

Institution: University of Ulster
Unit of Assessment: UOA 25 Education
Title of case study: ICT for intercultural school links: the Dissolving Boundaries Programme
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study is based on research into the Dissolving Boundaries (DB) Programme which uses ICT and face to face contact to address post-conflict mistrust between young people in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI). With funding from the Departments of Education in Belfast and Dublin, the programme has been operating in 300 schools since 1999. Research led by Austin (2004, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011 and 2013) has had an impact in four broad ways; first, on teacher professional development by refining practice of collaborative learning using ICT; second, on the quality of pupil learning, including perceptions of cultural difference; third, on government policy in the way ICT is assessed by requiring schools to use “exchange” as a new requirement and, fourth, internationally, through supporting the ‘north-south’ strand of the Belfast Agreement 1998, and shaping similar work in England and the Middle East.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Since the introduction of the DB Programme in 1999, two books and five peer-reviewed articles on different aspects of the work have been published in international journals. Key research insights have shown how ICT links between schools can be inclusive, foster inter-cultural education, provide teachers with professional development in the use of ICT for collaborative learning, and nurture enterprise in the curriculum. Thus, research has impacted on the way that ICT is assessed in NI by requiring schools to show how they use ICT to “exchange” with others. Tasks for “exchange” support intercultural links between Catholic and Protestant children.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Early work demonstrated that appropriate technologies could be used to include students with Special Educational Needs in cross-border links (Abbott et al. 2004); this was a reminder that “boundaries” between schools meant more than the obvious political barriers created by the partition of Ireland. After the initial start-up grant of £313k. for 2001-4 from the two departments of education in Ireland, this led to a further grant of £258k. for 2004-7 from the same funders to support further research and development. 2. Research (Austin and Anderson, 2008) established that the use of ICT in school links could make pupils more open-minded towards cultural difference. This data was subsequently corroborated by external evaluation (National Foundation for Education Research 2011) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (2012). NFER noted that ‘Pupils reported increased awareness and tolerance of pupils from the other side of the border’ and the Inspection report (p.11) that ‘the programme has led to a positive change in pupils’ values and attitudes’. Further research grants from the Department of Education, NI followed of £600,000 to expand the programme, 2007-10. 3. Austin et al. (2010) established for the first time an understanding of the perceptions of teachers working in primary, special and secondary schools when they were involved in a collaborative learning partnership with another school using ICT as the principal means of interaction. This ascertained that teacher professional development was a critical priority in the success of inter-school collaborative learning. This was important in NI where there is a growing government expectation that all schools will be expected to collaborate more closely in sharing courses and resources (Entitlement Framework, DENI, 2013). This research led to further funding for 2010-13 of £600k. to extend and refine the programme. 4. Austin (2011) provided the first published evidence on the ways that enterprise activities between schools using a range of ICT tools not only developed enterprise skills in young people but provided the vehicle for greater intercultural understanding. When pupils as young as 10 set

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up joint mini-companies between their linked schools, they learned not only about product design, marketing and sales but, in the process, how enterprise requires cultural sensitivity. This work was funded from the two Departments and the Joint Business Council, representing the Confederation of British Industry and the Irish Business Economic Council.

Key Researchers: Professor Roger Austin (1979-) was the lead researcher since the creation of the DB Programme in 1999. Other members of the research team include Jane Smyth (1999-) and Marie Mallon (1999-) at the University of Ulster and in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Aidan Mulkeen, Angela Rickard, Nigel Metcalfe and Alma Grace.

3. References to the research (Books available from HEI on request)

Austin R. and Hunter W. (2013) *Online Learning and Community Cohesion: Linking Schools*, New York and London, Routledge. ISBN: [9780415510288](#)

Abbott L., Austin R., Mulkeen A. and Metcalfe N. (2004) 'The global classroom: advancing cultural awareness through collaboration using ICT', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 19 (2) 225 – 240. DOI: [10.1080/08856250410001678504](#) (Included in RAE 2008, 29 citations, Google Scholar).

Austin R. and Anderson J. (2008) *E-schooling; Global Messages From a Small Island*, New York and London, Routledge, Ch.6, 97-110. ISBN: [978-1843123804](#)

Austin R. and Anderson J. (2008) 'Building Bridges Online: Issues of Pedagogy and Learning Outcomes in Intercultural Education through Citizenship', *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education*, 41 (1) 86-94. DOI: [10.4018/jicte.2008010108](#)

Austin R., Smyth J., Rickard A., Quirk-Bolt N. and Metcalfe N. (2010) 'Collaborative on-line learning in schools; teacher perceptions of purpose and effectiveness', *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 19 (3) 327-343. DOI: [10.1080/1475939X.2010.513765](#)

Austin R. (2011) 'ICT, Enterprise Education and intercultural learning', *International Journal of Information, Communication and Technology Education*, 7 (4) 60-71. DOI: [10.4018/jicte.2011100106](#)

4. Details of the impact

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

4.1 Impact on teachers

According to the NFER report (2011, p.97), detailed in section 2, professional development in the use of ICT on the DB programme '**helped to develop teachers' skills and confidence in this area**' and this, in turn, was regarded as '**one of a number of significant motivators for teachers' participation in the project**'. Further, a Joint Inspection report by officials on both sides of the border in Ireland (2012), said that the professional development provided by the DB programme improved the quality of learning; key findings, such as the insights into what kinds of practice facilitated collaborative learning using ICT were disseminated in research reports to all teachers and used as the focus for professional development at annual planning conferences. The report noted that the DB programme '**has contributed to and utilised international research to ensure that it is focused on improving the quality of the learning experiences for the participants**' (Source 1, p.5).

4.2 Impact on children's learning

Data from the 2011 NFER report (2011), *Teaching Approaches That Help to Build Resilience to Extremism among Young People*, noted that **'pupils reported increased awareness and tolerance of pupils from the other side of the border.'** (Source 2). The data from the NI/ROI Joint Inspection report (Source 1, 2012, p.12), confirmed these findings. It noted that **'99% of the schools in Northern Ireland strongly agreed or agreed that the programme has led to a positive change in pupils' values and attitudes, eg. open-mindedness, acceptance, self-confidence, empathy and curiosity.'** Research by Austin and Hunter (2013) reported that, even one year after their involvement in the programme, students who took part were extremely positive about their experiences and far more likely to want to repeat such links compared to pupils in the same schools who had not taken part.

4.3 Impact on educational policy; ICT accreditation and assessment

The data generated by research into the DB programme has led to changes in the accreditation of ICT; a letter from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2012) has confirmed that since 2009, the scheme run for all schools in NI was amended to include "exchange" because of the work of the programme. It stated, **'In 2009, CCEA introduced a revised version of the ICT Accreditation Scheme for pupils at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 which, for the first time, included the requirement that ICT should be used for "exchange". This new focus was introduced as a result of the growing number of schools that were already using ICT for inter-school links through the Dissolving Boundaries Programme'**. The ICT accreditation scheme will become mandatory for all schools in 2014 in NI (Source 3).

The Joint Inspection report (2012) recommended that **'the Department of Education should ensure that the outcomes of the DB programme are linked more clearly to the principles of the Cohesion, Sharing and Inclusion policy.'** These recommendations have resulted in a directive being issued in July 2012 by the Department of Education to the local education authorities in NI to take account of the work of the DB programme for cross-community relations and the delivery of the 14-18 curriculum (Source 4).

4.4 Impact on global policy and practice

Israel

The DB programme's use of ICT has had a direct, medium-term impact in developing a similar project in Israel, based on links between Orthodox Jewish schools, secular Jewish schools and Arab schools (Source 5). In explaining the design of their own project they noted that **'A number of computer-mediated communication (CMC) projects have been carried out among diverse populations, specifically populations in conflict, based on the contact hypothesis. Probably the best documented one is *Dissolving Boundaries*, ... between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Austin, 2006)'**. The authors further noted that **'Austin and Anderson (2008) claim that a new paradigm is emerging that can bring together insights from both social learning theories in education and insights from social psychology'**. An interim evaluation of the Israeli project showed that the year-long links were building trust between pupils and key recommendations in this evaluation were put into practice in 2013. This led the Ministry of Education in Israel to expand the programme in 2013-14 (Source 6).

England

Similarly, research into the effectiveness of the work in Dissolving Boundaries has had an impact on the Schools Linking Network (SLN) in England, an organisation set up after the race riots in Bradford in 2001 to foster better race relations between young people in schools. As a consequence of a presentation on DB, the Director of SLN wrote in December 2011: **'While we have always used ICT to introduce pupils to each other, we have not until now used it to develop on-going collaborative work. SLN has now put in place a clear ICT strategy which we will be able to offer to schools across the UK to support our on-going programmes'** (Source 7).

In terms of the impact of the DB programme compared to other initiatives, the Centre for Cross-Border Studies was commissioned by the Department of Education in NI to review all cross-border educational programmes. Having assessed all the evidence available, it commented that DB was **'the single most outstanding example of mutually beneficial cross-border cooperation... between schools anywhere in Europe, let alone Ireland'** (Source 8).

Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland educational cooperation

The financial support of the two Departments of Education for DB since 1998 has enabled them to partially fulfil the obligations of Strand 2 of the Belfast Agreement which placed a responsibility on the two governments to establish areas of mutual cooperation. The programme has been discussed on several occasions at the North-South Ministerial Council, most recently in February 2013 when a joint communique noted the launch of a DVD **'featuring both Education Ministers'** which showed how ICT was being used to promote community cohesion and that **'experiences gained within the Dissolving Boundaries Programme have assisted in the development of a similar programme in Israel'** (Education Joint Communique, Source 9).

Overall, DB effectively fits with the UoA research impact strategy by working in an all-Ireland developmental context and actively pursuing research which has influenced, demonstrably, policy and practice in education, north and south. Subsequently, its insights are proving valuable to other contested societies.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Assistant Chief Inspector, The Education and Training Inspectorate, Northern Ireland <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/surveys-evaluations/surveys-evaluations-post-primary/surveys-evaluations-post-primary-2012/joint-evaluation-report-dissolving-boundaries-programme-2010-2011-2.pdf> See section 3.2.2 and also p.12 for impact on pupils' attitudes.
2. Bonnell, J., Copestake, P., Kerr, D., Passy, R., Reed, C., Salter, R., Sarwar, S. and Sheikh, S. (2011) *Teaching Approaches That Help to Build Resilience to Extremism among Young People* (DFE Research Report 119). London: DFE. Available online at: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR119> p.97
3. Letter from Council for Curriculum, examinations and assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland (12 May 2012) & http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/microsites/ict_accreditation_primary/
4. Letter from the Department of Education in Northern Ireland to Education and Library Boards (10 July 2013). Corroboration by DENI available.
5. Hoter E., Shonfeld M. and Ganayim A. (2009) 'Information and Communication Technology in the service of Multiculturalism', *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10 (2) 1-15. ISSN: 1492-3831. Available at: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/601/1228>
6. 'Unlocking the Future', DVD. See: <http://www.dissolvingboundaries.org/index.php?id=5&v=1>
7. Letter from the CEO, Schools Linking Network (1 December 2011).
8. Statement from The Director, Centre for Cross-Border Studies, Armagh (30 June 2011). See: <http://sluggerotoole.com/2011/06/30/bringing-schools-together-in-ireland-through-ict/>
9. North South Ministerial Meeting, Education Joint Communique (27 February 2013). See: http://www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org/index/publications/joint-communiques/sectoral-jc/education_jc/education_joint_communique_27_february_2013.htm