



EDUCATION AND RECONCILIATION REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY

Norman Richardson

"Art of Everyday Peacebuilding" by Patrick Sanders

The illustrations that appear throughout this paper have been created by the artist Patrick Sanders for CRIS' "Art of Everyday Peacebuilding" Exhibition. Patrick created these drawings while listening to the stories, perspectives, experiences and craic shared by parents and carers from North Belfast and Antrim who participated in CRIS Family Community Relations Programmes.

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Norman Richardson

“Children are the living messages we
send to a time we will not see”

(Neil Postman, 1982)

*This paper is a slightly expanded version of a presentation I was invited to give at the **Joined-Up: Promoting Reconciliation Through Schools** conference, co-organised by The Corrymeela Community and Community Relations in Schools (CRIS), which took place on 31st January and 1st February 2019. I was asked to set the scene by outlining the journey of this work up to the present day, and in the process to highlight some of the key issues and questions. A somewhat more detailed and academic version of the historical account appeared as several chapters in a book published some years ago (Richardson & Gallagher, 2011: chapters 1-5), though this predated most of the recent developments in Shared Education. The intention here is to provide an overview of a process that has taken place over almost 50 years, some of which is unknown to many or may have been forgotten by others, in order to give perspective and context to current thinking and practice.*

An account of this kind cannot be neutral; it inevitably reflects the author's experience and points of view, but it can nevertheless attempt to be objective. Thus some of the more controversial dimensions of this account are raised as questions, rather than as dogma. Brevity requires that it must also be selective, again reflecting the author's experience and encounters. The exclusion from this particular account of other projects or developments is not intended in any way to lessen their value or significance.

Inspiration – and a Personal Anecdote

The venue for the conference at which this presentation was given was the Corrymeela Centre, near Ballycastle on the stunning North Antrim coast. Corrymeela, as both a residential centre and a scattered community of people committed to working for reconciliation, has been influential for many people, not least the present author who stumbled across it as a student teacher in the late 1960s. It has also been a significant player in the process of engaging schools in cross-community encounters over many years. (The other key player in the organisation of the Joined-Up conference, CRIS, comes into the narrative a little later, though it also has significant longevity in this process, over almost 40 years.)

Corrymeela was the base for one of my own early involvements in inter-school work. Having moved to Northern Ireland at the end of 1972, after three-and-a-half years of teaching in London, I was working in a controlled secondary school at the edge of the Rathcoole Estate, just on the Newtownabbey side of the border with North Belfast. The nearest Catholic secondary school was just outside the estate – many Catholics having been intimidated out of their houses (in what had originally been built in the 1950s as a mixed housing area) and replaced by Protestants who had been similarly displaced from North and West Belfast. Paramilitary activity in the area at this time was not insignificant. At an early stage I made contact with teachers in the Catholic school and proposed some joint activities, having been inspired by Corrymeela's concern to work with schools from both communities. The pictures below were taken at the first event of this link, in May 1973, in which a group of pupils from each school took part in a joint mid-week residential at the Corrymeela Centre.

The 15-year-olds were fairly boisterous and were about to be the first cohort of pupils to have their time at school extended by one year, when the Raising of the School Leaving Age (RoSLA) legislation made it compulsory for pupils to stay until after their 16th birthday. Over about three days a wide-ranging programme of discussions, expeditions to local places of interest and other on-site activities took place, led by teachers from both schools and with the support of a (plain-clothes) member of the RUC Community Relations branch who specialised in youth work with young people from troubled areas. It was generally deemed as successful and led to later activities, including joint camping expeditions in the Mourne.

(It was not, however, universally popular with colleagues in the school. While the contact had the cautious support of the Principal, two senior colleagues called me into their workshop one day and warned me that my activities risked making things more difficult for the school. In their view I was naïve and – because I was English – could not really understand the situation. They said that “this used to be a great wee country” until the IRA had started to cause trouble. There was also a hint that if things did go wrong the school would not support me.)

On reflecting on this programme that took place over 45 years ago it occurred to me that those boisterous 15-year-olds would now be around the age of 60! Teachers seldom know what becomes of those we have taught; if we have influenced them for good or provided any kind of solid foundation for their later lives. I wonder how, or if, that 1973 encounter made any difference to those young people. Indeed, over the decades since those early ventures, we can but wonder if we have sown the seeds of something positive and hopeful in the lives of those who have come into our professional orbit. Such is education!



1973: Pupils from Hopefield and Stella Maris Secondary Schools on residential at the Corrymeela Centre.

Separate Schools in a Separate Society

It is not unusual to hear visitors or observers remark on the separate and parallel school systems in Northern Ireland and express the view that this has contributed significantly to community divisions. Even now, despite many years of educational initiatives of various kinds, about 90% of children continue to attend schools that are wholly or largely separate on the basis of 'perceived religious/cultural/political identity'. Some argue passionately that this is undoubtedly the cause – or at least a cause – of the years of violent conflict that we call 'the Troubles'; others, however, propose that such separation is an inevitable symptom or consequence of centuries of inter-community conflict and separation.

Perhaps both perceptions are true, cause and effect being bound up together in the complex realities of a society that is a political, cultural, religious and national interface between Britishness and Irishness, unionism and nationalism, Catholicism and Protestantism. Even the language of that division is in dispute; are the schools, like many of the communities they serve, just simply 'separate', or are they 'segregated'? In this paper the terminology of 'separation' is preferred, as 'segregation' is seen as provocative by some. Clearly schools are not separate because of some authoritarian decision to keep them so, though it is sometimes argued that some communities' preferences to keep their distance from those who are different is indeed a form of un-decreed, voluntary segregation.

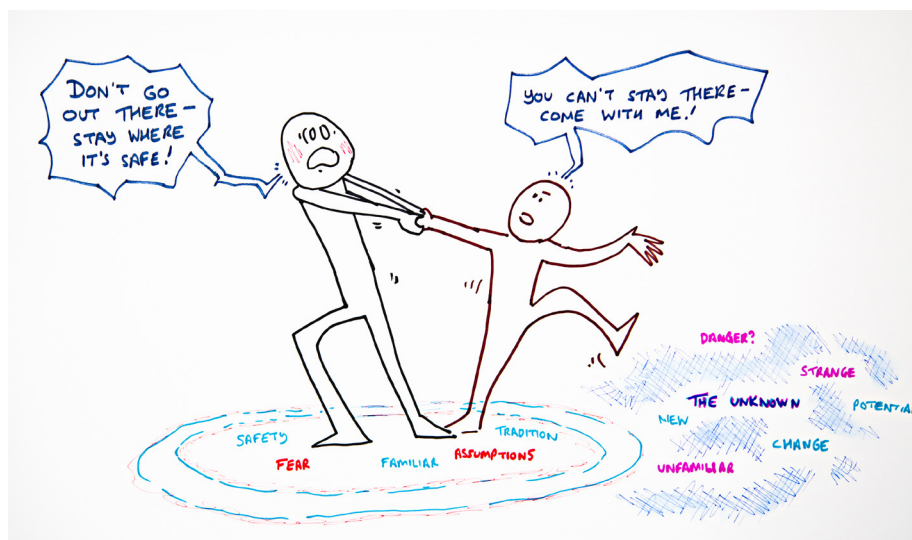
We do well to recognise, of course, that separate schooling in a divided and conflicted society is not unique to Northern Ireland. A glance at schooling in former or current areas of conflict – Apartheid South Africa, parts of the American 'Deep South', Israel/Palestine, Sri Lanka and the Balkans, for example – quickly reveals similar or even more complex separations, in some cases deepened by different languages.

Three main approaches have emerged in Northern Ireland in response to this situation. Some have preferred to retain the status quo, not necessarily aggressively, but out of a concern to preserve safety and continuity of identity within their own community. Mixing schools may well seem to some to threaten the stability of this 'benign apartheid'! Others have conceded that "we need to work together more", collaborating for good relations, but at the same time to ensure that there is no risk of loss of identity through assimilation, thus retaining some significant separate structures such as schools. Yet others argue that separate structures in education must be removed and replaced by one system for all if there is ever to be a genuinely shared society.



The situation is further complicated by several other factors, not least the demographic reality of Northern Irish life. Many people continue to live in distinct and separate areas, making natural meeting and collaboration less likely and planned joint activities more awkward and expensive. There are still so-called "Peace Walls" in some areas and less visible, but no less real, mental barriers in many people's minds, reflecting suspicions and anxieties about "the other community" and how they

might respond. Within education itself, and even within the two dominant schooling sectors, further divisions, often social, are preserved by the continuation of academic selection at the age of eleven. Change is never easy!



A Five-Decade Journey

Despite many obstacles, from the start of the Troubles right up to the present day there have been many programmes designed to improve cross-community awareness and understanding through education. The narrative is sometimes presented as though the earliest initiatives began in the 1980s when government began to support and fund various projects, but this would be to ignore the significant contribution of voluntary organisations (NGOs) and academic institutions right through the 1970s, continuing, indeed, to the present time. The movement for integrated schools also stems from the early 1970s, though the first schools did not emerge until the 1980s. Gradual government interventions and, later still, curriculum reform took these initiatives to a further level, ultimately embedding relevant areas of learning into the statutory curriculum during the 1990s and 2000s.

Renewed policies and government commitments over the most recent decade have established Shared Education as the current manifestation of these initiatives, including a Shared Education Act in 2016 – one of the last gestures of the Stormont Assembly before it disappeared into what seems, at the time of writing, as a bottomless pit!

Some expansion of this outline history will be offered below, especially in relation to its early development. Arguably, all these initiatives over the years have tended to fall into three variable but intersecting key categories which may be summarised as **contact, integration** and **curriculum**.

Contact initiatives, based on the social psychology concept of the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969), are designed to provide separated communities with opportunities for meeting, encounter and collaboration. Cross-community inter-school projects and even Shared Education itself are but varied expressions of this strategy. Advocates of contact theory, however, have always emphasised that simply bringing people together is not enough and that to be effective contact must be systematic and continuous, must involve “equal status” groups, must have support from authority and involve collaborative activities – sometimes described as the “laundry list” of conditions.

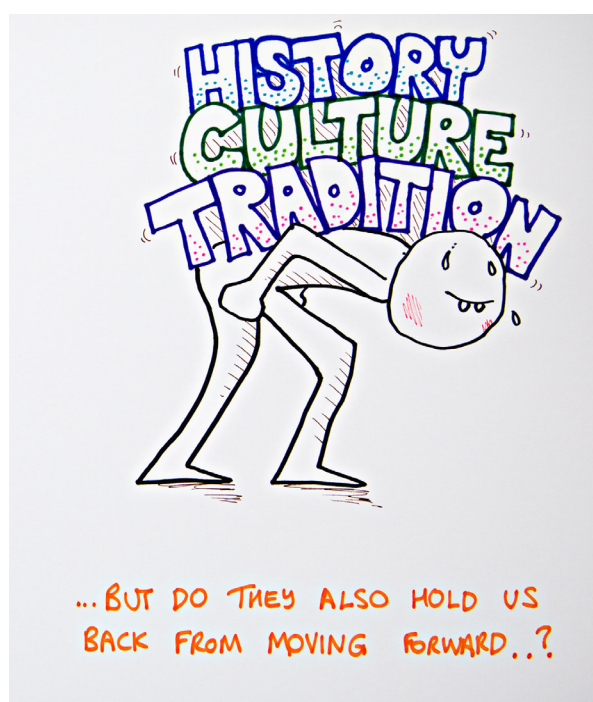
Integrated Education is also a form of contact, though it clearly goes beyond occasional meetings between otherwise separate school communities in order to promote schools where children of all backgrounds can be educated together. It is the continuing debate between these two approaches – inter-school contact or full integration – that remains particularly contentious. The two positions need not be mutually exclusive, however, and some who currently state a preference for developing co-operation between schools from separate systems may well see this as a stage in the process towards ultimate integration.

Interwoven through these approaches has been a curriculum strategy, whereby schools focus on issues about identity, diversity, prejudice, conflict, etc. directly in the classroom. Over the years curriculum programmes of this kind have been developed and promoted by NGOs, academic institutions and official curriculum bodies. They have been used in all types of schools, separate or mixed, though not uniformly. Some teachers have been wary and have chosen to avoid dealing with sensitive and controversial ‘local topics’, claiming a lack of relevant knowledge, experience and skills, or even protesting that solving such persistent social and political problems is not their job.

Others, however, have engaged enthusiastically with such challenges. One obstacle to curriculum work of this kind may well be the lack of priority given to personal and social development curricula in contrast to the emphasis on academic subjects – and this has been particularly evident in the post-primary phase of schooling. Yet some of the best work of this kind has deliberately taken place in curriculum areas with the potential for raising divisive controversial issues, not least History, Religious Education, Literature and Sport. Such programmes have sometimes been far ahead of their time and thereby underused due to lack of teacher awareness or the availability of relevant professional development.

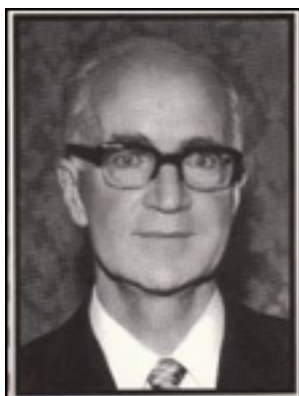
It may be worth noting that, alongside educational initiatives, there have been other programmes that have impacted positively on these concerns – work done by youth organisations, inter-church activities, cross-community holiday schemes and other groups.

These 'informal education' projects have sometimes been superficial or unfocused, but at their best they have provided additional support and encouragement. On several occasions I have come across serving or student teachers whose commitment to working for reconciliation through education has been sparked or significantly encouraged by involvement in schemes of this kind.



Key Moments: early visions

Most students of educational history are well aware of the attempt by government in 19th century Ireland to establish a single system of schooling and of the post-partition Education Act of 1923 that attempted something similar. That these initiatives failed was certainly due in no small way to the determination of the larger Christian denominations to continue their significant influence on schools and, in particular, on the teaching of religion.



John Malone

Separate schooling has remained the norm for most pupils from Protestant or Catholic backgrounds throughout the 20th century and up to the present, though it has not been without its critics. Concerns were inevitably heightened at the start of the Troubles in the late 1960s and various groups and individuals began to consider how to mitigate the negative effects of separation. An important early initiative was the appointment in 1970 of **John Malone**, the Head of Orangefield Secondary School, to lead a Schools' Project in Community Relations, jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Education and the Head Teachers' Association. Malone, who had a keen interest in international education, set up various opportunities for meetings between pupils from different school types and established links with curriculum development work elsewhere to see how pupils might explore relevant social and political issues.

He gathered together a group of teachers and youth workers to develop the programmes in various neighbourhoods. But some politicians and civil servants were anxious about where Malone's work might lead and before the various programmes could come to fruition he was stood down and planned curriculum resources were cancelled. Malone's 1972 report scarcely hides his disappointment and frustration at these decisions, and he wrote, prophetically:

"What is required is a wholesale reassessment of aims and objectives and relative priorities – not within the schools alone but within the whole education system – in the light of the needs of this community and the children who are growing up in it"
(Malone, 1972).

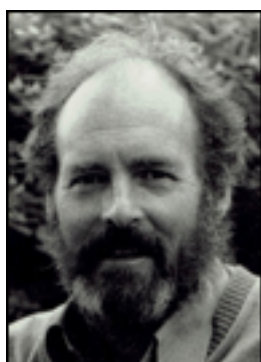
John Malone's work, in the words of Avila Kilmurray (1984), was "an early vision", and a more sympathetic civil servant later wrote that "his pioneering work was disgracefully ignored by the sceptical and non-practising pundits in the Ministry of Education" (Maurice Hayes, 1995). Over the final ten years of his life Malone turned his attention to broader community issues in education but sadly died before some aspects of his vision began to move towards realisation.

Other individuals in the 1970s, often based in higher education, attempted to take similar ideas forward. **Malcolm Skilbeck** was Professor of Education from 1971 to 1975 at the New University of Ulster (as it was then called) and created a stir in 1973 with his remark that “teachers are naïve bearers of [sectarian] culture” (the word ‘sectarian’ having been used when he spoke but removed in publication [Skilbeck, 1976]). His point was not to accuse Northern Irish teachers of naivety or sectarianism, but rather to suggest that if separate cultures were not challenged in schools then the result might easily be a sustained sectarianism by default.



Malcolm Skilbeck

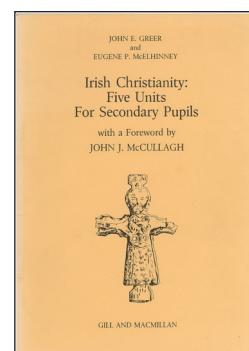
In 1974 Skilbeck established the Schools’ Cultural Studies Project, which developed a series of publications for post-primary schools, and the work of this project continued for almost two decades, influencing a small but significant cohort of teachers, especially in schools around Coleraine, Limavady and Derry.



John Greer

In 1974, and also based at the New University of Ulster, **John Greer**, a lecturer (later Reader) in Religious Education, was developing a programme for the joint study in secondary-level schools of Protestant and Catholic traditions. “Irish Christianity” (which was not actually published until 1985) may seem a tame concept now, but in the 1970s it was for some – in schools and in the churches – a highly contentious idea. Greer, a former Anglican university chaplain, worked closely with Catholic colleagues and inspired a generation of RE teachers, including the present author, though his work was disregarded and even dismissed by those who at that time saw themselves as the ‘guardians’

of a much narrower concept of Religious Education. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the work of John Greer, John Malone and several others provides evidence of truth of the Biblical adage that “A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country” (Mark 6:4).



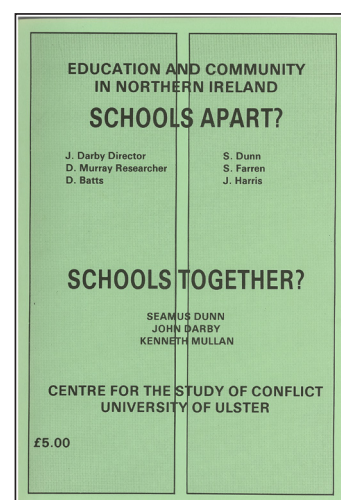
Other curriculum-related concerns centred on History education. Several academics and teachers (Jack Magee, Rex Cathcart, Vivian McIver, Carmel Gallagher and Alan McCully were the best known among them) set out to explore how to develop shared models of History teaching at a time when topics and approaches in the subject varied significantly between schools in the two dominant traditions. The success of their endeavours is reflected in the much more cohesive approach to History that is apparent in the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Another initiative was inspired by work on Peace Education that was emerging from the United States, particularly through programmes developed by the Quakers and other religious and secular NGOs, focusing especially on conflict management. This ultimately led to an ecumenical Churches Peace Education programme, jointly sponsored by the (Protestant) Irish Council of Churches and the (Catholic) Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, that set out to develop joint resources for churches and schools.

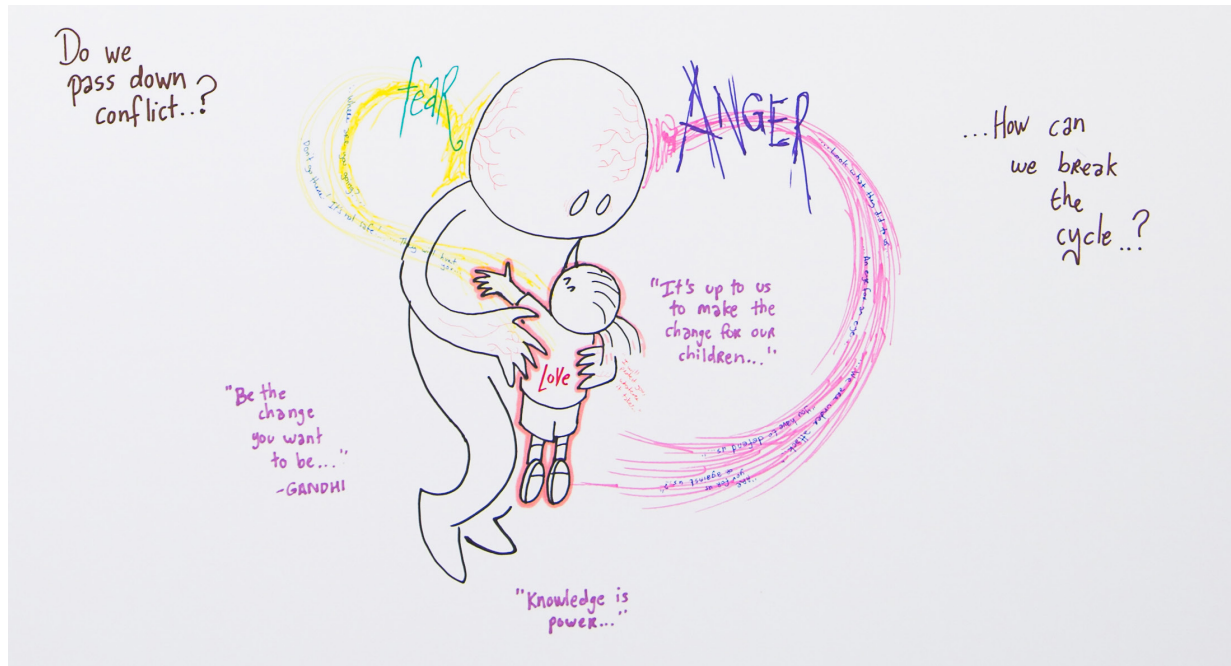
At the same time, from the early 1970s, the group of parents that became the **All Children Together** movement was campaigning for the establishment of schools whereby children of Catholic and Protestant backgrounds could be taught side by side. Attempts to establish relevant legislation were successful, but no schools were successfully established until 1981. The school that later became Lagan College famously opened its doors in a scout hut, with 28 pupils, two teachers, no adequate classroom equipment and protesters outside! No public funding was available for the first four years and some of the parents had re-mortgaged their houses in order to make it possible.



Lagan College in 1981 – the original pupils and staff

In 1978 a study entitled “Schools Apart” was published by the Centre for the Study of Conflict at the New University of Ulster. Featuring research carried out by Dominic Murray and co-edited with John Darby and Seamus Dunn, it examined the lack of awareness and contact between schools serving the two dominant traditions in Northern Ireland. A few years later a follow-up study, entitled “Schools Together”, explored the potential for inter-school contact, and discovered some openness to it. Researchers remarked that even asking the questions seemed to spark some level of interest within some schools, and so the second report had a more positive tone and, indeed, led to further inter-school projects, promoted and researched by the Centre. (Dominic Murray [1985] later produced his own influential book based on that research, entitled “Worlds Apart: Segregated Schools in Northern Ireland”.) A 1978 ecumenical report to the Churches, entitled “Violence in Ireland” had also recognised concerns about separation in education and proposed joint work to develop and improve relations between schools, although the Catholic and Protestant authors had been unable to agree on the issue of integrated schools.





Key Moments: Government initiatives

As the conflict moved into the 1980s, there was evidence of a change in government policy that led to much more significant funding being directed towards inter-school and curriculum initiatives. In 1982 the Department of Education issued Circular 82/21, which included the statement that:

"Every teacher, every school manager, Board member and trustee, and every educational administrator within the system has a responsibility for helping children to learn to understand and respect each other, and their differing customs and traditions, and of preparing them to live together in harmony in adult life".

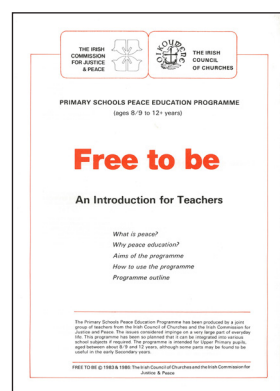
The intention was that a copy would be delivered personally to every teacher, and Department officials had even considered placing a copy in teachers' salary notifications. Recognising the work already under way on the part of NGOs and academic institutions, new funding was made available and new initiatives encouraged. Several secondments were made possible for teachers to develop the work with schools, including with the Corrymeela Community and the Churches' Peace Education Programme (the position there being taken up by the present author). One of the direct responses to the new government policy was the establishment in 1982, initially in East Belfast, of Community Relations in Schools (CRIS). An early agreement between these three NGOs led to the establishment of an informal mutual support group, the Forum on Community Understanding and Schools (FOCUS), which continued over the next 25 years and involved many other organisations with similar aims.

A committee was established within the NI Council for Educational Development (NICED – a predecessor body of the current curriculum body, CCEA), involving teachers, teacher educators, other academics, inspectors, representatives of NGOs and some others. It was this group, during its first meeting in June 1983, that decided to name the programme **Education for Mutual Understanding – EMU** (the term having been influenced by the concept of Education

for International Understanding - EIU) and the committee itself became known as the EMU Steering Group (possibly suggesting a rather bizarre antipodean pastime!). The group set out to provide ideas and support for schools and appointed field officers for the primary and post-primary phases. In its developing thinking, and later in its publications, the work of EMU always had two dimensions, curriculum and contact, which needed to be kept in balance. Later in the 1980s, encouraged by the Steering Group, some of the Education and Library Boards also began to appoint EMU Field Officers within their Curriculum and Advisory Service (CASS) teams.

From 1985 government made funding available to integrated schools, enabling several new schools to emerge, including the first two integrated primary schools. Some observers have speculated, however, that the readiness of schools in the 'mainstream' sectors to support the development of EMU was at least in part a response – and possibly a defensive one – to the emergence of a growing integrated sector.

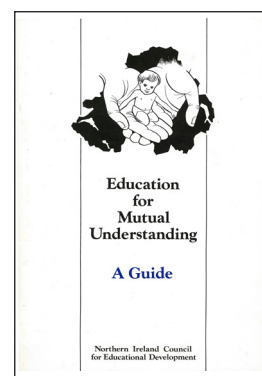
The appointment of Dr Brian Mawhinney (a Conservative MP in England who was originally from Northern Ireland) as the Direct Rule Education Minister for Northern Ireland led to further government initiatives, most notably the establishment in 1987 of the **Cross-Community Contact Scheme** for schools and youth organisations. Schools could make joint applications for funds for inter-school activities, and after some initial hesitation there was a growing take-up of these opportunities. Ongoing research by the Centre for the Study of Conflict at Coleraine suggested that there was an increased openness to the possibility of schools working together in this way.



It was becoming clear, however, that many schools and teachers remained cautious about engaging with such ideas in the formal curriculum. Between 1983 and 1985 the Churches' Peace Education Programme published "Free To Be", a series of curriculum resources for primary schools – on themes such as self-esteem, relationships, understanding symbols, case-studies and religious diversity – and began to promote them around Northern Ireland. Most schools responded politely but it was evident that many struggled to see where such ideas might fit into the curriculum or whether there was any time and space to accommodate them at all. In some cases school principals acknowledged their anxieties about the possible negative reaction of parents, ancillary staff or even local clergy to the use of such materials. On more than one occasion in later years sets of these and other resources were discovered in pristine condition in school cupboards!

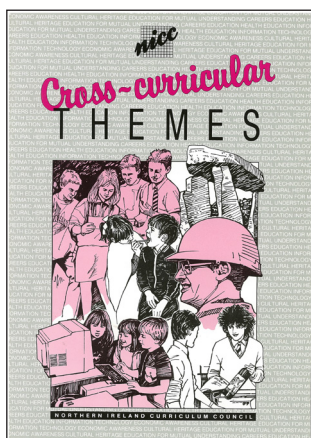
There was a growing recognition that curriculum development requires the support of professional development.

The NICED EMU Steering Group continued to develop and promote mutual understanding within and between schools, and in 1988 published "Education for Mutual Understanding: A Guide", which was sent to all schools. The group was stood down, however, at the point when it was announced that the forthcoming Northern Ireland Curriculum would include EMU as an Educational Theme. Dr Brian Mawhinney promised that a new co-ordinating structure would be set up, though this never actually happened.



Key Moments: Curriculum Reform and Beyond

Legislation for the establishment of a statutory curriculum for Northern Ireland was passed in 1989 and almost immediately work began on defining and detailing the content of each subject area and each of the six Educational (Cross-Curricular) Themes. Two of these statutory themes were designed to be closely inter-related: Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH). All the subject areas were also required to indicate how their subject was relevant to each of the themes.



One of the key issues for the group attempting to define the theme of EMU was the relationship between curriculum and contact, in particular as to whether or not contact should be made compulsory. Very strong views were expressed though, perhaps wisely, it was decided not to go along the compulsory route at that time but rather to recommend strongly that schools should work together. It is nevertheless ironic that EMU in popular perception came to be perceived *only* as inter-school contact, with many schools ignoring the curriculum intentions of the theme. (This perception persists to the present, even more than a decade after the specific terminology of EMU ceased to feature in the Northern Ireland Curriculum.) In a later publication (CCEA, 1997) the shared objectives of EMU and CH were re-defined as:

- fostering self-esteem and building relationships;
- understanding and responding creatively to conflict;
- appreciating interdependence; and
- developing an understanding of cultural diversity.

A difficulty that emerged in relation to the Educational Themes was that in making EMU and the other themes every teacher's responsibility, the danger was that they became *everyone else's* responsibility. Many teachers expressed uncertainty about what was being required of them, again highlighting the need for professional development. In response, a significant in-service training programme in EMU and CH was established by the Queen's University School of Education, and this ran successfully, first by secondment and later as a series of "twilight" courses, from 1990 to 1997. The positive impact on the 200 or so teachers who took one of these courses was significant, but more was clearly needed.

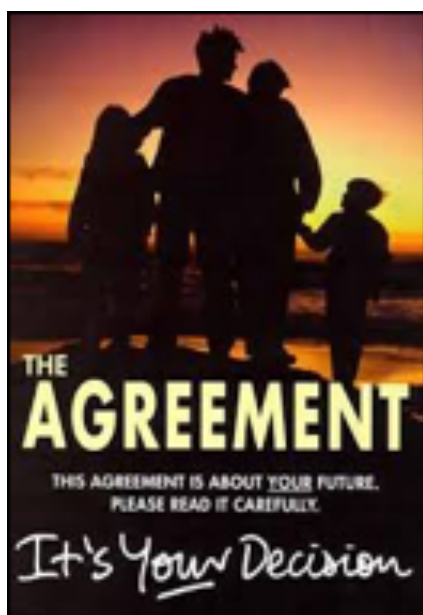
There is no doubt that, encouraged by the new curriculum and supported by funding from the Cross-Community Contact Scheme as well as by various NGOs, some schools entered into strong, enduring relationships and also attempted to work on these issues in the curriculum, separately as well as together. In the various evaluations of inter-schools work by the Inspectorate and academics, it was recognised that residential experiences, with time for pupils to engage socially and informally, were particularly valuable in such processes.

But there was undoubtedly some superficial or token engagement, some of which was highlighted in the media, with particular criticism of schools taking part in field-visits, nominally together but, in reality, more in parallel, with little or no engagement between the pupils. Responding to some of this criticism, the Department of Education and the Education and Library Boards, re-launched the Cross-Community Contact Scheme in 1996, using terminology that they hoped would make the purposes of such work much clearer; it became the **Schools Community Relations Programme (SCRIP)**.

Some overt opposition was also evident. From some nationalist or republican sources there was a tendency to dismiss such programmes as missing the point by trying to improve superficial relationships when the real issue was about fairness and human rights. On the loyalist side the criticisms tended towards suspicion that such work would seek to lead Protestants towards a United Ireland; anti-Catholicism also featured, with one clergyman/politician putting out leaflets describing EMU as attempting to “kidnap Protestant pupils”! At a more serious level some educationists and some NGOs argued that contact alone would make little impact unless there was a much greater focus on challenging prejudiced attitudes and tackling relevant local controversial issues in the classroom.

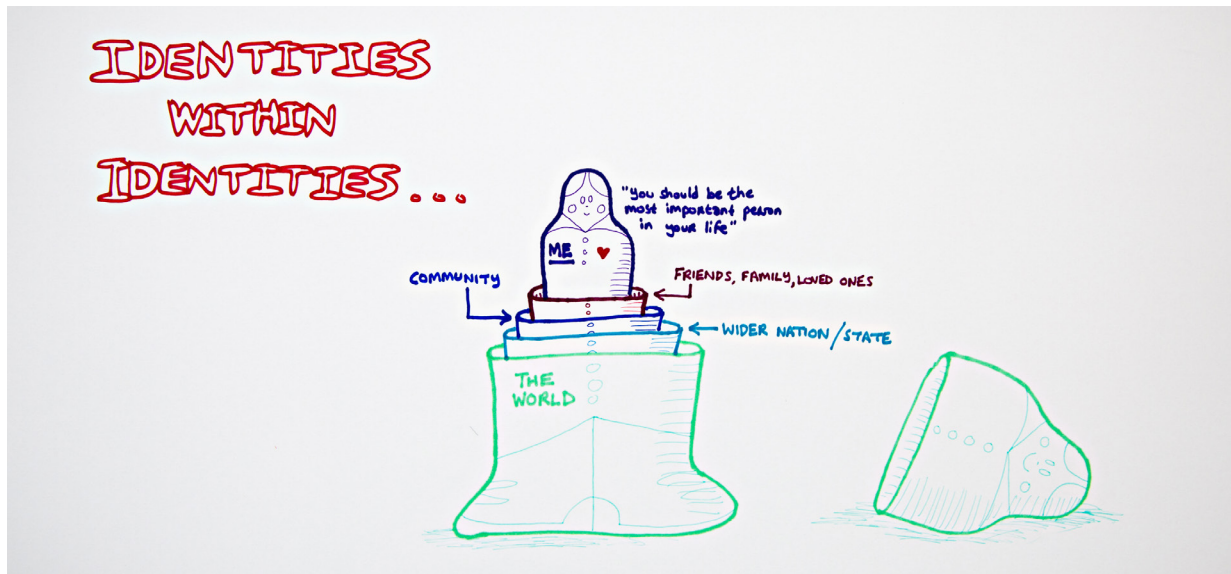
Key Moments: towards a Shared Society

The paramilitary ceasefires of the 1990s and the 1998 Belfast Agreement encouraged a focus on the possibility of developing a shared post-conflict society, and the role of education was significantly on the agenda. The signatories to the Agreement stated that they ..



“... recognise and value the work being done by many organisations to develop reconciliation and mutual understanding and respect between and within communities and traditions ... they pledge their continuing support to such organisations and will positively examine the case for enhanced financial assistance for the work of reconciliation. An essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing.”

Later government policy statements, such as "A Shared Future" (OFMDFM, 2005), expressed this even more strongly, advising that all schools should ensure "through their policies, structures and curriculae, that pupils are consciously prepared for life in a diverse and inter-cultural society and world" (Section 2.4). This policy was, however, set aside by the power-sharing NI Executive, and some observers felt that the later policy drafts were much more cautious.



Unease in some quarters with what was felt to be an insufficiently challenging EMU/contact model led a number of academics and curriculum developers to propose and begin work on a more rigorous Citizenship approach. Significant work on citizenship education was carried out by Professor Alan Smith and his colleagues in the University of Ulster's UNESCO Centre. This led ultimately to the inclusion of Local and Global Citizenship (LGC) as a post-primary dimension of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum in 2007, though there has been some disappointment that the actual implementation has been more limited than was intended.



The Revised Curriculum, based on "underpinning values", dropped the concept of Educational Themes and replaced them with new and mainstreamed areas of learning. Thus, at post primary level Learning for Life and Work included both LGC and Personal Development, while at foundation and primary levels the former EMU, CH and Health Education were merged and expanded into Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU).

In 2010 funding for the Schools Community Relations Programme was ended, much to the disappointment of some schools. The following year the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy reaffirmed commitment to educational community relations work and the importance of equality and inclusion. More controversially, however, the policy argued that the contribution of “the voluntary and community sector ... should not be factored into the development of this policy approach”. In order “to ensure long term sustainability” the role of NGOs that had continuously been at the heart of this work was now to be set aside. Many schools again were angry, arguing that they needed all the support available. As a result, several such organisations were unable to continue; others, including Corrymeela and CRIS, had to downsize their schools work significantly and seek alternative funding; valuable experience was undoubtedly lost to the system.

The Present Moment: Sharing Education



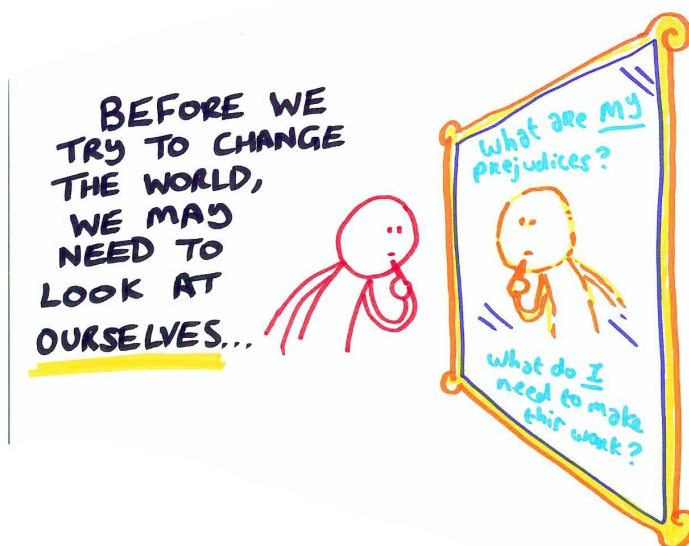
During this period the variant model of **Shared Education** was beginning to spark interest. In one sense this was just another version of inter-school contact, though the intention was to go beyond just occasional joint activities and develop a more structured collaborative approach, involving shared lessons and shared staffing. Early experiments from Queen’s University and in two of the former Education and Library Boards (the Fermanagh Trust programme in the Western ELB and the Primary Integrating and Enriching Education [PIEE] programme in the North Eastern ELB) suggested that this was a viable model, and more schools were drawn in over time.

In 2010 a significant boost was given to Shared Education when the then First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, declared that the Northern Ireland education system was a “benign form of apartheid”. From this point on, government policy set a clear preference for shared education, seeing it as “*the core mechanism for improving schools, increasing educational outcomes for all children and young people and preparing them to play a full and active role in building and sustaining an open, inclusive and confident society*” (Connolly et al, 2013). Post-primary schools in particular were encouraged to collaborate for their Key Stage 4 and post-16 pupils through the Entitlement Framework and Area Learning Communities. According to the **Shared Education Act** of 2016, two of the stated purposes of Shared Education are:

- to promote good relations; and
- to promote respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.

Within the integrated school sector, however, there has been a growing concern that the statutory requirement to promote integrated education is being marginalised. Numbers of pupils appeared to have peaked at about 7% of the school-going population and it has been increasingly difficult to establish newly integrated schools. While several controlled schools have transformed to become integrated, the Catholic education authorities have remained opposed to Catholic schools taking this option.

At the time of writing, Shared Education continues to have significant support, with funding accessed from various sources and preparations in some areas for schools to share campuses, though while retaining their separate identities and many of their facilities. Professional courses for teachers have also been provided in relation to key areas of policy and curriculum. Reviews of progress from the Department of Education and the Education and Training Inspectorate have reported increased numbers of schools participating, though with some gaps and weaknesses (notably more limited pupil numbers at post-primary level and variability between take-up in some areas).



Ongoing Issues

This, in brief, is the journey so far; hopefully those who have been travelling on it will be able to identify with at least some of that narrative. In this concluding section the intention is to draw together some loose ends and highlight several key issues in order to evaluate if we are moving in the right direction and serving effectively the children and young people who come through our education system. Do we have a clear sense of what has been good practice, but also of what needs to be left behind? Have we actually learned from what has gone before, or are we just reinventing wheels or even repeating mistakes? Indeed, is this work overall more 'joined-up' now than it was some years ago? These are issues that require our ongoing attention as the journey continues.

Many voluntary bodies associated with inter-school work, several of them over a very long period, were set aside by government under the CRED policy. The implication in this policy decision was that schools had been using outside agencies to fulfil responsibilities that should have been undertaken within the school. Many schools disagreed and felt that their efforts had been undermined by this decision. NGOs working in this field saw themselves as supporting and empowering schools in their community relations work, providing resources, training and encouragement to teachers, developing links with local communities and building confidence. Some were able to sustain their work by sourcing alternative funding – CRIS, The Speedwell Trust and Corrymeela are notable examples – while others had to close their doors. There may, however, be some indications at the time of writing of moderate rethinking and some recognition that such organisations still have a role to play. Long-term experience, integrity of purpose and broad links with the wider community are too valuable to be shut down by officials whose own involvement with these issues has often been on a much shorter-term basis. Can we really afford to lose this valuable partnership between the voluntary and statutory sectors that has sustained this work for so long?

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Teachers, it is argued, need to develop skills in managing such issues; to avoid them issues is a message to pupils that they would be better to do the same. Some NGOs have focused on developing such skills over many years; integrated schools, unsurprisingly, have often been particularly alert to the importance of this; more recently it has been encouraging to see official guidance on teaching controversial issues emerging from CCEA and the

inclusion of these themes in teacher education programmes. It is hard to see how we can make significant progress in this work without continuing to develop this capacity.

Conclusion

This article has been written from the perspective of a commitment to education for reconciliation and the development of a shared, more cohesive society. For the task of bringing Northern Ireland's pupils and schools into closer relationship, however, other motives are certainly available. Some emphasise economic efficiency in a society where many local facilities seem unnecessarily duplicated. Others emphasise school improvement and the provision of more equal opportunities through the post-primary Entitlement Framework. All of these are worthy aims, but is reconciliation the ultimate, the highest purpose? Do we, indeed, have a clear understanding of what is meant by the term "reconciliation"? In their "Working Definition of Reconciliation", Hamber and Kelly (2004) offered five key dimensions:

- Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society
- Acknowledging and dealing with the past
- Building positive relationships
- Significant cultural and attitudinal change
- Substantial social, economic and political change.

While this definition is not specific to education, there are many important ways in which school communities can contribute positively to such ideals. Or as Nelson Mandela – who knew something about reconciliation – once said: *"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"*.

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For Discussion:

Starter-questions for teachers, student teachers, educational support bodies (statutory & voluntary), policy-makers, academics, etc.

- What have we learned – or what could/should we learn – from a greater awareness of the development of these processes over the past decades?
- How effectively has the quest for reconciliation been evident from our own involvements in these developments?
- What model or models stand out as being particularly effective in the past and at the present time?
- In light of the definition of reconciliation by Hamber & Kelly (above), what needs to be done in order to ensure that the work continues to focus on this goal? (Respond in terms of policy; strategy; classroom practice; curriculum reform; training, etc.)

Joining Up

'Joining Up' is a collaborative initiative by CRIS and Corrymeela Community that documents key learning on the journey of reconciliation and education in Northern Ireland. Reflections have been collated through a series of shared learning events with stakeholders from the Third Sector, Academics, Schools, DENI, EA and ETI and are presented as digital Case Studies and an academic paper.

About Community Relations In Schools

Community Relations In Schools (CRIS) is a peacebuilding and education charity that works in partnership with schools, district councils and other statutory providers to positively and systematically address the separated context of living in Northern Ireland. Through strategic action, service delivery, reflective practice, advocacy and research – CRIS has developed unique, multi-faceted, collaborative approaches to achieve its mission which 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."

www.crisni.org

About the Corrymeela Community

Corrymeela's mission is to 'Transform Division through Human Encounter'. Founded as a charity and an ecumenical Christian Community in 1965, Corrymeela works with schools, youth organisations, communities, faith institutions and public sector bodies to promote reconciliation.

www.corrymeela.org

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