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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Evaluation on the Primary Integrating and Enriching Education (PIEE) Project

Conducted on behalf of the North Eastern Education and Library Board by the School of Education, University of Ulster

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Executive summary

The School of Education, University of Ulster was commissioned by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) to research the Primary Integrating/Enriching Education (PIEE) project. This report brings together the findings of this three-year evaluation.

The PIEE project involved developing cross-community partnerships between small rural schools in the NEELB area. The aim of the project was that every pupil in a project school would have an opportunity to take part in activities and shared learning with pupils from other schools in the area. From the outset this has been a project focused on partnership and working towards a shared education goal. The purpose of the research undertaken by the School of Education, University of Ulster was to explore the PIEE project partnerships and to gather information on best practice.

Most of the evidence was collected from two 'case study' partnerships. In the first year interviews were carried out with principals, teachers and governors. Pupil focus groups also took place with P6 and P7 children. During the second year this data collection was repeated and a survey of all participating principals and teachers was undertaken. Additionally, the third year of research explored the role and mechanism of a shared teacher in each of the partnerships.

The data collected across this three year period indicated that the PIEE project has been successful in delivering its intentions of supporting rural schools, building cross-community relationships and promoting a shared future agenda. This research contributes to the debate as to whether the concept of shared education moves community relationships forward or facilitates people to remain comfortable within existing structures.

1. Background to the PIEE project

The Primary Integrating/ Enriching Education (PIEE) project was co-funded by Atlantic Philanthropies (AP) and the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), and ran from 2009 to 2013. The project aimed to develop 11 cross-community partnerships between 28 primary schools, involving more than 1,900 pupils in the North Eastern Education and Library Board in Northern Ireland. This partnership project involved schools from four different sectors of educational provision in the Board area, namely, the Controlled, Integrated, Maintained and Irish Medium sectors. Schools involved were of comparable size (with an enrolment of less than 105 pupils) and situated mainly in rural settings. Partnerships could comprise of two, three or four schools.

Through the project, every pupil in the local network should have had an opportunity to take part in activities with pupils from other schools in the area, including but not exclusive to, shared classes and learning opportunities. Additionally, it should have offered a breadth of curriculum experience through external advice and support as well as collegial support between schools in new curriculum developments. A process for staff professional development was also provided along with opportunities of joint activities for parents and governors.

From the outset, it was envisioned that this project would have an impact on several levels: on the pupils themselves and also on other educational stakeholders, including teachers, parents and governors.

2. The rural context

The schools involved in the PIEE project were all situated in a rural context. These social settings, often referred to as ‘rural interface areas’, have their own unique issues. These divided communities have been relatively under researched, compared to their urban counterparts. Furthermore, shared space is likely to be less available than in urban contexts (with a lack of shopping areas and parks for instance) and demarcated social networks more pronounced with separate economic, religious, social, political, and sporting structures juxtaposed in a small geographical area. Due to this and to the legacy of the conflict, family structure is more tightly linked, with emotional and historic barriers impacting on the development of new and potentially controversial relationships with the other community. The rural dimension of these schools, therefore, has a considerable impact on the impetus, logistics and nature of sharing in education.

3. Sharing in education

The ‘Shared Future’ document published in 2005 by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for Northern Ireland highlighted the need for greater ‘sharing in education’. It is within this context that the PIEE project has attempted to continue the momentum of the community relations objective by exploring a ‘third way’ of the contact hypothesis.

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3.1 PíEE Activities

The PíEE project facilitated a wide range of partnership activities that included: principals meetings; staff development and planning (curriculum planning at Key Stage Level); co-ordinating school calendars; resource sharing; shared and team teaching; joint events such as sports days, school productions and school projects; pupil residentials and away days.

4. Methodology

The purpose of the research evaluation was to explore PíEE's impact on cross-community relationships and, in particular, how the partnership schools have interpreted their role in the project. The evaluation mapped the participating schools' emerging relationship and practice. The research explored the views and attitudes of principals, staff, governors, parents and pupils towards the project.

4.1 Research objectives

The research objectives for the evaluation were to:

- gather perceptions of the PíEE project from a range of stakeholders including principals, teachers, members of the board of governors, parents and pupils;
- explore staff understandings of the partnership model;
- map examples of best practice and evolving practice with a view to transferability to other school settings/ partnerships;
- assess the extent to which staff feel they have created a 'shared space' with their rural community partnership;
- explore and evaluate the role and experiences of the shared teachers employed as part of the project; and
- consider the sustainability of the project beyond the lifespan of the PíEE project.

This evaluation of the PíEE project took place across three school years. Data was collected at three points in time: March-May 2011, April-June 2012, and April-June 2013.

Phase 1: 2011 Data Collection

Two case-study partnerships (a two school partnership and a three school partnership) were sampled. Research instruments employed were semi-structured interviews and pupil focus groups.

Interviews	5 principals
	12 teachers
	5 school governors (1 from each school)
Focus Groups	Pupil focus group of P6 and P7 pupils in each school

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Phase 2: 2012 Data Collection

Data was collected from the same two case-study partnerships as in 2011 and included interviews with principals, teachers and governors, as well as a survey of parents. In addition principals and teachers across all PIEE schools were surveyed.

Interviews	5 Principals
	10 teachers
	4 school governors
Surveys	48 completed questionnaires from P6 and P7 children's parents (return rate of 57%)
	60 completed questionnaires from principals and teachers across all PIEE schools (return rate of 47%)

Phase 3: 2013 Data Collection

The 2013 research was focused around the shared teacher post within the PIEE project.

Interviews were undertaken with each of the shared teachers and two separate surveys were undertaken, one with teachers across all PIEE schools that had a shared teacher and the other with principals across all PIEE schools that had a shared teacher.

Interviews	10 shared teachers
Surveys	29 completed questionnaires from teachers (return rate of 32%)
	18 completed questionnaires from principals (return rate of 78%)

5.0 Findings

5.1 Perceptions of the PIEE project

- The work of the PIEE project has the broad support of principals, teachers, governors, pupils and parents.
- Teaching staff valued the collegiality and professional development they are afforded through the programme.
- There is a general consensus that it has enhanced pupils' educational experiences and has helped them build positive social relationships with pupils from their partner school(s).
- Pupils enjoyed the activities associated with PIEE, valued making new friends and developing new skills but they were also able to articulate the deeper purpose of the project of understanding and living with difference, and how this would benefit them in later life.
- Parents and school governors were supportive of the project and were keen to see the work continue.
- Wider political change and the decrease in community tension were perceived to be an important backdrop to the success of the project.

5.2 Staff understandings of the partnership model

- The concept of ‘sharing’ was sufficiently flexible to facilitate partnership work without posing a threat, real or perceived, to each school’s sense of identity.
- The majority of principals, teachers, governors and parents who responded were in favour of sharing and partnership but rejected the idea of the future amalgamation or integration of schools.
- Teachers remain reluctant to address the more challenging aspects of difference in Northern Ireland society but there were indications that they were more aware than previously of the need to tackle such issues, even if they felt their confidence and skills were inadequate.

5.3 Best practice

- The PIEE model was seen as a way of keeping small rural schools viable as well as contributing to improved community relations.
- School leadership, the commitment of principals and calculated risk-taking were important factors in understanding the strength of partnerships.
- Investment in building strong staff links between the schools is key to developing successful school partnerships.
- The concept of the Shared Teacher, on the evidence to date, appears to be a very significant catalyst in consolidating the partnership at all levels and demonstrating its value in a very tangible way.
- Conversely, the termination of the Shared Teacher post after a year raised the possibility of creating a sense of deficit which may impact negatively on future work.
- Schools appeared to be developing genuine and meaningful relationships which were rippling out into the wider community.

5.4 The extent to which staff feel they have created a ‘shared space’ with their partnership

- At all levels the schools were developing genuine and meaningful relationships which, in turn, were having a positive impact on wider interaction within the community.
- The schools involved in the case studies were becoming more integrated within the local community and jointly had a stronger community presence.
- Geographically demarcated space was becoming more ‘open’ as cross-community events were held by the schools.

5.5 Shared Teacher

- The shared teacher model was approached flexibly by schools.
- Emphasis on the shared dimension of this post varied widely.
- There were models of best practice partnerships which could provide a template for implementing shared teacher posts in the future.
- The shared teacher post demonstrated potential for enhanced educational experiences and cross-community engagement.

5.6 Sustainability

- Sustainability in the face of the removal of funding in the future is a major concern for partnership schools with fears that the removal of support for transport, planning time and resources will erode current provision.
- Some principals and teachers are determined to maintain at least some of the gains, even by exploring alternative funding sources, while others indicated that the work was likely to diminish through time.
- It may be that the shared teacher model can offer a solution for resourcing primary schools in rural ‘interface’ communities.

6.0 Recommendations

1. The success of the PIEE project should be factored into Department of Education policy with regard to its rural schools and CRED policies.
2. Funding allocated to rural schools should take account of the financial needs and savings associated with partnership.
3. Funding should be sought to pursue the Shared Teacher initiative on a larger scale to enable it to be properly evaluated.
4. Continued funding for transport is necessary if partnerships are to be successful.
5. Rural schools should be given priority in the allocation of interactive technologies to support existing relationships and to help overcome isolation.
6. Resources for staff planning meetings are critical to develop and sustain partnerships.
7. Opportunities for school governors and parents from schools working in partnership should be encouraged further, supported and formalised.

7.0 Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that the partnership model has potential to enhance pupils’ access to the entitlement curriculum. Schools have engaged well with the project and invested considerable time and effort into forging new approaches to sharing in education. This research contributes to the debate as to whether the concept of shared education moves community relationships forward or facilitates people to retain existing structures.

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