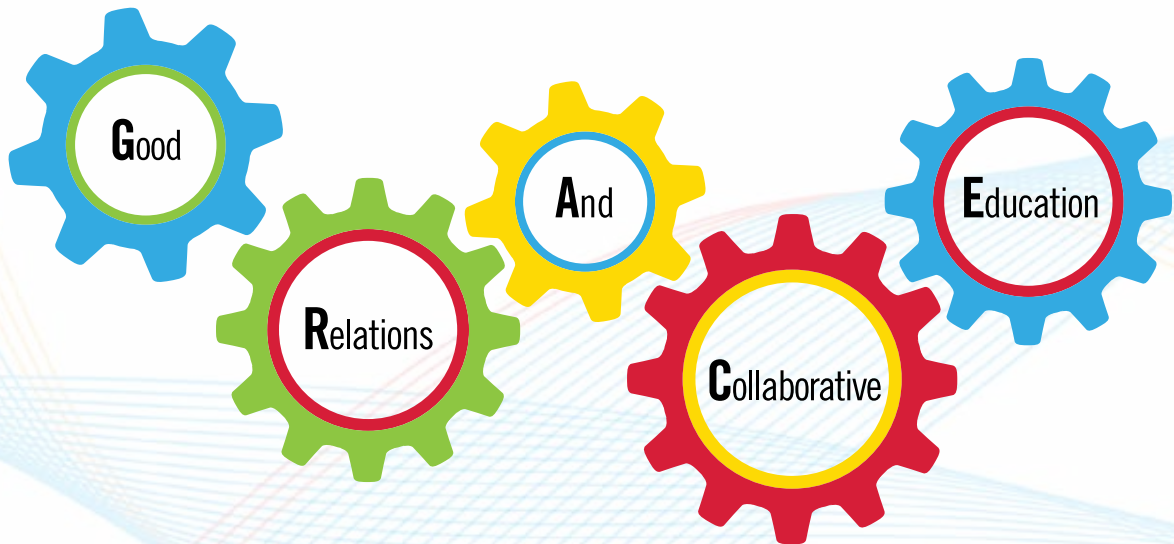




Community Relations In Schools

A leading agent for change.



# Good Relations and Collaborative Education (GRACE): A Whole School Community Approach

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## A Practice Guide

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## Introduction

*The mission of CRIS is to be a leading agent of change in shaping an inclusive, peaceful and safe society where everyone has hope and the opportunity to learn and grow. CRIS has worked consistently within the evolving climate and context of education and peacebuilding over the last four decades. Throughout the next decade, CRIS will leverage and share its practice, wisdom and expertise regarding Good Relations and Collaborative Education as it works towards a more vibrant society built on compassion, mutual understanding and hope.*

This document draws together the learning and experience gained by CRIS over years from its practice in promoting inclusive school communities as part of building a shared society. The culmination of which has led to the consolidation of its model of practice in Good Relations and Collaborative Education (GRACE). This document will serve as a guidance manual to accompany a newly developed digital media resource which features the GRACE model and profiles its implementation through five case study demonstrations. The media resource can be accessed directly on the CRIS website: [www.crisni.org](http://www.crisni.org).

This document is also designed to provide a wide audience with an overview of CRIS practice highlighting key insights learnt while developing and promoting sharing, collaboration and embedding Good Relations in partnership with school communities. It will inform the reader about the links between CRIS' approach and various government and education strategies and programmes including, for example:

- The Northern Ireland Executive Office's Together: Building A United Community (TBUC) Strategy.
- The Department of Education's Every School a Good School (ESAGS) Strategy.
- The Department of Education: Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning.
- Department of Education's Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education.
- Department of Education, The Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) Policy.
- The Educational Authority's Network for Shared School Improvement (NSSI) Strategy.
- Educational Authority's Shared Education Signature Project (SESP).

The document will take a step-by-step overview of the five stages of collaboration and outline key insights gained through practice at each point. It will also include examples of each stage as illustrated through case-studies drawn from diverse contexts: rural, urban, and conflict interface locales. Examples feature schools from across all sectors drawn from Nursery, Primary and Post-Primary education.



## Background to the development of the GRACE Model

CRIS is a small, dynamic education and peacebuilding organisation that has been in operation since 1982. During the early years of its existence, CRIS supported schools to deliver cross-community reconciliation workshops and activities including residential for children and young people. This largely involved working within 'school twinnings' and included management and facilitation of pupil contact programmes. As the years went on, CRIS began to introduce theme-based workshops for children and young people. These explored issues such as 'relationship building', 'conflict', 'prejudice and stereotypes' and 'flags and emblems'. For nearly three decades, CRIS was core-funded by the Department of Education to support programmes such as 'Education for Mutual Understanding' (EMU) and the 'Schools Community Relations Programme' (SCRIP).

From 2009-2014, CRIS began to pioneer work to extend good relations by: exploring school cultures, engaging parents/ carers, offering input into teacher training and by developing staff capacity building programmes. CRIS' practice learning continued to grow after funders invested in the organisation through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) Community Bridges Programme. This funding secured the flagship programme 'Whole School Community Approaches Project' which involved 24 schools and was delivered over the subsequent 4½ years in three geographical locations: North Belfast, Antrim/ Randalstown and Cookstown.

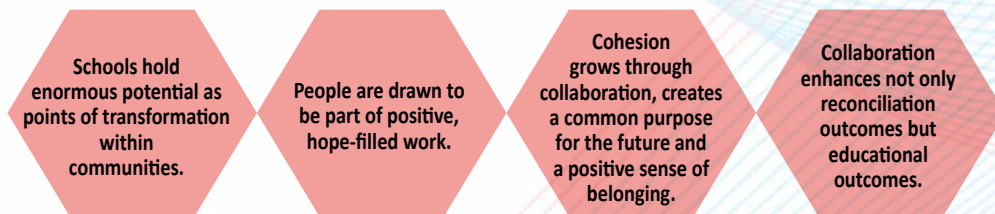
In each area a new model was tested and developed. CRIS worked with feeder nursery, primary and post-primary schools from the Catholic maintained, State controlled and Integrated sectors to:

- Build confidence and capacity to engage with Good Relations and Collaboration at a single school level
- Build and develop relationships between 'twinnings' (i.e. schools from different sectors working with the same ages/ stages)
- Build and develop relationships between the feeder schools in each geographical area
- Share learning and practice between schools, twinnings and collaborations within and between different geographical areas.

A crucial aspect of the project involved working with schools 'at the stage that they were at' in their own journey. Strong relationships between CRIS and the schools meant that CRIS could 'walk beside' schools; for example, suggesting ideas and by using an invitational approach. CRIS continues to work on legacy projects in partnership with the original *Whole School Community Approaches Project* schools today as well as leveraging learning it gained during the project to inform practice elsewhere. It is learning from this project specifically, which has now placed CRIS at the forefront of pioneering practice in Good Relations and Collaborative Education and has led to the consolidation of the GRACE model.

# The Praxis and Principles that Underpin the GRACE Model

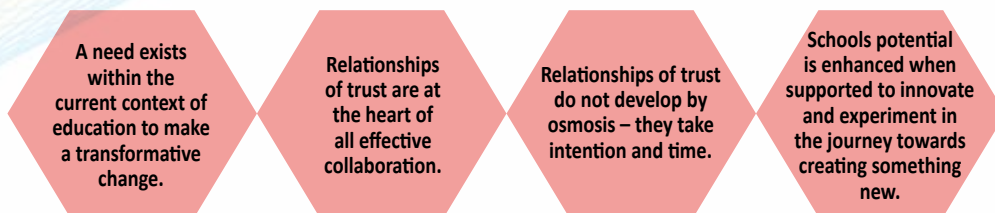
CRIS has drawn on its experience of working with schools for more than three decades as well as its current pioneering practice to distil core principles about the role of schools in peacebuilding work. While CRIS has developed these principles from practice, academic theory also reinforces why this is an important approach (see section Links to Academic Peacebuilding Research). Together they inform principles which underpin the GRACE model and the work of CRIS.



## OUTCOME FOCUSED PRINCIPLES



## CAPACITY BUILDING PRINCIPLES



## FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

It has been the experience of CRIS that the long-term, cumulative effect of positive relationship development, shared agendas and common goal-setting between schools can ultimately change the paradigm of education and wider society.



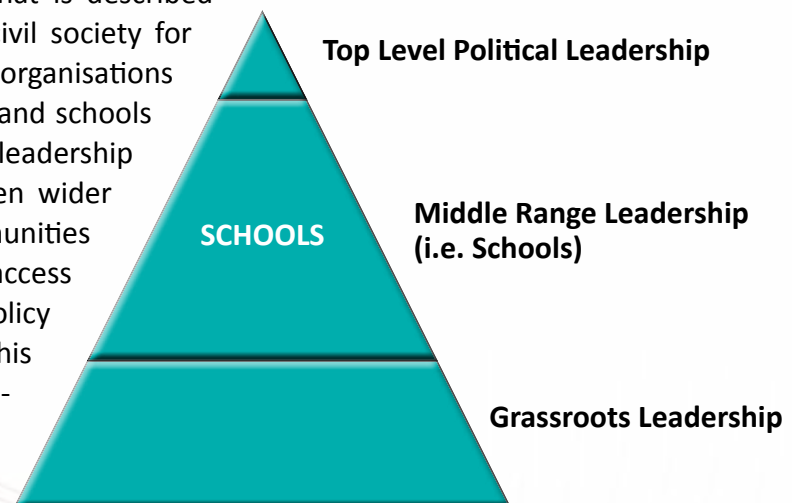
## Links to Academic Peacebuilding Research

The GRACE model is the consolidation of just under forty years of CRIS's practical experience partnering with schools and communities to build a shared and inclusive society in Northern Ireland. Built organically out of a context of historic conflict and division, GRACE is what may be described as a 'phronetic' model of peacebuilding. Drawing on the Aristotelian term for practical wisdom 'phronesis' the term has recently been adopted by academics within peacebuilding to describe knowledge gained from practical experience navigating complexity, uncertainty and instability—a common feature of protracted social conflict (Stanton and Kelly, 2015). Rather than using predetermined approaches or templates, 'phronetic' models of peacebuilding place a high value on understanding local contexts and thus emerge organically as a product of reflective practice, experimentation, trial and error, and by being responsive to nuances within differing localities.

As a model that seeks to underscore sensitivity to context, GRACE presents a flexible and adaptable stepping-stone approach to collaboration. It does not seek a one size fits all blueprint plan towards sharing but rather recognizes that all schools and communities are unique and consequently may find a variety of pathways towards partnership. In recognition that peace is a slow growing endeavor, the model places priority on building durable (strong) and ductile (able to be stretched without breaking) relationships at every stage of collaboration. Furthermore, the GRACE model views the school community as unique location for anchoring social change in meaningful ways.

### Schools: Middle-Range Leadership for Peace

Academic scholarship also provides strong support and explanation to suggest why the school community is an important location for generating collaborative relationships to enhance peace. Scholars such as John Paul Lederach (1997) have written extensively about the importance of including all levels of society within peacebuilding and place emphasis on the role of leadership at what is described as the mid-range level within civil society for example: non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade-unions, churches and schools (Lederach, 1997). Middle-range leadership is an important conduit between wider civil society and grassroots communities while simultaneously retaining access to those responsible for policy and political leadership. For this reason, Lederach views middle-level leadership as a strategic location for influencing social transformation.



## Schools: Unique Location for ‘Everyday Peace’

Academic peacebuilding scholarship has also begun to highlight the importance of ‘everyday peace’ describing the ways that peace can be naturally woven into ordinary life. In this view, it is the simple rhythms and routines of shared daily living which are considered to become building blocks for a cohesive society. This point underscores the importance of working with the education sector to highlight the role schools can play in connecting communities and families across localities in the building of relationships. The regular rhythm and routines of shared school life, shared learning, visits, and playdates all serve to normalise the formation of relationships with those who might initially be view as strangers. By extending this hand of friendship towards the wider school community and involving them in parent coffee mornings, joint celebrations, festivals or concerts- a ripple effect is created. This ripple sends a multiplying impact across school leadership teams, teaching and non-teaching staff, Boards of Governors, and parents and communities alike. Roger Mac Ginty, one leading academic peacebuilding expert has written that ‘everyday peacebuilding’ is important because it may also, at times, set an example to our political level leaders:

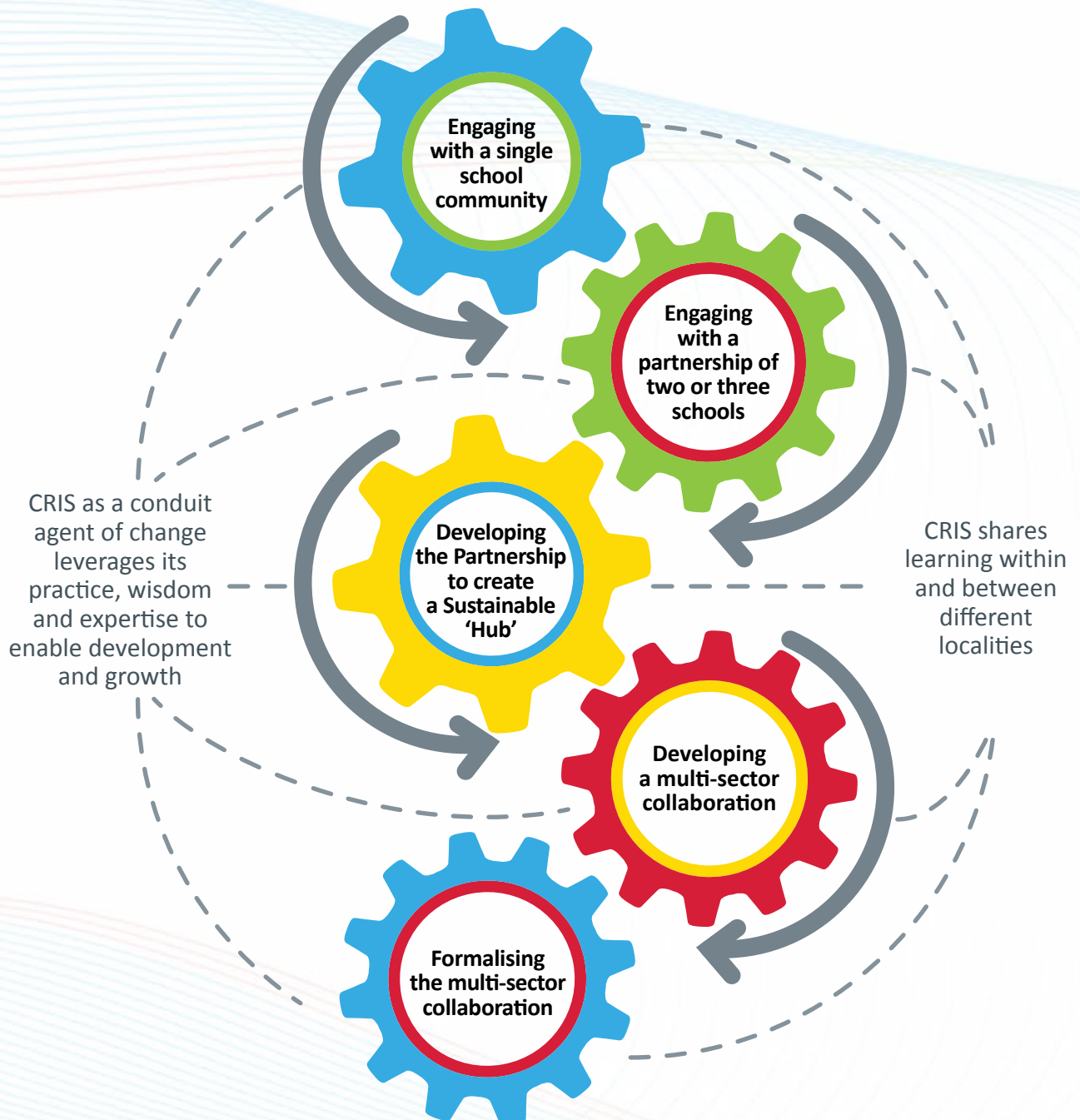
*“...Everyday peace and diplomacy can send important signals to political elites. It may signal the unsustainability of narratives of ‘the other’ as untrustworthy, illegitimate or not worth talking to. It may serve as an exemplar to political elites, encouraging them to investigate new avenues and suggesting that their constituencies are prepared for change” (Mac Ginty, 2014 p. 560).*





## Introducing the GRACE Model

The GRACE model is a relationship-focused five stage model of collaboration which builds durable and ductile interdependent relationships, fosters mutual understanding and builds capacity for meaningful and sustainable sharing with the education sector. GRACE is not a linear model- and it retains high sensitivity to context. At times, schools and communities may move in and out of several of its five stages. Working through the difference stages of this model can support the development of strong collaborative partnerships, can support school improvement, enhance the professional and personal development of all school staff, and build bridges into local communities.



## STAGE 1:

# Engaging with a single school community



At Stage 1, the GRACE model begins by taking time to value and affirm the single school community, an important step in preparation for collaboration. When using a *whole-school approach* it is important to secure commitment from senior leadership teams, both teaching and non-teaching staff, Boards of Governors and parents. Often this begins by exploring school values, and investigating how a school ethos and its policies may be enhanced to lay a foundation for sharing.

*What does this generally involve?*

- Scoping, auditing and listening to members of school community
- Understanding the local community context
- Engaging with the main teams within the school in intentional relationship building
- Assessing current school policies to consider how they may enhance sharing
- Exploring values, ethos and school culture
- Sourcing financial support and funding (including for teacher sub-cover through EA/ DE and other initiatives)
- Leveraging existing capacity and defining roles and responsibilities of key people

### **At Every Stage of Collaboration:**

- Planning, Doing, and Reviewing for future learning
- Time invested in relationship care and maintenance

## STAGE 2:

# Engaging with a partnership of two or three schools

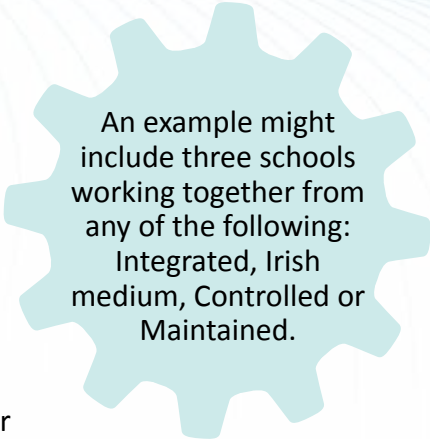


Engaging with a partnership of two or three schools

Stage 2 of the GRACE Model focuses on linking two or three schools that work at the same age/ stage and are from different management types and community backgrounds in order to develop strong working relationships between two or three school communities. At Stage 2 it is important to take time to invest in robust communication and relationship building as this creates a durable foundation for future collaboration. The modelling of interdependent staff relationships leads to shared professional advancement and can enhance both pupil and parental support for joint school collaboration.

*What does this generally involve?*

- Developing strong inter-school staff relationships
- Planning strategically – developing a shared mission statement and objectives
- Leveraging existing capacity and defining roles and responsibilities of key people
- Visiting other schools and exploring different approaches
- Sourcing financial support and funding (including for teacher sub-cover through EA/ DE and other initiatives)
- Delivering intentional sharing programmes (such as ‘Buddy Up!’ The Inter-School Buddy System)



An example might include three schools working together from any of the following:  
Integrated, Irish medium, Controlled or Maintained.

### **At every stage of collaboration:**

- Planning, Doing, and Reviewing for future learning
- Time invested in relationship care and maintenance



## STAGE 3:

### Developing the Partnership to Create a Sustainable 'Hub'



At STAGE 3 of the GRACE model twinned school relationships have become fine-tuned and consolidated. The partnership is increasingly inter-dependent, self-sustaining and able to transcend cycles of project funding. Integral to this sustainability is the support provided by parents/carers and the wider communities. Importantly- this support creates a virtuous circle of deepening collaboration.

*What does this generally involve?*

- Expanding and consolidating staff commitment widely and within linked teams
- Building sharing and partnership routinely into school development plans
- Joint parental engagement reinforces school partnerships and enriches the wider communities
- Leveraging and using funds to develop and expand collaborative programmes and initiatives
- Remaining choice-driven – this is the work of hearts and minds

**At every stage of collaboration:**

- Planning, Doing, and Reviewing for future learning
- Time invested in relationship care and maintenance

## STAGE 4:

# Exploring Locality-based Multi-Sector Collaboration



Stage 4 of the GRACE Model promotes active engagement with multiple school communities within identified geographical locations. The richness that comes from experiencing a variety of school settings, approaches and practices can give life to collaborative education that reaches far beyond the school gate. This stage will focus primarily on the development of relationships at institutional, departmental, and individual levels within the same locality. A key component of this stage is to adopt an invitational approach which honours each individual school context and builds commitment toward a shared sense of trust and ownership.

*What does this generally involve?*

- Intentional time invested to establish and deepen relationships among school leadership teams in geographical cluster areas
- Establishing professional networks across departments and in shared topic areas.
- Consolidating links between feeder schools both within and between sectors
- Taking an invitational approach
- Scoping for schools in other sectors (Irish medium, special, selective and non-selective) who may wish to join the partnership
- Establish geographical/regional wider networks (i.e. Good Relations officers, Local Council Planners)
- Identify areas of shared need between partners and agree goals to work towards.

### **At every stage of collaboration:**

- Planning, Doing, and Reviewing for future learning
- Time invested in relationship care and maintenance

## STAGE 5:

# Formalising the Multi-Sector Collaboration



Stage 5 of the GRACE Model will focus on the formalisation of a Multi-Sector Collaborative Education Partnership. Operating at this stage requires the intentional development and maintenance of inter-school relationships in tandem with strategic and operational planning. Ideally, partnerships are formed in a geographical cluster to create a sense of shared purpose and investment. It is important that time is taken to formulate and establish policies, practices and activities that meet a shared need and promote enhanced educational outcomes for all pupils, staff and families. While it is important at every stage to include the Department of Education, the Education Authority, Local Borough Council and key community and voluntary services within your locality, at this stage this investment can enhance scaling and replication as formalised partnerships may stimulate system change within educational provision.

*What does this generally involve?*

- Supporting schools to work together to access broader services
- Joining up service provision across a whole geographical area
- Linking staff from different schools together to share practice in thematic groups
- Attracting other/ multiple stakeholders
- Supporting the dissemination of learning and the development of similar networks in other areas.
- Mainstreaming and normalising the approach
- Informing policy and practice at a DE level
- Contributing to learning and policy consultation where there are currently major gaps (such as multi-disciplinary working and community links)
- Evaluating and assessing impact

### **At every stage of collaboration:**

- Planning, Doing, and Reviewing for future learning
- Time invested in relationship care and maintenance



# Roles and Activities of CRIS to Engage and Support GRACE

*CRIS engages in four key roles and activities when promoting and enabling collaboration*

## ***Being a neutral, critical friend***

- Supporting schools to explore their own context and plan for collaboration
- Helping school staff to notice and name themes, challenges and issues
- Auditing needs and available services
- Supporting exploration of school cultures and enabling growth of practice
- Understanding how culture needs to be brought to a place where new policy and practice can take hold. Exploring the role of culture in affecting change.
- Celebrating and marking milestones

## ***Building capacity for collaboration***

- Co-designing programmes and activities
- Supporting curriculum (through PD&MU, LLW and Citizenship)
- Facilitating, educating and training
- Developing learning and practice alongside schools in order to enable embedding
- Building scaffolding and centralising the processes of collaboration
- Maintaining positivity and focus on a long-term area-based strategy. Being a consistent presence against a backdrop of changing initiatives and funding streams.

***Acting as conduit and leveraging agent***

- Linking people and organisations and acting as a conduit between sectors, geographies and structures
- Encouraging learning exchanges and visiting between other schools and partnerships
- Being a non-statutory, non-aligned education and peacebuilding agency
- Accessing funds that are unavailable to statutory organisations

***System advocacy to champion collaboration***

- Influencing and shaping approaches to stimulate collaborative thinking
- Lobbying for support, interest and recognition by relevant stakeholders
- Taking risks to promote innovative peacebuilding
- Sharing good practice and learning across localities through documentaries, conferences and regional events
- Consulting on evolving policy related to sharing in education
- Inviting representatives from pioneering schools to develop resources and deliver training
- Sharing the learning with other interested parties (such as international groups and the initial Teacher Training Colleges)

## Case Studies of GRACE in Action

Over the years CRIS has been involved with projects that can be considered case studies and examples of collaboration at different stages of the GRACE model. These case-studies can also be viewed as short stand-alone videos accessed directly from the CRIS website at: [www.crisni.org](http://www.crisni.org).

### Case-Study Stage 1: Values, Ethos and Policy Development (Cookstown Primary School)

CRIS delivers a range of development programmes for schools and school staff. At a single school and ‘twinning’ level CRIS frequently delivers inputs and workshops with whole staff teams exploring their school culture, the values that drive them and their mission statements. At Cookstown Primary School while partnerships had been in place with other schools for some time, it was felt that more support was needed in order that collaboration could be more deeply embedded into school life. CRIS worked with key stakeholders within the school to explore their own identities, the local context of conflict and its impact on division in the locale, and its more recent experience of welcoming newcomer families. A Good Relations Policy was written with staff involvement to anchor the values and ethos of inclusion and diversity as a keystone towards collaboration.

### Case-Study Stage 2: Inter-school Staff Development (Ligoniel Primary School and St. Vincent de Paul Primary School)

CRIS has found that schools often have pre-existing relationships developed over previous years through involvement in earlier sharing programmes such as Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) activities, for example. However, at times, whether that be through staff changes or a lack of more recent contact, schools need extra time invested in relationship building to deepen collaboration. For example, in recent years CRIS has supported Ligoniel and St. Vincent de Paul Primary schools from North Belfast- two schools who, despite previous links, identified the need to deepen their partnership and intentionally build relationships between their respective staff teams to advance their shared education initiatives. CRIS worked with their staff teams to get to know each other, build relationships, support communication, and plan for shared lessons. Time invested forging strong staff team partnerships has created shared professional advancement. Staff teams from the two schools are now modelling strong co-working relationships, which they describe has strengthened pupil and parental support for joint school collaboration.



### Case-Study Stage 3: Peacebuilding and Community Development across the Crumlin Rd Interface (Holy Cross Nursery School and Edenderry Nursery School)

CRIS has worked with school partners on either side of one of Northern Ireland’s most turbulent interfaces for more than 15 years. Today, CRIS works in partnership with two pioneering nursery schools Holy Cross and Edenderry Nursery School to engage parent/ carers in ‘everyday peacebuilding’ activities including shared parent courses and dedicated peacebuilding programmes. CRIS supports the schools to run an annual programme of innovative and creative activities that motivate parents/ carers to change the paradigm of division for themselves and their children. This model is an example of a self-improving system. It is a fully-embedded whole school community approach that drives school improvement and critically links families from each community to their own school community. In addition, it has provided a model of pioneering practice Buddy Up! showcasing how schools can actively engage and promote the building of Good Relations, even in one of Northern Ireland’s most fractured communities. The Buddy Up! model is co-ordinated and driven by school leaders, and an ethos of shared leadership amongst all school staff (together with the support of CRIS) has created an inter-generational participative framework for reconciliation that is embedded and nourished year-on-year.

### Case-Study 4 and 5: Antrim and Randalstown Schools: “Moving Forward Together (MFT)”

Moving Forward Together (MFT) is a collaborative education, community and peacebuilding partnership born out of the CRIS/ IFI Whole School Community Approaches Project. The partnership consists of 19 schools from the area, collectively educating approximately 6000 pupils aged 3 to 19 on an annual basis. MFT represents



Nursery, Primary, Post-primary and special schools from the controlled, maintained, integrated, selective and non-selective sectors. It is a wholly unique partnership, led by the schools, that seeks to raise standards in education and achievement, improve Good Relations and promote the sharing of resources through the development and growth of formal collaboration and ‘system leadership’. MFT has grown into a community-statutory partnership that is a sustainable model, able to attract additional services, funding and multi-sectoral input.

CRIS is the sole community partner in MFT. The CRIS/ IFI *Whole School Community Approaches Project* catalysed the schools involved and CRIS continues to be central to MFT’s innovation and development. CRIS is a shaper and co-designer of this self-sustaining model and coordinates the annual operational programme. MFT is an example of a Highly Effective Partnership (HEP). It began life as a series of local school partnerships that joined together in clusters, (Stage 4 of GRACE model) later formalising as a self-improving system that has shared school improvement at its core, alongside an overarching Good Relations agenda (Stage 5).

## Complementary CRIS Programmes and Services

*CRIS has a range of other programmes which can be used in conjunction with- and are considered to be complementary of- the GRACE model. If you are interested in learning about any of these programmes, more information can be found on the CRIS website [www.crisni.org](http://www.crisni.org) or by contacting the CRIS office directly.*

- **Buddy Up!” The Inter-School Buddy System**

CRIS developed ‘Buddy Up! The Inter-School Buddy System’ in partnership with Holy Cross and Edenderry Nursery Schools almost twenty years ago. Since then, CRIS and the schools have tweaked the approach and launched a teacher resource which shares their learning. The T:BUC strategy directly commits to rolling out of ‘Buddy Up!’ to every nursery and primary school in Northern Ireland. CRIS is currently working alongside schools from right across Northern Ireland to support them to implement ‘Buddy Up!’ to enhance their shared education work.



- **Intergenerational Good Relations Residential Programmes**

CRIS has developed a unique model for engaging parents/ carers through an intensive family residential programme. Over the course of three days, families from partner schools come together to live in community and explore their own roles as active peacebuilders. The residential programme includes a shared classroom for children, a shared learning space for adults and dedicated space for making positive family memories. CRIS has been delivering its flagship residential programme for over a decade and continues to develop and adapt the programme.

- **Shaping Cultures of Inclusion and Resilience within Schools (The Unity Project)**

The Unity Project is a post-primary programme that supports young people to explore their roles in creating safe, welcoming communities within schools. It uses a range of methodologies including group work and storytelling to empower young people to move from bystanding to upstanding. It is usually delivered on an inter-school basis and therefore supports shared education work as well as actively promoting Good Relations.

For any further information please do not hesitate to contact the CRIS office through [info@crisni.org](mailto:info@crisni.org) or at [www.crisni.org](http://www.crisni.org).

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# Notes

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*We wish to thank the following funders for their support towards the production of the GRACE Practice Guide and the accompanying digital media resource.*

### Community Relations Council



**For further information about the contents of this document or for information on CRIS services and programmes, please see our website or contact us on the details below.**

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