



## Supporting community cohesion through ICT: The epartners programme in Northern Ireland



Roger Austin<sup>a</sup>, Bill Hunter<sup>b,\*</sup>, Lynsey Hollywood<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Education Department, University of Ulster (Coleraine campus), Co. Londonderry BT52 1SA, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Education, The University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 11 Simcoe St N., PO Box 385, Oshawa, ON L1H 7L7, Canada

<sup>c</sup> Consumer Studies, Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Ulster (Coleraine campus), Co. Londonderry BT52 1SA, United Kingdom

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 11 March 2015

#### Keywords:

Online learning  
Community cohesion  
Conflict reduction

### ABSTRACT

In the face of deep-rooted sectarian sentiment in Northern Ireland and the pervasive nature of “separateness” between the Protestant and Catholic communities, this article examines school projects designed to promote community cohesion and assesses the role that information and communications technology (ICT) can play to encourage collaboration within a social psychology framework. Further, we report on exploratory research conducted through the evaluation of a pilot program that involved university student tutors working with teachers and pupils in a range of schools. Our findings to date suggest that a strong focus on collaborative work in non-contentious areas of the curriculum has a strong chance of securing support from key stakeholders, including teachers, the main churches and other stakeholders in the educational system.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

In this paper, we assess recent efforts to address one of the most deep-rooted problems on the island of Ireland by examining an ICT project called “epartners.” For centuries, the people of Ireland have been divided over intertwined issues related to religion (Catholic vs. Protestant) and to relations with Great Britain. In recent decades, the tensions around these issues have been most acute in Northern Ireland which remains a part of the United Kingdom. This project links Catholic and Protestant schools within Northern Ireland in an attempt to provide a prototype for reaching all schools in Northern Ireland.

One of the most striking features of sectarianism on the island of Ireland is the depth of its roots, with animosity and inter-communal violence between Catholics and Protestants reported as long ago as the late eighteenth century. An Irish historian writing in 1892 noted that “If the characteristic mark of a healthy Christianity be to unite its members by a bond of fraternity and love, then there is no country where Christianity has more completely failed than Ireland” (Lecky, 1892).

At various points since then, attempts to address the root causes of conflict have included efforts to see how schools might play a part in enabling the next generation to set aside their differences

in the interests of social cohesion. For example, in 1831 the British administration of Ireland set up a national school system with the principal aim of uniting “in one system children of different creeds” (Akenson, 1970, p.158). According to Hyland (1989) these noble aspirations were undermined within twenty years by the main Christian churches whose leaders campaigned to have schools under their own distinct control. By 1850 only 4% of the schools were genuinely mixed in religious affiliation and this was a pattern that continued after the partition of Ireland in 1921. The creation of two states, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, not only left a legacy of suspicion between north the south, it also sharpened divisions within Northern Ireland between those who wished to strengthen links with the rest of the United Kingdom (primarily Protestants) those who aspired to a united Ireland free from British rule (primarily Catholics).

The extent to which people lead separate lives in Northern Ireland (e.g., Hargie, Dickson, & Rainey, 2002), is reflected in the make-up of political parties, housing patterns and preferences for different sports and culture, (Austin & Anderson, 2008; Roulston, & Young, 2013) and is clearly evident in the schooling system. Some 95% of children attend schools that remain predominantly Catholic or Protestant. We will examine literature related to past efforts to address Northern Ireland’s through school-based interventions, describe our efforts to use university-based tutors to assist teachers in using technology to enable diverse students to collaborate on school work, and indicate the challenges and possibilities for future uses of such an approach.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 705 252 6880.

E-mail addresses: [rsp.austin@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:rsp.austin@ulster.ac.uk) (R. Austin), [bill.hunter@uoit.ca](mailto:bill.hunter@uoit.ca) (B. Hunter), [l.hollywood@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:l.hollywood@ulster.ac.uk) (L. Hollywood).

## 2. Review of work to address division between Catholic and Protestant schools within Northern Ireland

As [Duffy and Gallagher \(2014\)](#) suggest, there have been a range of efforts, particularly since the 1980s, to find ways that schools might be encouraged to play a role on contributing to community cohesion.

### 2.1. Integrated education

In the 1980s, a group of parents set up the first “integrated school” in 1981 to educate children of all faiths (and none) together. The support for integrated education led to a provision in the 1989 Education Reform Order which placed a duty on the Department of Education in Northern Ireland to “encourage and facilitate” integrated education. ([Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 1989](#)). However, there was opposition to the integrated schools movement by the main churches, whose leaders wanted to retain the status quo; by some teachers, who feared for their jobs; and by some politicians, who claimed that there were already too many schools for the size of the population in Northern Ireland. Partly because of this, the number of pupils attending integrated schools reached only 7% of the school population by 2014. ([Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, annual report 2012/2013](#)).

There have been three further noteworthy efforts to build bridges between schools since the 1999 introduction of political power-sharing between the republican/nationalist part of the community (which is mainly Catholic) and which has an overall aim that includes uniting Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland) and their unionist counterparts (who are predominantly Protestant) and who wish to remain within the United Kingdom.

### 2.2. A common curriculum

First, a common curriculum in Protestant, Catholic and Integrated schools means that every child in Northern Ireland can be expected to cover broadly the same history and, in citizenship courses, to study the need for respect for diversity and tolerance ([Council for the Curriculum & Assessment., 2014](#)). But according to [Barton and McCully \(2012\)](#), young people from communities which have strongly held views about the past often struggle to connect the powerful narratives they hear in their own community with the more balanced version of history they hear in school. Furthermore, [O'Connor, Beattie, & Niens \(2008\)](#), in a study of the effects of citizenship education in Northern Ireland, found that regardless of the intrinsic merits of the course content, the fact that pupils studied only with peers from the same side of the community as themselves was a limitation in the learning environment. More recently, in a detailed evaluation of the extent to which a shared curriculum could enhance community relations, [Niens, Kerr, & Connolly \(2013\)](#) reported that there were notable differences between the schools which studied the same content but also had contact with one another as compared to schools that simply studied the same curriculum. Findings emphasized the benefits of having one curriculum to encourage cohesion rather than promote separation. One teacher was quoted as saying,

It doesn't matter what they teach you in school, but if you go home to your own community and you're still separate, and you never meet anybody that's any different from yourself, that's the way you're going to be. I don't think it should be solely left just in the hands of schools.

[[Niens et al., 2013, p. 55](#)]

[Niens et al. \(2013\)](#) concluded that while the curriculum has had the effect of making a difference to pupils' attitudes, there was considerable added value for both the pupils and teachers when contact was part of joint study of the curriculum. They noted that,

the contact element of the programme has, patently, been successful in engaging schools; the lessons which were “shared” were predominantly reported as having gone very well in terms of pupil enjoyment, interaction and participation. Additionally, a majority of Curriculum + Contact teachers felt that the joint sessions were very positive exercises, particularly, in terms of learning from the other teacher's experience.

[[Niens et al., 2013, p. 67](#)]

### 2.3. Shared education

The second recent approach to promoting community cohesion has been through shared education. This is a government supported initiative defined as, “two or more schools from different sectors working in collaboration with the aim of promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.” ([Connolly, Purvis, & O'Grady, 2013, p. 7](#)). For example, the Department of Education plans to build 10 new school campuses in which schools of different denominations have their own buildings but may share facilities (e.g., sports hall, gyms). The authors estimate that this solution might reach no more than 12% of the total school population given that the campuses are likely to cater for no more than 60 schools out of a total number of around 1200 schools. However, clusters of local schools have also been brought together in Area Learning Communities ([Department of Education, 2013a](#)) with the purpose of sharing expertise and resources.

A recent Department of Education survey across all schools in Northern Ireland sought to determine the extent to which the schools had participated in shared education. Seventy-six percent of respondents claimed to have been involved in such work but only sixty-five percent was cross-community. ([Department of Education, 2013b, p. 8](#)). It is also worth noting that a significant percentage of these links were with special schools, international or cross-border, rather than with schools of a different denomination within Northern Ireland.

[Hughes \(2014\)](#) further argued that even though shared education may have some positive effect on pupils, it remains problematic that teachers' reasons for participating are more focused on educational outcomes than on reconciliation. [Duffy and Gallagher \(2014\)](#), while noting some achievements of shared education pointed out that most of the work done to date involved the bussing of pupils from one school to another (or to neutral venues). It would appear that little or no use has been made of ICT within Northern Ireland to sustain partnerships between schools.

It seems clear that any plan to address the problems emanating from having separate schooling will need to be sustainable, cost-effective and capable of garnering cross-community support. Crucially, to make a difference, any strategic plan would need to be capable of including every school in Northern Ireland in a cost-effective way and make use of effective “contact.”

### 2.4. Using technology to link schools

Finally, the role of ICT in linking schools for community cohesion has been the focus for considerable recent research. Evidence has been emerging that the use of ICT to link schools across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere has been welcomed by teachers and started to have an impact on the skills and attitudes of young people. In the design of this work, the combination of the contact hypothesis ([Allport, 1954](#)) and the reach of the internet were found to be critical ([Austin & Hunter, 2013](#); [Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013](#)). The most recent research indicated that even a year after the contact came to an end, pupils were reported as displaying

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6838094>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6838094>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)