

# Chapter 7

## Assessing Impact of ICT Intercultural Work: The Dissolving Boundaries Program

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### ABSTRACT

*This article reports on a school-based ICT initiative, called Dissolving Boundaries (DB) which links primary, (pupils aged 5-11), post-primary (pupils aged 12-18) and special schools (pupils aged 5-18) in partnerships across the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The aim of the research was to investigate if participation in DB was associated with an increased awareness and understanding of life on the other side of the border. The ICT skills of pupils were also probed. Two cohorts of pupils were used in the study, one which had taken part in the Dissolving Boundaries program during an academic year and another cohort of similar age in the same schools, which had not taken part. Findings suggest that participation in the program contributed to students' knowledge and awareness in general of the other jurisdiction. In terms of collaborative work, a large majority of DB pupils agreed that they could learn something new from working with another school. Participating pupils in the DB program showed much higher competence in those ICT skills associated with communication and collaboration than their non-participant peers.*

### INTRODUCTION

Academic debate about the importance of schools in promoting the values of respect, tolerance and openness to cultural diversity is not new, but the issue has attracted increased attention in recent years (Hughes & Loader, 2015; Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Donnelly, 2010; Ruane et al., 2010; Devine, Kenny & Macneela, 2008; Waldron & Pike, 2007; Leavy, 2005). The dangers of negative stereotyping and inertia that hinder the development of such values are documented in educational literature

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(Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Ligorio & Van der Meijdent, 2008; Donnelly & Hughes, 2006) and it is clear that positive attitudes, particularly in contexts where tensions and mutual distrust have prevailed, need to be modelled, nurtured and celebrated in order to be sustained throughout a person's life (Montgomery & McGlynn, 2009; Trew 2004; Connolly, Smith & Kelly, 2002; Brown, 2000). Educational policies and curricular aims designed to challenge and discourage racism, xenophobia and all other forms of bias against others are welcome because they articulate the appropriate values of a democratic and civilised society. However, such policies are only liable to result in lasting attitudinal change when practical models are implemented in schools and elsewhere that will enable culturally diverse groups to come into contact with each other in meaningful ways and that tap into children's centres of interest and motivation. (Bonnell et al, 2010; Niens & Chastenay, 2008)

Changes to the political, social and demographic landscapes of both Ireland<sup>1</sup> and Northern Ireland in recent years, coupled with social tensions that appear more salient during times of economic hardship (such as those being experienced currently in what is referred to as post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, the period after the economic boom of the 1990s and early 2000s) make it imperative that schools model good practice in relation to values of respect, open-mindedness and cultural diversity (Donnelly 2010; Devine et al., 2008;). With this also comes a need for teachers to engage with pedagogies that will contribute to developing positive dispositions among young people. As Connolly et al. (2009) note, awareness among children of their own and others' ethnic identities starts to emerge at a very early age, even in a society where the markers of ethnic difference are not obvious. Yet the still prevalent educational segregation that divides school-goers along religious lines in both Ireland and Northern Ireland (Donnelly & Hughes, 2006) results in continued social, geographic and symbolic divisions between young people of different cultural and religious backgrounds on the island of Ireland (de Burca & Hayward, 2012). The limited opportunities for cross-border contacts among young people would likely exacerbate this problem.

## **The Dissolving Boundaries Program**

The Dissolving Boundaries through Technology in Education Program (DB) ([www.dissolvingboundaries.org](http://www.dissolvingboundaries.org)) was established in 1999 in the aftermath of the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and came to a close in 2015 when funding ceased. The Agreement was a political settlement, involving the British and Irish governments and politicians in Northern Ireland that was designed to bring about the end of violent conflict in Northern Ireland that had prevailed for over three decades. That conflict had resulted in the loss of life of over 3,500 people during that time (Archick, 2013; McGinty et al, 2007). Strand 2 of the Agreement saw the establishment of a North/South Ministerial Council tasked to develop cross-border cooperation in a number of areas of common interest including Education as well as Agriculture, Environment, Health, Tourism, and Transport. Dissolving Boundaries was an example of this cross-border focus; it was a school-based exchange program that embedded the use of technology in classrooms with a view to promoting intercultural understanding and awareness among the participating students. The school-based projects undertaken by teachers were conducted with whole class groups over a full academic year. The technology used for this work was combined with support for the opportunity to conduct a face-to-face meeting to further the development of positive relationships between the linked classes.

By the time of completing this research Dissolving Boundaries comprised of over 200 school based-projects and had reached as many as 50,000 students since 1999. The program was by then the largest and

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