Educating for peace in Northern Ireland: from EMU to Citizenship

Gerard McCann looks at the way in which the curriculum in Northern Ireland was adapted to promote peace and reconciliation, and explores the practical links that have emerged between what can generically be labelled ‘education for peace’, citizenship and development education.

The religious, community and political divisions that exist in the north of Ireland are evident throughout the society, and affect issues around education policy and practice as much as they affect housing, policing or fiscal policy. The historic impact of these divisions has been manifested in an intense and destructive manner through the political and sectarian violence that ensued between 1969 and 1994, and periodically thereafter. Teachers, pupils and schools have often been carried into the frontline of the conflict and, with the lack of political consensus, have been left to deal with the adversity of living, learning and educating in a conflict scenario. This resulted in a system of educational provision that is unique in the context of the European Union.

The most prominent ‘peace’ initiative that crossed the education system in Northern Ireland came under the term ‘education for mutual understanding’ (EMU). It was to become a focal point throughout the 1980s and 1990s for educationalists eager to embed reconciliation within the schooling system. It succeeded the Schools Cultural Studies Project (1974-1980) which had the intention of ‘increasing levels of mutual understanding among young people in N. Ireland’ (Smith and Robinson, 1992, pp.11-15). Its practice included exchanges at primary level and cooperative projects at secondary level. Under the Community Relations (NI) Order of 1975, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) was given the statutory responsibility for ‘formulating and sponsoring policies for the improvement of community relations’. The specific instruction from the department on EMU came under the non-assuming title ‘DENI Circular 1982/21: The Improvement of Community Relations: The Contribution of Schools’, and led the way to a highly innovative and integrated method of carrying themes which enhanced peace building in the curriculum and schools. It stated: ‘Every teacher, every school manager, board member and trustee, and every educational administer 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 adult life’ (DENI, 1982; also see DENI, 1999, p.7). The EMU policy also acted as a centre-point for linked initiatives such as the influential Churches’ Peace Education Programme (CPEP), the Quaker Peace Education programme, and the regional application of development education (DE) by the Belfast based One World Centre (now the Centre for Global Education).

The term ‘education for mutual understanding’ emanated from a 1982 DENI conference titled ‘Peace and Development Education’, which was organised in part by the Churches’ peace education project. The ‘cross community’ exchange and contact element of EMU was perhaps to become the most prominent feature of the policy, where schools were encouraged and assisted in developing linkages that would enhance community relations. The policy moved towards a form of ‘relationships education’ in an attempt to encourage understanding and reconciliation within a profoundly divided society. Subsequently, working from the Education Order (1989), the Northern Ireland Curriculum Council (NICC) – the designers of the actual curriculum – offered a broader understanding of peace education in the regional context with the stipulation that: ‘...pupils should develop a knowledge and appreciation of interdependence within the family, within the local community and within the wider world’ (NICC, 1989, p.15). To further emphasise the connections between EMU, peace and DE, the working group to the department defined EMU at this stage as: ‘...self-respect, and respect for others, and the improvement of relationships between people of differing cultural traditions’ (DENI, 1989, p.5). While EMU was incubating as policy, the peace and DE centres for the north of Ireland were established. In 1984 the Peace Education Resources Centre was opened in the Inter-Church Centre in Belfast, supported by sixteen Irish Churches and staffed by volunteers from the US Church of the Brethren, and in 1986 the One World Centre for Northern Ireland was established in the neutral area beside Queen’s University in Belfast, supported by seven development agencies operating from Northern Ireland. Both organisations would act as hubs for the promotion of the methodologies and pedagogies of their respective specialities, peace and development, and were well positioned to inform, influence and assist in the design of EMU as it rolled out through the curriculum.

The Education Reform (NI) Order of 1989 brought the pedagogy of mutual understanding onto a new plane, as a statutory part of the common curriculum. From September 1992 EMU would become a ‘cross-curricular theme’ which meant that all pupils in the education system in Northern Ireland would come into contact with some aspect of the learning for mutual understanding. The regional government’s Ministerial Working Group on Education for Mutual Understanding restated a position which was mirroring the work of the organisations facilitating both peace and development education in Northern Ireland:
‘Education for Mutual Understanding should enable pupils as an integral part of their education:
- to learn to respect and value themselves and others;
- to appreciate the interdependence of people within society;
- to know about and understand what is shared as well as what is different about their cultural traditions;
- to appreciate how conflict may be handled in non-violent ways.’

(NICC, 1989)

The reconciliation aspect of the EMU policy was very evident and through its cross-curricular nature carried many of the accepted core principles of ‘peace education’ into the various subjects and schooling environment. A cross-community contact scheme enhanced the knowledge aspects of the EMU policy with substantial DENI revenue to facilitate school links. The pickup was acknowledged and sustained across the various sectors. The community relations format of the programme dominated the form of the links and under the management of the Community Relations Branch of DENI, the peace aspect of the work largely focused on the difficulties faced by the two dominant communities in the north of Ireland. EMU proved popular with many schools and in the approach to political consensus and the ceasefire of 1994 the schools were encouraged by government and the NGOs into the new dispensation through policies such as EMU.

While signifying a genuine attempt by the department and NGOs to embed peace education within the curriculum in the north of Ireland, there were however a number of reservations about the EMU model. In the 1992 evaluation of EMU, the University of Ulster’s Alan Smith and Alan Robinson commented that: ‘The over-riding perception within schools is that EMU should be about encouraging tolerance and understanding... they are reading EMU as an educational code which is primarily about relationships between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland’ (Smith and Robinson, 1992, p.29). They also noted that with government involving itself so strongly in the promotion of EMU the programme left itself open to the opinion that the initiative was being too influenced by governmental political strategies. This suggested a conflict of interests and invariably caused resistance in certain education sectors. This situational aspect of EMU for many educationalists tended to restrict the possibilities of broadening the scope of mutual understanding and by implication the full potential of peace education. The community relations interpretation of EMU was to dominate the policy until its eventual adaptation through to citizenship and personal development education (NICC, 1989, pp.5-6).

In the yet to be published Diversity, Mutual Understanding and Schools, Norman Richardson and Tony Gallagher commented that EMU was essentially the evolution of a process to get reconciliation into the schooling system. There was a belief that EMU had emerged from a series of initiatives from the early 1970s onwards that came to fruition through the EMU programme (Richardson, 2006, p.3). This position can be seen in the Department of Education’s ‘Strategic Plan for Education 1996-2000’, where community relations is highlighted as a priority with its activities taking three forms. Firstly, the support of contact initiatives for young people; secondly, the inclusion of EMU within the actual curriculum; and finally, integrating education (Richardson, 2006, pp.2-6). Richardson also relays a number of bullet points which not only emphasise what he terms a ‘menu of themes’ that were peculiar to the development of EMU, but he also maps the interface between community relations education and education for peace as they evolved in the region:

- An emphasis on personal development, starting with the building of confidence and self-esteem as a basis for developing positive relationships at a range of scales (personal, group, community, national, international).
- The development of awareness and skills in dealing creatively with conflict and prejudice, and exploring alternatives to violence.
- An exploration of human diversity and an appreciation of similarities and differences in a plural society, including culture, ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, etc.
- An awareness of human and cultural interaction, dependence and interdependence, including issues of justice, equality, rights and responsibilities. (Richardson, 2002, p.7)

The links with DE are self evident.

At the most intense periods of conflict in the late 1980s and early 1990s gun-battles, sectarian riots and bombings were daily occurrences across the north of Ireland, yet in the midst of this schools were recognised by the communities to be peaceful ‘spaces’ where families could leave children in a safe and developmental environment. With the political peace settlement coming to consensus in the mid 1990s and the very visible regeneration of the economic infrastructure of the region, the Department of Education’s 1998 working group on the ‘culture of tolerance’ carried the discourse on overcoming the effects of violence onto a more contemporary platform. Representing all the statutory and formal education agencies in Northern Ireland the group returned to the theory of ‘positive peace’ to inform an identity in the region that – in the new dispensation – was about the ‘appreciation of the variety and rich diversity of our cultures’ (DENI, 1999, p.3). Concepts of inclusiveness, rights, justice, equality and respect for diversity were central to the dialogue that took place within the group, and reflected the more assertive post-conflict society that had been emerging since the end of an intense period of violence in the early 1990s. The sensitivities that came forward in this dialogue reflected a new context in which, while sectarian violent incidents were occasional and sporadic, the children being taught in the schools had been born in a post-conflict society. In this their ideas of peace (generally) would be more akin to children in other parts of Europe, or indeed the United States, with similar cultures and problems. Furthermore, an issue that was emerging as an
urgent component to the community relations element was the need to engage with the question of diversity in an increasingly multicultural society.

Consequently, the working group refined the ‘role of education in peace building’ in this manner:

- That those involved in education management, at all levels, develop policies, strategies and funding mechanisms which embody the concepts of fairness, justice, human rights and responsibilities, respect for diversity.
- That teachers and those involved in the informal processes of education deliver programmes which reflect these concepts.
- That parents and young people are offered opportunities to practise inclusiveness in the life of their school community. (DENI, 1999, pp.3-4)

There was a general acceptance across the sectors and organisations involved in the group that education has a role in peace building; that promoting tolerance was the remit of teachers; and that they needed a framework within which to develop their work. For example, it refers to: ‘... the shared citizenship of a community, based on justice and equality for all. It therefore promotes a seminal value of human social development’ (DENI, 1999, p.4). While not deliberately engaging with the methodology and practices of peace or DE as understood in other contexts coming out of conflict, the philosophies can be clearly recognised in the strategy presented by the working group. Core values in the education system were defined as pluralism, the pursuit of social justice, the acceptance of human rights and responsibilities, and democracy.

Following the seminal Crick Report in 1998 the UK government set about incorporating citizenship education across the UK (DfEE/QCA, 1998). Political and constitutional changes had altered the nature of social, cultural and political inclusion, with education having to shift emphases in order to inform pupils of the type of pluralist and democratic society in which they live. Changing demographic patterns have meant that aspects that may have been central to political, cultural and social education in the past have had to be reframed throughout Europe to reflect the more diverse and plural society in which pupils currently live. The implementation of the new curriculum in Northern Ireland invariably has been shaped by the changing circumstances. With the introduction of citizenship education a process has begun which will arguably enhance the themes that have been operating throughout the Northern Ireland education system, and which should contribute to the spirit and practice of reconciliation.

The new curriculum in Northern Ireland has placed citizenship at the core of its work (together with personal development), with an innovative approach that is applicable to the peculiar circumstances of the region. Primary schools have been piloting a proposed programme for mutual understanding in the ‘local and global community’ whereas secondary schools have been working on modules on the ‘local and global citizenship’. This is to become a comprehensive statutory programme as of 2007 (Mussano, 2004, p.7).

What is notable about the form of citizenship that has been designed for the curriculum in Northern Ireland by the Department of Education and its advisory organisations is its subject remit in comparison to its counterparts in, for example Wales, England, Scotland, or Eire and the educational lineage which takes on board the work that has been undertaken through EMU, DE and peace education. In effect, the link has been made between peace and citizenship, education and development. With the changing political situation in the north of Ireland, the changing demographics regarding a more multicultural society, and the educational shifts towards enhancing civil society and the understanding of peaceful developmental democracy, ‘citizenship’ as a cross-curriculum theme has become a focus which encapsulates these various elements within the education system.

References

Dr Gerard McCann is a Senior Lecturer in European Studies at St Mary’s University College, Queens University Belfast. He is also Chairperson of the Centre for Global Education in Northern Ireland.
g.mccann@stmarys-belfast.ac.uk