Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Prof Roger Austin (Ulster) and Prof Rhiannon Turner (QUB) - *New evidence and new approaches for shared education*

The seminar highlights research on the role of blended contact in shared education. The term 'blended contact' refers to interactions which are a blend of face to face work and online learning.

Shared Education

In 2015, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland secured external funding to develop the Shared Education Signature Project (SESP) which involves around 380 schools, based on existing cross-community partnerships with a requirement that there be a minimum of 6 face to face sessions per annum for children involved. Following an enquiry by the Education committee in the devolved administration in Northern Ireland, a Shared Education Act (2016) was passed to 'deliver educational benefits to children and young persons', and to promote 'the efficient and effective use of resources', 'equality of opportunity', 'good relations' and 'respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.' In 2018, the roll-out of shared education to a new cohort of schools (300 schools by 2019) which did not have existing partnerships was introduced through the Collaborative and Shared Education programme (CASE), funded through the European Union. For the first time, it was agreed that as part of the 30 hours contact time which pupils were expected to do, 20% could be online.

Around 50% of the total number of schools in Northern Ireland are now involved in shared education, and the Department of Education has made clear its intention to 'mainstream' shared education, noting that 'a two pronged approach which includes face to face contact supplemented by online collaboration is one method to sustain relationships and raise standards' (DE, 2018)

Previous research on a blended contact approach to community cohesion, where pupils are linked through both face to face work and regular online interaction.

Turner and Cameron (2016, p. 228) underlined the potential value of blended contact in providing a means for young people to have much more frequent contact than would be possible through face to face work.

Harwood et al. (2013) refer to the ways that online contact can overcome three of the challenges of face-to-face contact, namely practicality, anxiety and sustainability. These findings were confirmed by Austin, Reilly and Ricard (2017) who demonstrated that ICT can supplement face to face work, notably by providing longer term engagement between pupils than would otherwise be possible and offering teachers a model which is better able to fit into the demands of a busy teaching day. There is also evidence that intergroup contact through ICT in the classroom can have long-term benefits: Christian and Muslim students in Australia who took part in an online group classroom project showed reduced levels of prejudice and intergroup anxiety that remained six months after completion of the project (White & Abu-Rayya, 2012).

From 1986-2016, two separate government funded projects made extensive use of Information Communications Technology (ICT) to extend face to face contact between pupils. The European Studies (Ireland and Great Britain) project which ran from 1986-2016 linked schools in Northern Ireland with others in Ireland, the United Kingdom and mainland Europe (Austin and Hunter 2013). Following the Belfast Peace Agreement of 1998, the locally elected administration in Northern Ireland and its counterpart in Ireland, set up the Dissolving Boundaries Programme which was funded from 1999-2016 and involved some 50,000 young people. Evidence has emerged from evaluation of these projects that this blended approach has been welcomed by teachers and is starting 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). Moreover, recent research indicated that even a year after the contact came to an end pupils displayed more interest and knowledge than matched pupils who had not been involved (Austin, Rickard, Smyth & Grace, 2014). Their findings were confirmed by external inspection of the programme (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2010/11) and external evaluation (Bonnell et al, 2010). Key conclusions showed that pupils gained better understanding of each other and developed enhanced ICT skills. Teachers also gained extensive professional development through having to use ICT to plan joint work with teachers in another jurisdiction.

Lessons learned from this use of blended contact with schools that were some distance apart were used in the development of the epartners programme which ran from 2013 to 2015 and linked schools within Northern Ireland with the support of student mentors. Austin, Hunter and Holywood (2015) reported that blended contact between 2 academic grammar schools had enabled teachers to appreciate the value of blended contact when faced with the demands of a crowded curriculum and examination pressures. A follow-up study the next year with 28 primary schools working in 14 cross-community partnerships found strong support for blended contact (Austin, 2018). One of the student mentors noted a range of skills that children were learning from the experience

> *'The children are being exposed to other backgrounds in a natural way, using learning and fun as the primary focus. The children are engaging with their partner school well on the discussion boards, and are freely sharing their ideas and coming up with compromises to ensure that everyone is pleased. I believe this helps the children to develop key negotiation skills as well as team work abilities'.*

In the context of Northern Ireland, the investment in the ICT infrastructure through a public-private partnership called C2K has brought the affordance of online contact within the reach of every child in every school; in other words, ICT provision opens up the potential for an approach that would include all children irrespective of the type of school they attend. Furthermore, as part of the overall drive to encourage teachers to use ICT, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland has been steadily increasing its expectations that the use of ICT should be either accredited or assessed (CCEA, 2014). The requirements include the expectation that pupils will use ICT to "exchange" communication with others. In other words, using ICT to link to another school could fall within the framework of what was expected, and even required as part of the curriculum. This sort of alignment, between one part of the curriculum, the use of ICT, with another, the

need for schools to work together, is one key part of finding a way to sustain such work and make it accessible for all children.

Blended contact in Shared Education

In February 2017, teachers in shared education partnerships were encouraged to enrol on modules of professional learning related to shared education. One of these was called CLOSER (Collaborative Learning Online for Shared Education and Reconciliation). It has been taught 9 times between February 2017 and June 2018. The course consisted of 2 days face to face training in the use of a common Virtual Learning platform, called Fronter, a real-time video-conferencing software package called 'Collaborate' and sessions on how these ICT applications could enhance and extend face to face collaborative learning. Both applications are available to all schools in Northern Ireland at no cost as part of the managed ICT service for schools. The course was taught by an experienced academic, an ICT trainer from C2K and teachers who had already been using blended contact. Teachers were advised on the importance of creating group to group contact between their pupils in line with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and creating online discussions which had a 'social' element to foster friendships as well as work areas for study of agreed tasks. At the end of the initial 2 days, teachers were asked to deliver a 6 week course with their partner teacher in their schools and return for a final face to face event to present a report on their work. As part of this final day, teachers were invited to complete an online anonymous survey, using Qualtrics software.

Findings

35 teachers (28 females, 7 males; 21 Catholic and 14 Protestant) completed the survey. Teachers reported that the pupils they had worked with were aged between 4 and 13 years with an average age of 9.5. 31 of the teachers reported working in primary schools. 9 teachers said that their schools were within walking distance of one another, whereas for the remainder public transport was required. 95% of the teachers who attended the training were in cross-community school partnerships funded through SESP. These partnerships ranged in duration from 1 year to 25 years with an average of 3 years. All of the teachers reported that their work had been fitted into existing curriculum areas, with several focusing on 'the World around us', 'literacy' and this often included work on internet safety. 2 teachers working in secondary schools linked classes in English and Technology and Design. The key findings to emerge are as follows.

Teachers had limited experience of ICT in Shared Education prior to CLOSER

75% of teachers had little or no knowledge of the VLE Fronter prior to their training and 80% reported a similar lack of knowledge with the synchronous software Collaborate. Indeed, 68.5% said their prior work on Shared education was entirely face to face. We think it is fair to conclude that this group of teachers were not ICT specialists but could best be described as fairly typical classroom teachers who had an interest in the use of ICT.

- Entirely face to face
- Mostly face to face
- Mostly online
- Entirely online
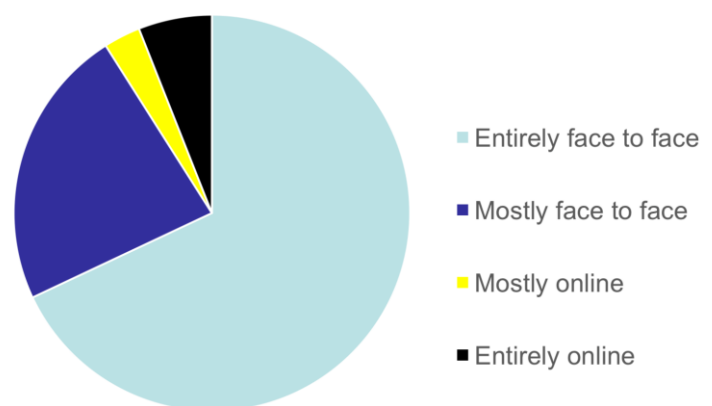
Fronter was used extensively following CLOSER
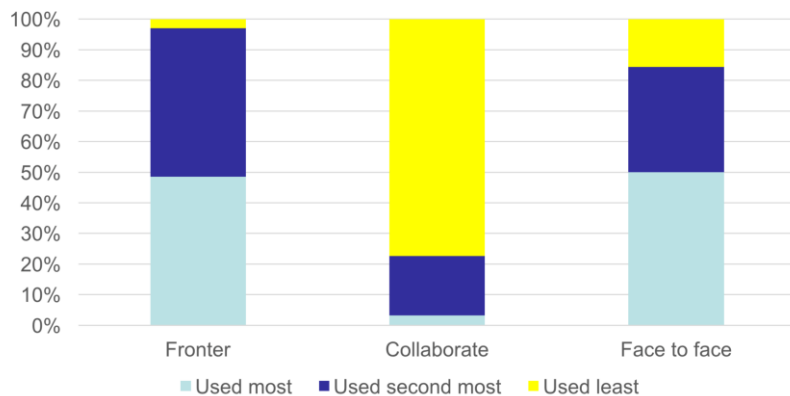
48.5% of staff reported using the asynchronous VLE, Fronter, the most frequently during their six-week project, while 48.5% used it the second most frequently, after face-to-face contact. The synchronous video conferencing tool Collaborate was typically used the least frequently.

The different methods of contact are used flexibly by teachers

Teachers' comments suggested that there was no 'magical' order in which to deploy the three ways of making contact. Some used Fronter first, finishing with face-to-face contact, whereas others started with face-to-face contact, with Fronter and Collaborate used to support the project along the way. These findings suggest that once teachers have the skills to deploy ICT as part of their work in shared education, they use them flexibly to add value to the process of building working relationships.

Blended contact had a positive impact on pupils' experience of shared education

Teachers were asked about a range of potential areas of impact for pupils, and whether the blended contact project had resulted in things getting much better (+2), a bit better (+1), no change (0), slightly worse (-1) or much worse (-2). Average ratings across the teachers suggest that the project was perceived as having a positive effect on pupils' experience of shared education across the board.
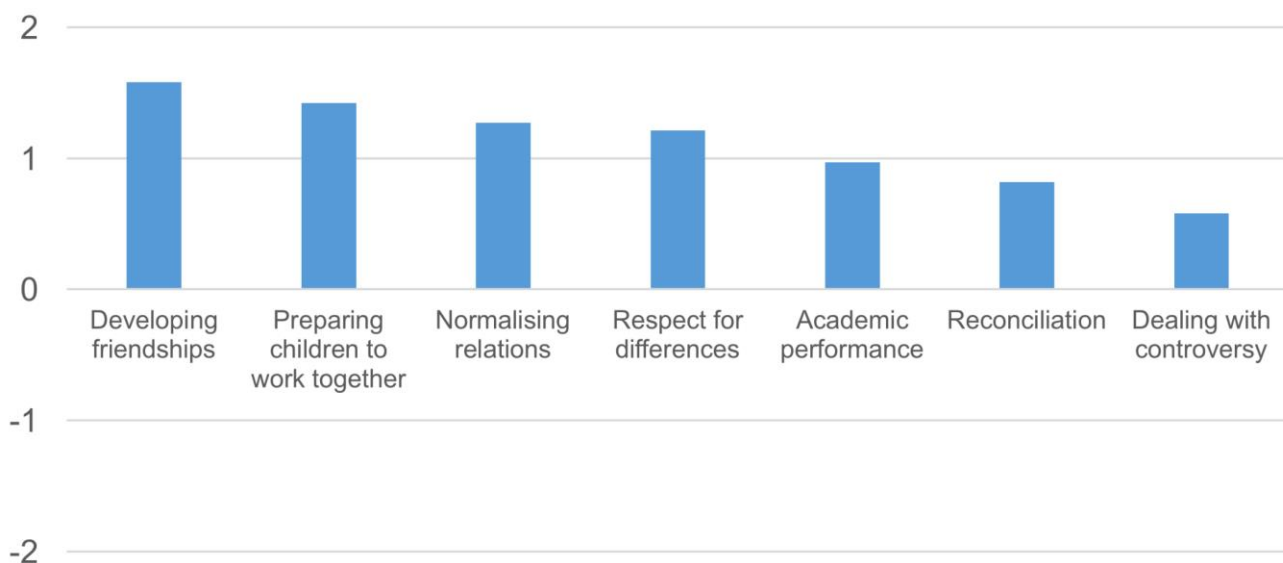
The most powerful positive change teachers noted in pupils was in terms of the *development of friendships*. Teachers noted that, 'more regular access to each other in online forums has meant that children have a

chance to chat in a way which is familiar to them' and 'leaving comments for each other on Fronter and then matching the comment to the person during face-to-face activities helped to build on relationships'. Many other comments referred to the 'cementing' or 'reinforcing' of relationships as a result of discovering similar interests through working in a safe online environment and through group to group interaction 'every week'. This is crucial because having friends has a powerful impact in promoting positive attitudes, increasing trust and empathy, and reducing anxiety about interacting with members of the other community (see Turner & Cameron, 2016, for a review).

The second biggest positive impact on the children related to *getting children ready to work together*. This is important given that the workplace in Northern Ireland is regarded as the point where people are most likely to encounter those from a different background (Eyben et al 2002). Teachers reported that children had worked well together both online and face to face; one noted that 'group tasks have also encouraged working with others, which has supported children's skills in working with others and communication; these are vital in getting ready to work with others in the future.' The asynchronous nature of Fronter meant that pupils had time to read other pupils' comments and think about how to respond, an approach that suited some pupils better than the immediacy of face to face interaction.

Teachers also believed that blended contact had a positive impact in terms of *normalising relations* between pupils, with one teacher writing that the approach fitted very comfortably into the pupils' world because 'regular contact using an online platform is familiar to 10 and 11 year olds in everyday life'. Another reinforced the sense that normalising was taking place because of 'more regular face-to -face contact coupled with greater on-line collaboration... Pupils are no longer out-of-sight out-of-mind. Use of Fronter has let us develop and extend lessons within own schools but pupils are still learning, sharing and responding to each other's work.'

The aspect of shared education which teachers saw as coming next in importance was *respect for difference.* In many of the younger classes, this arose naturally through an online exchange of information about hobbies and interests. One of the teachers noted that 'the children were able to ask questions about each other's hobbies such as Gaelic and football or Irish dancing or Scottish dancing'. Collaborate also enables real-time interaction, including the sharing of music; for one teacher this meant 'hearing songs in Irish near St Patrick's Day gave children more of an insight into a different culture'.

Although *improvement in academic performance* was not seen as a high priority by the majority of teachers, they did on average perceive there to be a slight improvement in children's performance. Comments showed that the presence of an audience for pupils' work had been motivational. One teacher noted that 'children are more engaged with completing tasks online. They have improved ICT skills, they are more aware of their spelling and grammar, they self-edit and they have a wider audience for peer assessment.' Another noted 'Children were enthused by the use of technology to engage with their new friends. This enthusiasm meant that children engaged more fully in art and literacy/ ICT activities that they shared online and in Fronter room with their buddies.' And, according to another teacher, this meant that in addition to improved attitudes to work, pupils were also developing skills in both ICT and literacy, helping teachers meet targets and raising standards. The link with the pupils in the other school meant that 'pupils are seeing themselves how their potential can be raised.'

The smallest changes teachers observed were in the areas of *reconciliation* and *handling controversial issues*. One teacher noted that children were too young to realise that children from other schools were from the other community, although they acknowledged that this might differ according to geographical location. Another teacher noted that the short time the schools had been working together might explain why reconciliation was perhaps too big a goal, but that this might be important as part of a longer-term approach.

It was also clear that teachers avoided handling controversial issues, and felt this was inappropriate for the age of the children they were working with but there was a recognition that 'this could be approached if pupils have been involved in shared education projects throughout their time in primary school'.

Teachers varied in how adequate they felt ICT provision was
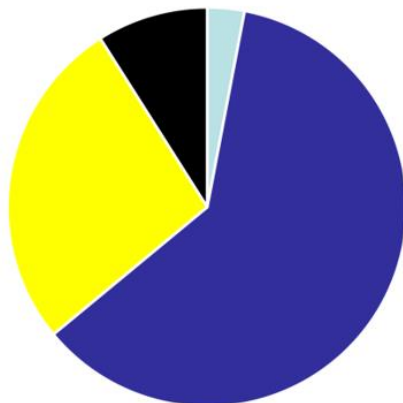
- Completely adequate ■ Somewhat adequate
- Somewhat inadequate ■ Completely inadequate

Given the importance of reliable and accessible ICT to carry out their planned work teachers were asked if they felt that the ICT provision in their schools was adequate. 3% said it was 'adequate' while 60% claimed it was 'somewhat adequate'. The remaining third expressed varying degrees of disappointment with their facilities.

Assessment of ICT and shared education.

We wanted to find out if teachers were connecting the ICT work they did in shared education with the requirement for them to assess pupils' work in ICT; 18% answered 'yes', and 63% answered 'potentially'. This indicates a strong degree of potential alignment between 2 different spheres of school life, namely work in shared education and the assessment of ICT.
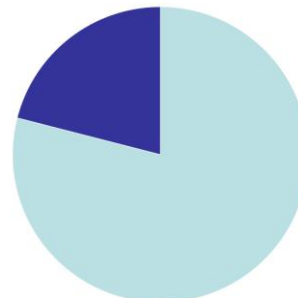
Perceived benefits of CLOSER and plans for future use of blended contact

"Future planning for shared education should include ICT as having equal importance to face to face contact"

"How useful was CLOSER for your professional development?"
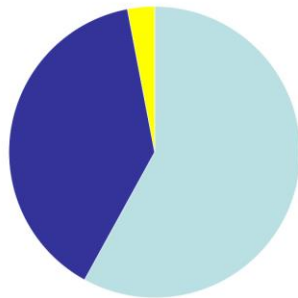
■ Strongly agree   ■ Somewhat agree
■ Somewhat disagree

■ Very useful   ■ Quite useful

We asked teachers if their use of ICT on CLOSER had led to improved communication with their own colleagues and with those in the partner schools. 51% said it had done so 'considerably', with a further 45% saying it had 'to some extent'. Teachers were also asked about how they saw the role of blended contact in future planning for shared education. The question asked teachers if ICT and face to face contact should be regarded as equally important. 57% of teachers 'strongly agreed' with this statement, with a further 40% indicating that they agreed 'somewhat'. In response to a question about whether teachers had found that CLOSER had been useful for their professional development, 78.79% said it was 'very useful' with the remainder of respondents saying it was 'quite useful'.

Summary

The findings offer strong endorsement of the use of blended contact as a way of sustaining and extending partnerships between schools in shared education, and professional courses like CLOSER to train teachers in their use. In terms of the specific software that enables interaction between schools, the teachers in this sample, predominantly from the primary sector, found that the VLE Fronter was suitable for asynchronous contact between pupils in this age range. Further investment and support is needed to get the full benefits of the real-time Collaborate software. The data also indicates that blended contact through shared education has been very successful at delivering a range of outcomes for pupils, especially around friendship and preparing children to work together. Crucially, the data shows a strong degree of convergence between teachers from all types of school regarding the goals of shared education. They believed that the development of friendships, normalising relations between children and learning respect for difference were more important than reconciliation and handling controversial issues.

We recommend that in mainstreaming shared education, extending it to every child in every school in Northern Ireland, it is crucial that schools make the fullest use of the ICT infrastructure to provide a cost-effective way to extend face to face contact. These findings raise some important questions about future directions for shared education. First, should friendship be the priority in terms of goals for shared education? Second, should courses on blended contact be a compulsory component of teachers' continued professional learning?. Third, how can the ICT infrastructure be enhanced so that schools have the tools available to effectively implement blended learning?

For further details of this research or a bibliography, please contact rsp.austin@ulster.ac.uk