources and funding for contact programmes came in for some criticism, more usually from teachers who had not been involved in the programmes.

*"The perks of extra finances and resources act as an incentive, but there is some resentment at some facilities"*

*"The non-Catholics were dragged into it by bribes and tokens - never whole hearted. Money was given and this was very wrong because if you don't do something from principle .... we are trying, but sceptical"*

*"Teachers are envious of the funding available. Others are keen on it generally and enjoy it. I feel a little left out. I would like to get involved"*

Allocation of resources is always a contentious issue, peoples' priorities are bound to vary and it would seem that authorities will be open to criticism whichever way they turn on this issue. If extra resources are not made available then complaints will be made that teachers are asked to implement change without adequate resources. If extra resources are made available then authorities are open to charges that resources are being used to manipulate and induce participation. In the long term it may be important to consider how the situation can be created where funding for EMU is seen less as an extra injection into schools, possibly interpreted as a reward for conformist behaviour. The alternative would be a system of funding which builds EMU-related costs into the budget for every school. This, of course, carries a danger that such funds slide into other areas of the school budget if the priority attached to EMU is low. Options for funding are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

### **5 Suggestions for Development**

A number of teachers put forward suggestions for developing the work. Improved consultation with parents was mentioned frequently and others thought it was important for support from Boards of Governors to be nurtured.

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*"..training days for Board of Governors and introduce EMU with seminars. Invite parents to talk and listen to them, air it all in this area particularly with the Protestant side"*

There was the suggestion that to have impact the work needs to be 'institutionalised' to some extent.

*"I would like to see every class involved with more work in each others' schools so that the programme is integrated into the normal yearly work and is seen as routine"*

Some teachers feel uneasy about reorganising children to encourage mixing of groups, although much of the internal organisation of schools groups children in all sorts of artificial ways, for example, by gender, ability, and age.

*"When visiting the groups are split and mixing is organised. If you did not do that I wonder how they would sort themselves out. They're too young to re-group themselves. The only objection I have is that a lot of the situations are very contrived"*

Some suggestions were quite specific and outlined work that might be carried out in the future.

*"I would love to produce a book on legends of Ireland for the class and do it with the children. The existing books are not simple enough and do not use their language. We could make it a book they want to read and produce it in co-operation with the other staff. The children would have an input by suggesting the language for it"*

A few teachers would like to see EMU work become more closely-linked to contemporary events in the community.

*"I would like to see us address the conflict in some less neutral way, perhaps study the roots of the conflict with older children especially to see the other side's view. Everyone is already too well-versed in their own side of the story and need to know the other side to sympathize"*

## 6 Current Educational Practice

A point raised by a number of teachers was whether schools are well-placed to develop EMU given the way children have traditionally been taught.

*"Northern Ireland problems consist of a fear of discussion. The new style of religious education is more critical, there is time to talk"*

*"We are trying in this school to promote questioning in Maths, Science and English. Change is beginning. The*

*political corollary may be social change. Schools may overcome peer pressure, but thinking critically about our own situation is different. We have a resistance to challenge our own background"*

EMU is perceived to be centrally involved with encouraging children to think in a critical and autonomous way yet many teachers felt the approach to teaching in many schools is not geared to this.

*"Critical, independent thinking, we hammer that out of them at school. We don't teach them to be critical and assertive because of the syllabus and time restrictions. Employers want them to respect authority"*

*"Religious teaching promotes questioning and critical awareness, so does literature and the study of cultural heritage. Traditional teaching methods have not been adequate to promote this. For the last two years we have had space to develop that type of approach, but I am not sure if the National Curriculum will allow that time"*

## 7 The Conflict

There was a general perception amongst teachers that younger children are not fully aware of the conflict around them and it would be inappropriate to focus their attention on this too early. Some teachers identified the transition from primary 7 to post-primary school as the stage when they notice a developing awareness in pupils about the conflict.

*"At that age, primary four, with eight year-olds, there is little idea about religious differences"*

*"With the younger children we concentrate on how little differences exist between the schools. We cut down the differences and emphasise similarities. They get used to the idea of meeting and if it is carried on into the secondary schools they should find it easier to discuss things with each other"*

The majority of teachers did not see themselves as explicitly dealing with issues related to the conflict, perhaps leaning on the notion which has been described as creating an 'basis of peace' (for example, McCartney, 1986).

*"We avoid the conflict. Normality is the word. The children never ask why there was a bomb, for example"*

*"We don't feel we are addressing the conflict at all. All we are doing is establishing relationships between children, although this is and isn't linked to the conflict. EMU does not set out to address the problem directly. It is only addressing a small part of the conflict, but I can't see any other way to do it"*

*"We have steered away from conflict. It is based on the*

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*curriculum, justified on educational terms and educationally worthwhile"*

However, some teachers saw opportunities to tie in work with more direct relevance to the conflict.

*"I was on safe ground with the Armada. References were peripheral, but with implications. With the Tercentenary Celebrations in Derry I would have liked to have looked at Walker and Lundy and do a character study, looked at King James' forces and the treatment of those who surrendered"*

*"We all belong to the same country. We are all Irish and have a good country at heart. I think that with older children it should be spoken about plainly and openly, with parental involvement"*

### **8 The Motivation Behind EMU?**

With EMU becoming a compulsory part of the school curriculum we were interested in how teachers felt about this change, and what they thought the reasons behind it were. The majority were highly sceptical of government's motivation in introducing this curricular reform.

*"A last ditch effort to cure our ills, to solve our problems. They mixed before but the powers that be feel if a start is made with the children it will continue. There are social and political reasons, but they are principally political"*

*"Now government is expecting too much from education. It has to happen at a higher level. Most social education comes from the families. If Protestants are told at home that Catholics are untouchable then education will not overcome this. EMU is putting too high a responsibility to imagine that we effect children to that degree. Peer pressure is the biggest influence"*

*"We feel another threat from Mr Mawhinney. He keeps talking in terms of regarding us. We feel we are being forced along this road"*

*"The social problems existing here seem unsurmountable because of economic and political factors which will not be overcome by contact. Both sides are experiencing unfairness and education will not solve this"*

Some Catholic teachers felt that the government has an underlying agenda to bring about integrated schools, and teachers of both religions were anxious that their tradition's right to retain its distinctive characteristics and institutions should not be eroded.

*"It suggests that Catholics are entrenched in their Catholic schools. That is not true. We have made the running for EMU here. Contact might help. They think*

*it all happened because the schools were separated, but economics is a bigger factor"*

*"We are the people on the move, moving into integrated schools. The hidden agenda is to encourage integrated education a la Mawhinney"*

*"It will be a long, slow process, but it annoys me when I hear them blaming Catholic schools on television. Protestant people want their own schools. Let them have them"*

*"I don't see it as a religious thing. I would not want to put a Protestant viewpoint to Catholic children. I would be annoyed at Catholic theology"*

Others took a more pragmatic view.

*"With the education reforms EMU will be compulsory so, even considering reservations, in essence it doesn't matter. Since we have been involved for four years a structure exists for EMU so that side of the cross curriculum theme is not the problem"*

This sensitivity to the political motivation behind support for EMU comes through very strongly from teachers. Further evidence of this was provided by Bullick's survey of teachers in the Western Board area which indicated that:

*"although the majority of respondents saw the motivation behind EMU as more political than educational and a number stated they resented such 'blatant intervention and imposition', they generally accept its inclusion as a cross-curricular theme in the common curriculum. A total of almost 58% either approved or strongly approved of EMU's imminent introduction into regular classroom practice"*.

The survey also suggested that a correlation exists between teachers who held a neutral or negative attitude towards EMU and those who have infrequent contact with people from the other tradition in their personal lives. This is in line with our earlier view that teachers have no special immunity from the emotions generated by the Northern Ireland conflict, and part of the challenge of EMU is that they too re-examine their partisan perceptions of the 'other community'.

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## SUMMARY

It is impossible to say anything conclusive about the way all teachers feel about EMU and related contact activities. **The interviews revealed teachers' comments to be ambivalent on most of the pertinent issues giving the impression that a number of attitudes are pulling teachers in different directions.** As a group of professional people with a responsibility for the education of young people there is a natural sympathy with many of the aspirations expressed through EMU. As practitioners they are wary of the time and organisational problems involved. As members of the community they are conscious of the sensitivities of some parents, and reticent to deal with potentially contentious issues by embracing them in the classroom. As members themselves of the cultural traditions in Northern Ireland they are wary of the political intent behind certain aspects of curriculum reform. **Despite these divergent pulls the climate of teacher opinion towards work involving cross community contact seems remarkably receptive.** The extent to which such goodwill is translated into effective practice will depend to a large extent on the tangible and moral support which teachers receive within the education service.

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