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Andy Pollak

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ABSTRACT

EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND: A THOUSAND FLOWERS AND A HUNDRED HEARTACHES

Cooperation and exchanges across the Irish border between schools, teachers and youth groups have seen an extraordinary growth in the past decade, involving nearly 20% of all schools on the island of Ireland in 2000. Major programmes such as the European Studies Project, Dissolving Boundaries and Civic-Link have been sustained over periods ranging from six to 18 years with the participation of hundreds of schools and youth groups in a range of programmes, with Wider Horizons (involving work experience abroad for mixed groups of young people) as the largest in scale. Medium-term sustainability is still a key issue, given most initiatives' dependence on non-exchequer funding (over 80% of funding comes from non-British or Irish government sources). Evaluations have spoken highly of the achievements of these programmes, both pedagogical and in terms of greater mutual understanding, but have also stressed that these are long-term initiatives, requiring secure funding and great patience and effort. Similar programmes to bring together young people in France and Germany after the Second World War took a generation to have a discernible impact.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Andy Pollak is the Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, with offices in Armagh and Dublin. He is also Secretary of Universities Ireland, which links the nine universities on the island. He is a former education correspondent, religious affairs correspondent and Belfast reporter with the *Irish Times*. With Ed Moloney, he co-authored a biography of Ian Paisley (Poolbeg, 1986). He was coordinator of the Opsahl commission on Northern Ireland, and edited its report, entitled *A citizens' enquiry: the Opsahl report on Northern Ireland* (Lilliput Press, 1993).

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Andy Pollak

HISTORY OF COOPERATION

Education has been a “core value” for Irish people—North and South, Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist—for centuries. In 1824, according to the Commission of Inquiry into Education in Ireland (before the state became involved in education), there were over 12,000 schools in Ireland, and of those 9,300 were “hedge schools” catering for very large numbers of people. There was no compulsory attendance or anything like it—these were schools by the people for the people, a “bottom up” type schooling movement (Coolahan, 2001).

The hedge school system was replaced by the national school system in 1831 and again this proved a quite extraordinary success. It saw the rapid growth of a state-supported school system in Ireland that was way ahead of what was happening in England or Scotland at the time. By 1870 there were 7,000 of these schools catering for a million pupils, again long before compulsory attendance. This was a genuine all-island system, with a great deal of teacher mobility. The distinguished educationalist and antiquarian, PW Joyce, for example, came from his native County Limerick to work as an organiser of schools in Antrim in the 1850s (Coolahan, 2001).

Joyce’s *A Child’s History of Ireland* was a great success when it was published in 1898 and was used widely in schools of all denominations. He was an educational pluralist long before such a term had ever been coined, and it is salutary that his views on the need for mutual respect, tolerance and affection in the dissemination of Irish history and education are as relevant now as they were then. He wrote in the introduction:

Above all I have tried to write soberly and moderately, avoiding exaggeration and bitterness, pointing out extenuating circumstances when it is just and right to do so, giving credit where credit is due, and showing fair play all round,. A writer may accomplish all this while sympathising heartily, as I do, with Ireland and her people. Perhaps this book, written as it is in such a broad and just spirit, may help to foster mutual feelings of respect and toleration among Irish people of different parties, and may teach them to love and admire what is good and noble in their history, no matter where found (cited in Coolahan, 2001).

Then came partition, and education in Ireland, coming from a common root, sprang apart like a child’s catapult, and stayed apart, with an almost 100% “back to back” separation. The distinguished Irish educationalist, John Coolahan, has said that he trained twice a teacher in the Republic of Ireland in the 1960s, and “as far as education in Northern Ireland was concerned it could have been Timbuktu. There was no reference to it, no mention of it—it was just out of one’s consciousness”.

Any serious thought of renewed educational links between the two parts of Ireland would have to wait more than 60 years, until the late 1980s. The wider context for this was a dramatically new one: on the island of Ireland it involved the British and Irish governments working together to seek common solutions to the problems of Northern Ireland; on the continent of Europe it saw the coming together of old enemies in the European Union, stressing education and training as a way of fostering and promoting a common sense of European heritage and unity.

This European emphasis led to a multiplicity of exchange programmes—Erasmus, Socrates and Comenius—linking students and teachers and education officials, and bringing together schools and other educational institutions to do joint projects and research. In Ireland the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement led to the initiation of the first major North-South educational programme, itself firmly embedded in the wider European context: the European Studies Project (ESP).

The ESP was generously funded by the Departments of Education in Northern Ireland, Ireland and England in a way that no school-based educational exchange programmes were in the later “peace process” phase from the mid-1990s onwards. In its first six-year phase it had a £3.2 million budget and six full-time field officers in the North, the South and England. It had a junior programme for 11-15 year olds, with schools linked through information and communications technology (ICT) and occasional visits for the study of history, geography and environmental studies (themes which are common to the curricula of the three jurisdictions); and a senior programme based around the study of contemporary European issues, whether cultural, social, political, technological or economic.

A 1991 evaluation of the junior programme highlighted new “active learning methods” such as weighing evidence, detecting bias, questioning the validity of sources and students presenting their own considered viewpoints as being particularly suited to dealing with controversial issues in the classroom. Student-centred methods like field trips, role plays and making videos, and the use of ICT—until then little known in Irish schools—were also praised; the first Irish schools to use email on a regular basis were probably ESP schools (Gleeson, 1991).

The European Studies Project’s firm foundations were shown in the fact that by 1999 193 secondary schools (94 in Northern Ireland and 99 in the Republic of Ireland) were involved, and in 2005, nearly 20 years after it started, its website still shows 120 Irish secondary schools involved, plus schools from England and 17 other European countries. One of the ESP’s strongest values is that it has allowed northern Protestant schools to be involved in a North-South link alongside East-West links with England and continental European countries—“it takes in the wider, safer environment” in the words of one senior Education and Library Board official (Pollak et al., 2000).

AN EXTRAORDINARY GROWTH AND SOME FUNDING PROBLEMS

If the European Studies Project was the two governments’ main contribution to schools cooperation on the island of Ireland in the 1980s (and probably remains so

until the present), it presaged a remarkable flowering of North-South relationships in the educational sector by non-governmental organisations and individual school groupings. The first organisation into the field was Co-operation North (now Co-operation Ireland). Between 1985 and 1989, 105 different primary and secondary schools completed two-way exchanges organised by Co-operation North. A similar number of youth groups were involved in exchanges, although these were more erratic (Ruddle and O'Connor, 1992).

A discussion paper of this length can only give a flavour of the extraordinary growth in North-South school exchanges which occurred in the 1990s, and particularly towards the end of the decade when EU Peace and Reconciliation Programme funding became available. A Centre for Cross Border Studies (CCBS) scoping study for the departments of education in Belfast and Dublin in 2000 estimated that 540 schools on the island—261 in the North and 276 in the South—were by then involved in a wide range of cross-border programmes and projects, involving either face-to-face or ICT contact (Pollak et al., 2000: 6). This represented nearly 20% of all schools in Northern Ireland; just over 6% of schools in the Republic, and 9.5% of schools in the whole island. When the much smaller number of primary schools—where issues of distance and child protection make cross-border exchanges less feasible—were removed, the figures were more striking: in Northern Ireland, over 52% of secondary schools and 59% of voluntary grammar schools reported cross-border links; in the Republic of Ireland, with its larger number of schools (many of them distant from the border), nearly 23% of secondary, vocational and community schools and 35% of fee-paying schools reported such links.

However, the CCBS report noted that

there is a considerable job of work to be done if schools from the less well-off parts of society are to take part in this growing rapprochement. Taking the island as a whole, half the grammar and/or fee paying second level schools in both jurisdictions are involved in cross-border contact, compared to just over a quarter of other second-level schools. There is also a considerable amount to be done to bring more primary and special schools into contact with their counterparts across the border (Pollak et al, 2000: 7).

A 2000-2004 study by the North South Exchange Consortium (NSEC), made up of Léargas, the British Council and the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, of both school and youth exchanges showed an even more dramatic increase in activities: it concluded that during this five-year period nearly 3,000 school and youth groups had been financially supported, involving more than 55,000 young people (Green et al., 2004: 1). Nearly two thirds (64%) came from the formal education (i.e. schools) sector with one third (36%) from the informal (youth work) sector. In the formal sector, 57% of those involved came from secondary schools and 25% from primary schools. The NSEC study bore out the somewhat surprising conclusion of the earlier CCBS study that participation by northern schools and youth groups from a Protestant background was broadly in line with their proportion of the population of Northern Ireland as a whole (Green et al., 2004: 47).

This paper will now look briefly at five successful cross-border projects in ICT, citizenship education, education for reconciliation, teacher education and secondary education. The largest curricular programme, as we have seen, has been the European Studies Project. The largest and most successful North-South ICT-based programme has been Dissolving Boundaries, which is managed and co-ordinated by the University of Ulster and National University of Ireland Maynooth, and funded by the two departments of education in Bangor and Dublin. It began in 1999 with 52 primary, secondary and special schools, taking part in computer conferencing, video-conferencing and emailing on subjects like local history, geography, literature, art, drama, sport, human rights, and the developing world. By 2004 the number of schools which had participated had grown to 172, with 121 schools active in that year.

Another significant programme has been Civic-Link, which has also been one of the best funded, in that it grew out of a commitment given by President Clinton's Education Secretary, Richard Riley, to support an Irish cross-border adaptation of a US citizenship education initiative, Project Citizen, which had proved successful in a number of countries. Civic-Link involves second level students working with their teachers to identify and explore local community problems, and then to devise an action plan to present to policy makers. Unlike in the USA, this work is not focussed in one locality but involves the students using ICT and face-to-face meetings to share their ideas with partner schools and youth groups across the Irish border. Around 160 Irish schools and youth groups have gone through the Civic-Link programme since it began six years ago.

The European Studies Project, Dissolving Boundaries and Civic Link have all benefited from relatively secure funding from departments of education in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Britain and the USA. They are also all what one of the pioneers of North-South schools cooperation, Aidan Clifford, director of the Curriculum Development Unit of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee, calls examples of the "indirect model", where schools come together to work in areas of mutual interest that are not directly related to issues of Irish conflict and identity. The more difficult "direct model" is rarer: it is where teachers and students take on, in the classroom, the social, political and religious issues which divide Irish people. Both approaches have value and should live alongside each other, says Clifford.¹

Education for Reconciliation, a highly innovative citizenship education project conceived and managed by the Curriculum Development Unit, is an example of the latter—it has also suffered the financial insecurity experienced by so many smaller projects. It brings together 33 secondary schools, North and South, to train teachers to deal with the "hard topics" of reconciliation through the citizenship programmes for 12-15 year olds in both jurisdictions (civic, social and political education in the Republic, and local and global citizenship in the North), and to research and develop a reconciliation module for those programmes.

¹ Interview with Aidan Clifford, City of Dublin VEC Curriculum Development Unit, 23 May 2005.

Despite a glowing evaluation of its first 18 month phase (1999-2000), which was funded by the EU Peace and Reconciliation Programme, it then experienced a gap in funding and a dispersal of many of its first group of schools and its support team before it was able to re-apply for funding from the same source and start a phase two in autumn 2002. Its 2004 evaluation called it

a superb project, timely and important in the context of the new era of more harmonious relations and moves towards mutual understanding, North and South, brought in by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. It is characterised by excellent leadership, high motivation by the participating teachers, and a courageous effort to grasp one of the most difficult “nettles” of the post-conflict period in Ireland, the demands of reconciliation.

The evaluators highlighted the project’s professional development of participating teachers, giving them the skills and confidence to deal with controversial issues of conflict and identity in the classroom, and its input into key policy documents on citizenship produced by the curriculum councils, North and South (Arlow, Pollak and Gallagher, 2004).

There was another gap in funding in 2005, leading to the loss of the project’s highly effective manager and research officer. After six months of waiting, grants were forthcoming from the Irish Department of Education and Science (for the first time) and from the EU Peace Programme (for the third time). Recruitment of staff for the third phase had to start all over again.

Another initiative which faces an uncertain future, despite high praise from evaluators and senior education officials, is the North/South Student-Teacher Exchange project. This three year project is run by the Centre for Cross Border Studies in collaboration with the seven colleges of primary education on the island (four in Dublin, two in Belfast and one in Limerick). It has brought 80 trainee teachers to do a significant part of their assessed teaching practice (i.e. teaching practice that is examined by their college lecturers and forms a central part of their degree course), not in the usual comfort zone of their home place or college locality, but in a primary school in the other Irish jurisdiction. Thus young Protestant trainee teachers from Stranmillis University College have found themselves facing classes in Limerick. A young Leitrim Catholic became a particular favourite last year for his project on the Titanic with his class in a school in an estate in loyalist East Belfast.

Again the project’s 2004 evaluation (by the distinguished NUI Maynooth education-
alist Dr Maeve Martin) was laudatory, calling it “a courageous, inclusive and groundbreaking exchange” whose “transformational” effect on the participants “translates into reality some of the aspirations of the 1998 Belfast Agreement.” It notes:

This teacher exchange project has opened up opportunities for cohorts of student teachers on the island of Ireland to come together in a spirit of sincerity, goodwill and openness with a view to working collaboratively on issues of mutual concern, and in the process to learn from each other. In the absence of this project such an opportunity would not exist. The baseline data prior to the exchange indicate almost total ig-

norance of the host jurisdiction in aspects that the project addresses: education system, culture and tradition, socio-political issues. In contrast the post-exchange data reflect an upbeat enthusiasm from the participants for the learning and insights gained over the exchange period.

The evaluation goes on:

Teachers are extremely influential in the lives of many, and it is therefore very important that they bring to their task accurate information and unbiased orientations. The stakeholders recognise the potential of the project to erode prejudice and ignorance that may have played a destructive or corrosive role in pre-project days. The multiplier effect is also recognised. Young teachers in the long careers that lie ahead of them can influence the attitudes and values of their many cohorts of pupils. This project contributes to the realisation of this desirable outcome by creating conditions to foster mutual understandings, respect and informed insights. It is unlikely that the enrichment that the project brings could be brought about without the lived experience of being a project participant (Martin, 2004: 23, 25).

Senior Department of Education and Science officials in Dublin said the project had given a real boost to the Republic's sometimes less than dynamic colleges of education. Department of Education officials in Northern Ireland expressed satisfaction that it had broadened the outlook of the often narrowly focussed and provincial graduates of Stranmillis and St Mary's. Yet when the CCBS approached a very senior Department of Education (NI) official for advice about future funding, it was made very clear that the organisers could expect not a penny from a cash-strapped department. At time of writing renewal of EU funding looks highly unlikely.

Short-term and "stop-go" EU funding, and a lack of governmental funding, are typical of very many cross-border educational projects. Fund-raising is "a terrible distraction from the hard work of both education and peacebuilding", in the words of one senior educationalist. Another salutary example is the Horizon project. Started by a group of senior students in Dublin's Alexandra College in 1992, this now brings together students from around 100 schools for an annual weekend of outdoor pursuits and cross-border team projects, as well as round-the-year community relations projects. Its 1999 evaluation said that Horizon was "a very successful organisation" which spent its funding wisely and was one of the most student-centred projects in the cross-border field. However in its early years funding was a big problem for this very committed group of teachers and students. Before 1997 they depended entirely on the generosity of member schools. At one point the then co-ordinator was even forced to draw down £6,000 from her pension lump sum to pay an outstanding bill. The situation has improved somewhat in recent years: the project received EU Peace and Reconciliation funding in 1997-1999 and another round of funding under the 2002-2005 EU Peace Two programme, and since 2002 its co-ordinator has been funded by the two Departments of Education.

MEASURING THE IMPACT

If the funding for North-South and cross-border cooperation in education is erratic and often non-existent, evidence of its impact on peace building, creating mutual

understanding and moving towards that elusive concept, reconciliation on the island of Ireland, is even more sparse. This is a difficult area. Inside Northern Ireland, where cross-community work has been going on for far longer than work across the border, there is little measure of its impact on community relations. Almost from the outbreak of the Northern Ireland “troubles” education has come under scrutiny as a possible agent of social change and improved community relations, with considerable research on the segregation of schooling and experimentation with cross-community contact schemes and other initiatives. The 1989 Education Reform (NI) Order included a range of measures which institutionalised the new concept of education for mutual understanding (EMU), formalising joint activities between mainly Protestant (controlled) and Catholic (maintained) schools in the North.

However, although EMU and its related area Cultural Heritage (focussing on the traditions of the two communities in music, literature and customs) were now statutory, there was no requirement for actual joint activities involving pupils from the two sides. Cross-community contact was encouraged and some funding for it was made available, but schools could, if they wished, teach these themes entirely within their own classrooms without establishing any links with other schools across the divide (Smith and Robinson, 1992). EMU was also excluded from formal assessment and often taught in a minimalist cross-curricular manner rather than integrated into existing subjects. In a deeply segregated society it was often regarded with suspicion, and in the absence of an enthusiast on the staff, the difficult job of co-ordinating it was sometimes allocated to someone with limited interest and/or seniority. There were also examples of open antagonism where joint activities involving Catholic and Protestant pupils have had to be cancelled because of local protests.

For all these reasons, progress in EMU was slow, and in recent years government priorities have shifted towards new and broader citizenship programmes. More significantly for the purposes of this article, its evaluation, assessing the outcomes of almost a decade of statutory EMU work, was under-researched (Dunn and Morgan, 1999).

Alan Smith and Alan Robinson, the principal researchers in this field, believe that

despite the inherent attraction of the notion that increased contact and interaction between groups is likely to lead to a reduction in conflict, the empirical evidence to support this notion is limited.

They suggest that the reasons why it is difficult to establish causal links between inter-group contact and attitudinal change range from the lack of sensitivity in research instruments to the possibility that attitudinal changes only emerge over a long period of time. They suggest that there may be merit in

adopting approaches to evaluation which trace significant numbers of individuals who have participated in a variety of educational and reconciliation programmes during the past 25 years. The aim would be to contrast how individual social attitudes relate to biographical experiences and whether certain formative events are more likely to lead to positive inter-group attitudes than others. However support for this approach to evaluation has been difficult to secure because it is labour intensive and

demands a systematic and co-ordinated approach between academic and voluntary agencies over a sustained period of time (Smith and Robinson, 1996: 77-78).

WIDER HORIZONS

There is no cross-border educational programme that goes back anything like 25 years. However there is one training programme for young people, Wider Horizons, funded and managed by the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), which is both very well-resourced and long-established, in that it was started in 1987, and has been deemed successful by a series of evaluations. It is run through the main state training organisations, FÁS in the South and Department for Employment and Learning in the North, and nearly 15,000 young people, Protestant and Catholic from Northern Ireland, and all kinds from the Republic of Ireland, have passed through it. There is at least one in-depth evaluation which examines the impact of this important initiative on the attitudes of the young participants (Trant et al., 2002).

Like the International Fund for Ireland itself, Wider Horizons has two integrated aims—to promote employability and reconciliation through vocational preparation, training and work experience. These aims are implemented by sending religiously mixed groups of 20 young people from the two jurisdictions abroad for periods of up to two months to countries where they can obtain relevant training and work experience—usually the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or the EU. While abroad the participants must learn to live and work together as a united group. The aim is that each group should contain both cross-border and cross-community representation in the proportion of one-third northern Catholics, one-third northern Protestants and one-third young people from the South, although in practice the numbers of northern Protestants have sometimes been under the desired quota. There is a preparatory phase in Ireland lasting up to 10 weeks, and a return phase where the group as a whole reflects on its experience and looks for work at home. In practice, this last phase has been the weakest in the programme.

In its 19-year existence, Wider Horizons has focused on a range of target groups with varying degrees of success. However, since the early 1990s it had tended to focus on the needs of disadvantaged young people and on a number of disadvantaged areas. The programme has been particularly successful in improving the work motivation of participants, especially young people from deprived backgrounds and employment “black spots” (Trant, 2003). A 2002 evaluation—which was conducted through questionnaires and interviews over a period of three years and involved over 700 participants, including trainees, leaders and key administrators—showed that trainees tended to move from part-time to full-time employment and from unskilled to skilled work (Trant et al, 2002).

In the area of reconciliation, which is more difficult to measure, Wider Horizons also showed some significant progress. Anton Trant says that

at a general level it can be said that bringing people together from different sides of the divide in a meaningful, purposeful and non-threatening way has been a very beneficial experience. There is plenty of evidence to show that participants in Wider

Horizons projects genuinely look beyond the stereotypes they hold of each other and in many cases actually form close friendships (Trant, 2003: 88).

He notes that after starting from a position where any attempt to introduce formal reconciliation activities was looked upon warily, with the passing of time four reconciliation elements have been incorporated into the programme. First, as part of their preparation all project leaders are now required to take a formal leadership training course that includes reconciliation. Second, the normal practice is to understand reconciliation in a broad and inter-related manner which will be acceptable to young people, encompassing any issue that tends to divide people, including racism, homophobia and gender discrimination, as well as sectarianism.

Third, it became clear that reconciliation—as well as employability—

must be based on what could be called the building up of the individual person. Prejudice is especially difficult to combat when the individuals concerned are themselves vulnerable, fearful and disadvantaged. Hostile attitudes and behaviours towards others derive as much from personal insecurity and low self-esteem as from ignorance and lack of contact. A similar situation exists with regard to employability where studies have found that the young people most likely to be chronically unemployed usually have little belief in themselves or in their future.

Fourth, Wider Horizons

lends itself particularly well to what could be called institutional reconciliation. The programme not only comprises individual participants but also the various institutions to which these individuals belong and identify with, such as training centres and community and youth organisations. A typical Wider Horizons project requires cooperation from a number of organisations, and this cooperation extends in two directions: cross-community and cross-border. In other words, every project is based on organisations that cater to northern Catholics and Protestants and to people from the South. Several observers of the current conflict in Northern Ireland have pointed to the close connection between the reconciliation of individuals affected by the conflict and the reconciliation of the institutions with which they identify (Farren and Mulvihill, 2000: 103-119).

The 2002 Wider Horizons evaluation asked whether the programme was succeeding in its task of reconciliation by using three independent assessment measures: (a) friendship and social contact between the participants; (b) participants' perceptions of each other's communities; and (c) the internationally recognised Bogardus social distance scale for measuring tolerance and prejudice.

All three measures showed positive gains. With regard to friendship and social contact, all the participating groups—northern Catholics, northern Protestants and southerners—showed a clear trend of increased cross-border friendship, and at the end of the projects four-fifths of the young people were planning further cross-border visits. Cross-community friendships also increased, with, at the end of the project, over four-fifths of the northern participants planning to make more cross-community social contacts. There was an increase in positive attitudes all around,

with all three participating groups impressed by the others' friendliness and fun-loving traits.

With regard to measuring tolerance and prejudice, the evaluation used the Bogardus social distance scale, which has been used extensively in the United States as a means of measuring racial prejudice, and well as in a number of Irish research studies, notably by Micheál Mac Gréil (1977, 1996) in his major studies of prejudice in Ireland. The scale measures seven levels of closeness, ranging from "part of my family, for example through marriage" and "close friend" to "visitor only to my country" and "expel from my country". Using this scale, from 1 to 7, the perceptions of participant groups to each other were measured before and after their involvement in Wider Horizons.

The results from the social distance measurement showed that all social distance ratings reduced (i.e. improved) following the Wider Horizons experience: there was a "significant" change (meaning that there was a 95%+ probability that the change being measured was the result of the Wider Horizons experience) in northern Protestant participants' perceptions of people from the South; and a "highly significant" change (a 99% probability that the change was the result of Wider Horizons) in northern Catholic perceptions of northern Protestants, and vice-versa. Thus the most significant change in perceptions following Wider Horizons was the mutual increase in tolerance between the northern Catholic and northern Protestant participants (Trant, 2003: 90-91).

Trant concludes that "the Wider Horizons formula has proved over the years to be a simple, practical and very powerful force for cooperation and integration." Its uniqueness lies in the way in which the programme integrates its twin aims of reconciliation and employability, so that vocational training and work placements are the vehicle through which people come to know and trust one another—"it is because the vocational training element of Wider Horizons is perceived to have no ideological threat, that it can be used as a bonding and integrating activity" (Trant, 2003: 92-93).

It is invidious to compare Wider Horizons with any other North-School programme involving young people because it is so hugely well-resourced. In 2005, Wider Horizons received £67 million in International Fund for Ireland funding, and its annual budget is running at around £4.5 million, largely explaining why the recent North-South Exchange Consortium study found—to the surprise of most informed observers—that IFI had provided 55% of all funding for North-South school and youth exchanges.

CIVIC-LINK

For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to take one of the better funded and longer-running schools-based programmes so as to compare its impact, as measured by evaluators using similar methods, with the impact of Wider Horizons. One of the best resourced programmes involving schools (with a few youth groups) has been Civic-Link, started in 1999 with a budget of over two million pounds over three

years from the US Department of Education, the Irish Department of Education and Science and the Department of Education Northern Ireland (see above).

Civic-Link, which is managed by Co-operation Ireland, is a pilot initiative that aims to:

Promote values of mutual understanding, respect and acceptance of diversity; and Empower young people to action these values by assuming responsibility for and participation in civic action and community building for the mutual benefit of all people on this island, North and South (Civic-Link, 2001).

Between 1999 and 2002 the number of schools and youth groups involved in Civic-Link's programme of exploring community problems with cross-border partners grew from 30 to 120. The programme drew on two pedagogical approaches: an action learning, public policy focus promoted by the US Centre for Civic Education, and Co-operation Ireland's own North-South relationship building model. The former encourages and supports students to explore community problems and then devise an action plan to present to policy-makers. The latter emphasises personal contact as a means of tackling inter-group conflict, stereotyping, mutual distrust and prejudice. It is grounded in what is known as the "contact hypothesis" developed by social psychologists working on issues of prejudice and ethnic relations in the 1950s and 1960s. At the risk of some over-generalisation, this proposed that inter-group prejudice and conflict derive from a lack of knowledge and therefore misinformed stereotypes between members of groups engaged in inter-group hostility and conflict. The solution proposed to such ignorance, and therefore prejudice, is to provide forms of contact that will enable individuals to learn about one another and to realise that they have much in common.

Operationally, Civic-Link combines classroom work, project work to identify and explore the community problem being studied, and a number of residential exchanges with partner schools exploring a comparable problem in the other jurisdiction.

Using the same Bogardus Social Distance Scale as the Wider Horizons evaluation, a 2003 evaluation of Civic-Link (Ronayne, 2003) found that for the majority of students completing pre- and post-programme questionnaires, there was no significant change in social distance between northern Catholics and northern Protestants. The only statistically significant change was among southern Catholics, who reported improved (i.e. reduced) social distance towards "Protestant people" and "people from Northern Ireland". However, somewhat contradictorily, the evaluator also found that the highest proportion of students reporting reduced social distance were the northern Protestants (Ronayne, 2003: 8-11).

Another finding was that for southern and northern Catholic students,

the positive effect of Civic-Link participation on reducing social distance towards Protestant people and British people is confined to Civic-Link students attending schools not designated as disadvantaged.

Similarly for northern Protestant students,

the positive effect of participation in Civic-Link on reducing levels of social distance towards Catholic people and people from the Republic of Ireland is confined to students in schools not designated as disadvantaged.

Given the fact, borne out by other findings in this evaluation, that northern Protestant students in disadvantaged schools are likely to be the most resistant to any contact with or understanding of “the other side”, this is a telling, if not unsurprising, conclusion. Indeed, the evaluator notes

the greater relevance of Civic-Link for students attending disadvantaged schools who would appear to have fewer opportunities to establish personal relationships on a cross-community basis than their peers attending schools not designated as disadvantaged (Ronayne, 2003: 16-17).

He points to the value of “deepening the engagement” of students from northern Protestant schools in particular and disadvantaged schools in general (ibid: 48).

The evaluator also stressed that attitudinal changes were more marked among Civic-Link participants experiencing two residential exchanges than among those who had gone on one or no exchanges, with northern Protestants, in particular, “reporting substantially lower levels of social distance towards Catholic people than their peers undertaking just one or no exchanges” (Ronayne, 2003: 46). The importance of longer-term exposure to young people from the other Northern Irish community or the other Irish jurisdiction was thus stressed.

The evaluator points to a number of studies (Hughes and Knox, 1997; Cairns and Hewstone, 1997) which had highlighted the limited amount of cross-community contact between children in a segregated education system in Northern Ireland, and the limited impact of many community relations initiatives based on the “contact hypothesis”. These, he suggests, constitute a particular challenge for Civic-Link in operating to promote mutual understanding and respect among its northern participants, let alone its overall aim of mutual understanding and respect between young people on the island as a whole.

AN ICT PROJECT AND A PRIMARY SCHOOL PROJECT

Wider Horizons is a youth training project and Civic-Link is largely a secondary schools project. However, it is also worth looking at the educational and pedagogical impact of two very different North-South school exchange projects deemed successful by their evaluators: one in the area of ICT in schools, Dissolving Boundaries, the other involving primary schools, Pride of Our Place.

Dissolving Boundaries uses information and communications technology to link teachers and pupils in primary, secondary and special schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The programme, which is managed by the School of Education at the University of Ulster and the Education Department at National University of Ireland Maynooth, began in 1999 with 52 schools. To date 172 schools have taken part and in the 2003-2004 academic year there were 121 participating

schools. Funding is provided by the Department of Education and Science in Dublin and the Department of Education in Bangor.

The group of academics at University of Ulster and NUI Maynooth who manage the programme published a report in October 2004 entitled "Dissolving Boundaries: Supporting Transformation in the Classroom?" (Austin et al., 2004). For this they asked the participating teachers for their views on its effectiveness as a means to enhance and perhaps transform teaching and learning. The study paid particular attention to the use of ICT in the classroom; the implications of the regular contact between programme schools in the two jurisdictions for North-South understanding; the impact of face-to-face meetings between pupils; and the teamwork within the classroom, and between classrooms of partner schools.

In all, 79% of primary teachers and 70% of secondary teachers considered the programme's computer conferencing "very beneficial" or "beneficial" to their pupils; 87% of teachers reported a "very significant" or "significant" improvement in their pupils' ICT skills; 68% considered that Dissolving Boundaries had a very significant or significant impact on their pupils' North-South understanding (23% very significant and 45% significant); and 83% felt DB had had a "very significant" or "significant" impact on their pupils' curricular learning, including communication skills. The vast majority of teachers reported "a variety of changes, including more emphasis on ICT, more group work, more field trips, more active learning, more cross-curricular work, more planning". Teachers regarded face-to-face meetings (which 63% of participating schools took part in, rising to 92% of the schools in the 2003-2004 cohort) as a "very strong element" in the project (Austin et al., 2004: vi-ix, 5, 36-38).

This impression of significant educational and pedagogical gains from well-conceived, well-run North-South schools projects is reinforced by teachers' responses to a very different project, *Pride of our Place*, which for the past three years has brought together 9-11 year olds in 12 primary schools in the border counties of Armagh, Down, Louth and Cavan, to carry out a study of a local environmental feature and to share it with their partner school. It is managed by a steering group drawn from the Southern Education and Library Board, the Department of Education and Science and the Centre for Cross Border Studies. Funding comes from the EU Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

Analysis of a 2003 teachers' questionnaire (year one of a three year project) gives an indication of the commitment and enthusiasm for this project among both teachers and pupils. Among the main points in the teachers' responses were: a sense of pride generated by the project in the pupils' own locality; the importance of communication via ICT, video, letter and photographs; the importance of language and interpersonal skills in the context of communicating, meeting and greeting, and presenting the local environmental feature to the visiting pupils; the importance of the focused, practical nature of the project; the importance of teamwork, cooperation, decision-making, taking responsibility, initiating and sustaining relationships, sharing ideas and information; the use of a wide and varied range of creative teaching approaches and methodologies; the interest and goodwill generated by the project in

the local community; and the value of the exchange of ideas and approaches on the training days and the visits to schools (Burke, 2004).

Project researcher Mary Burke, who is writing a PhD on the experience of *Pride of Our Place*, says:

This project has been a huge learning process for the participating schools, one which has also brought in the children's parents and grandparents, and the local community. It has been very important for the teachers' development, and they have grown greatly as they have learned to give the initiative to their pupils. ... But most important is the impact on the children. They have used a very wide range of activities and methodologies: story, music, art and crafts, drama, ICT, field trips, photographic work, video and animated film, surveys, interviews, studying documents and old artefacts to tell the stories of "their place". At one of the most critical times in their lives, this project has given these pupils the ideal context to share their environment, their sense of place and their identity with others. In that sense it is a real "crossing borders" experience: they have "invited" others into their own place—"inviting" is a key word—and through this have gained inter-personal and relationship-building skills that will be critical to them for the rest of their lives².

THREE LEVELS OF COOPERATION

The picture of North-South cooperation involving school students and young people painted in this paper is necessarily only a snapshot: it contains, for example, no data on or analysis of the even wider range of cooperation activities in the youth work area. However, three distinct levels of cooperation are already apparent.

On its own, at the top, is *Wider Horizons*, generously funded over an 18 year period with funding currently running at around £4.5 million per year, with around 800 young people passing through its programmes every year. Its evaluators believe it is a model of good practice in its progress towards its joint aims of employability and reconciliation, and "one of the leading practitioners in the field of reconciliation" (Trant et al., 2002: 12-13). In the words of one programme manager:

Wider Horizons is too valuable to be let go easily. It represents a unique blend of reconciliation and labour market considerations. In the present situation in Ireland, such a programme must be preserved (Trant et al., 2002: 89).

However, Trant stresses that "if it is going to make an impact, it has to be prepared to take a long-term view." He compares it to the Franco-German Exchange, a generously-resourced youth exchange programme not dissimilar to *Wider Horizons* in its concern to promote cooperation and mutual understanding. This was set up over 40 years ago with the hugely ambitious aim of effecting a fundamental cultural change in the way the future citizens of those two formerly warring nations viewed each other. Trant cites evidence that this programme

² Interview with Mary Burke, St Patrick's College Drumcondra. 30 May 2005.

has made a substantial contribution towards promoting good relations between the two countries, but this was only discernible after a generation of young people had been given the experience of participating. The lesson for Wider Horizons is clear: if the programme is to make a serious contribution towards reducing prejudice and sectarianism in Ireland, then it must prepare for the long haul (Trant, 2003: 92).

Some informed commentators wonder about the likelihood of the International Fund for Ireland continuing in existence for the 20-25 further years necessary for Wider Horizons to make a similarly discernible impact. Recent cuts in IFI's funding from the US government and a general reduction in funds to Irish programmes from the EU—as well as the smaller numbers of disadvantaged young people due to the prosperity of recent years in both parts of Ireland—would suggest that this is by no means a certainty. Another danger, according to its evaluators, is of the agencies delivering the programme—FÁS and the Northern Ireland Training and Employment Agency (now part of the Department for Employment and Learning)—neglecting its central reconciliation aim in favour of its much more deliverable employability element, which, after all, is their core business (Trant et al., 2002: 108). If it were “mainstreamed” into a post-IFI phase, the danger of such a loss of direction (the evaluators' phrase) would be far more likely.

Similarly, the evaluators point to one of the problems of Wider Horizons “from the very beginning—how to link up effectively with the mainline educational and training schemes” (Trant et al., 2002: 107). The problems of much smaller but equally highly rated programmes like Education for Reconciliation and the North/South Student Teacher Exchange in moving towards this “mainstreaming” have already been noted.

If the gold-plated Wider Horizons programme faces problems of sustainability, mission drift and mainstreaming, then how much more serious is the situation facing the second group of North-South educational programmes—the few relatively well-funded schools programmes like Civic-Link, the European Schools Project and Dissolving Boundaries—and, at the bottom of the feeding chain, the multitude of one-, two- and three-year projects kept alive largely by EU Peace funding and unpaid voluntary work?

One obvious way to longer-term sustainability for schools-based programmes is for some incorporation of the “best practice” materials and methodologies learned from them into mainstream practice in the two jurisdictions, and particularly into the development of teachers. The kind of active teaching and learning methodologies (summarised by the Pride of our Place researcher and the Dissolving Boundaries report), which are common to many of these innovative cross-border projects, are now seen as international best practice by the OECD and Education Ministries all over the world.

This was the core of the argument for curriculum-based cross-border education which was the central thesis of the Centre for Cross Border Studies 2000 study *Cross-Border School, Youth and Teacher Exchanges on the Island of Ireland* (commissioned by the Departments of Education, North and South). It argued that such programmes “may offer a more sustainable approach to exchange pro-

grammes, alongside the face-to-face exchanges which remain the essential tool for lowering barriers and increasing mutual understanding.” Anything that is seen as “a non-curricular, non-mainstream ‘add on’ will be resisted by schools in these days of increasingly overloaded and examination-oriented timetables” (Pollak et al., 2000: 14 and annexe “Some Issues arising from the study”).

Some might argue that this is unrealistic, pointing, for example, to the marginalisation of even a general, single jurisdiction citizenship programme such as civic social and political education in the South. Tony Gallagher, the internationally-regarded Queen’s University-based researcher on citizenship education, has noted the long struggle in Northern Ireland to achieve a higher status and priority for work in education aimed at promoting reconciliation. He wonders if all the effort and energy has been used to best effect.

In an abstract sense, these issues are important to the education system. What is less clear is just *how* important they are, or rather, how important they are in relation to other priorities for education. I firmly believe that as long as schools are held to account primarily for academic achievement through base-lining, targets, inspection and development planning, then citizenship education is always going to come lower down, perhaps much lower down, the pecking order.

He wonders if the *relative* priority of citizenship and education for reconciliation is likely to remain low, perhaps what is needed is

to think of other ways of strengthening and supporting the work of the teachers who are committed to this work. Perhaps now we need to expend some of that effort in a different way, by tackling the potential isolation of citizenship teachers not within, but between schools. Maybe it is time we tried to build effective networks among the committed teachers, rather than hoping the system will catch up with us (Gallagher, 2004).

In other words, in this vital area more teacher development is a key way forward, as well as building networks between those teachers.

Aidan Clifford of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee Curriculum Development Unit agrees up to a point. He points out that in a highly prescribed and structured school curriculum and assessment process there are limited methods of entry for innovative curriculum ideas or methodologies—in a single Irish jurisdiction, let alone across a contested border between two. Working with a group of committed teachers personally open to change, as in Education for Reconciliation, was interesting, he says, but the input into the wider school and education system has been limited. He feels that in the future North-South innovators will have to put more energy into bringing about change in the system, for example through the policy documents of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. However, this painstaking, long-term kind of movement towards sustaining innovation might not be to the liking of funding bodies, most of whom view sustainability in crude

terms of “take away the funding and the course will continue in the schools anyway”.³

CONCLUSION

A major problem in identifying both good practice in North-South education cooperation and ways in which such cooperation might be sustained has been its extraordinarily rapid growth over the past decade: the “thousand flowers” of the title. The 2005 North South Exchange Consortium report highlighted a number of features which have emerged from this luxuriant but unsystematic growth. Among its findings were:

- Programmes and projects are funded in very complex ways, and funding routes are unclear (in the northern Department of Education, six different sections are involved in the funding of cross-border projects). This lack of clarity does not help the efficient or effective transfer of resources to target groups on the ground.
- Core funding to sustain organisations is very limited.
- The requirement of the two largest funders, EU Peace Two and the International Fund for Ireland, that funding must go to Northern Ireland and the six southern border counties (other than in exceptional circumstances), has “negatively affected wider north-south activity”.
- There is “a perception among some sections of the Protestant or unionist community that the focus of peace building efforts in this specific region is an attempt to soften or blur the border.”
- There are few organisations promoting east-west activities between schools and youth groups between Britain and Ireland (only a tiny 1% of funding goes to such programmes).
- There are overlaps and duplication between programmes, with the result that some schools and youth groups are participating in several programmes, while the majority are not involved in any activity.
- There is a need for more institutional involvement (less than 10% of cross-border activity is currently through institutional linkages; “personal relationships developed between group leaders alone cannot sustain a project.”
- “Proper policy making structures are needed to provide clarity for future programme development”, particularly as funding becomes scarcer, in order to meet the need for a more coordinated, transparent and effective system of oversight and funding (Green et al., 2004: 40-41, 51-60).

³ Interview with Aidan Clifford, 23 May 2005.

The report's key policy recommendation is that the current, embryonic North South Exchange Consortium should be developed into a new body, the North South Exchange Trust. This new body would

coordinate and manage the north south programme framework by identifying priority areas for funding, delivering programmes through tenders, developing an overarching monitoring and evaluation framework and developing a corporate plan.

However in their endorsement of the report's proposals, the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, make it clear that

in the current political context it is not possible to establish such a body at this time, but it is hoped that in the future conditions might arise when the establishment of an independent north south exchange Trust will exist" (Green et al., 2004: preface).

In other words, until there is agreement on returning power to devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, there is no possibility of setting up a formal North-South body in the area of education and youth exchanges. An obvious question follows from this: if and when devolution happens, will the sizeable funding—most of it from abroad—brought about by the generous international response to the Irish peace process, have run out?

The "short-termism" of politics is not conducive to the long work of reconciliation through education on the island of Ireland: the "hundred heartaches" of the title. In Anton Trant's words, this is a process which is "laborious and long-term and demands patience and constant effort" (Trant, 2003: 92). The social researcher Brian Harvey, in a 2005 evaluation of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, writes:

While many people are puzzled at the failure of governments to support the Centre, longstanding commentators on North-South issues point to a historic vacuum in strategies for North-South cooperation, of which the lack of defined funding streams is only a symptom (Harvey, 2005).

The increased segregation of society within Northern Ireland and the current political stalemate between two "tribal" political parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, does not help the continuing efforts to lower the barriers of ignorance and misunderstanding between people within the North or across the border. Every evaluation of every major North-South education project emphasises that the two tasks of cross-community reconciliation in Northern Ireland and cross-border reconciliation in Ireland have to go hand in hand. And how do we know how reconciliation is happening? In the words of one Wider Horizons youth worker:

When people can be themselves and talk about themselves and their own background without fear, understand themselves and where they are coming from, face up to what they do not know about others and learn to regard them as human beings like themselves (Trant et al., 2002: 83).

It is also worth remembering that this difficult work has been going on for a very long time indeed. In his address to mark the opening in 1814 of the Royal Belfast Aca-

demical Institution, the distinguished Belfast radical Dr William Drennan spoke passionately of the desire of the new school's board that

all pupils of all religious denominations should communicate by frequent and friendly intercourse, in the common business of education, by which means a new turn might be given to the national character and habits, and all the children of Ireland should know and love each other (Bloomfield, 2001).

The difficulties facing educationalists even in the "good years" of the past decade indicate that it may be the best part of another two centuries before that noble aim is realised.

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