EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ‘PROMOTING RECONCILIATION THROUGH A SHARED CURRICULUM EXPERIENCE’ PROGRAMME.
ULRIKE NEINS, KAREN KERR AND PAUL CONNOLLY
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Executive summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation, undertaken by the Centre for Effective Education at Queen’s University Belfast, of the ‘Promoting reconciliation through a shared curriculum experience’ programme. The programme was designed and supported by staff from the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) and the research team would like to acknowledge their funding, support and advice. The evaluation took the form of a randomised controlled trial and a qualitative process evaluation focusing on implementation. This report presents the key findings of the evaluation. The evaluation team is indebted to the children and young people, teachers, principals and schools from the WELB who participated in the study.

Promoting Reconciliation through a Shared Curriculum Experience

The ‘Promoting reconciliation through a shared curriculum experience’ programme (PRTSCE) is an educational initiative aimed at promoting community relations through specific curricular materials and activities as well as cross-community contact. It is a specifically designed programme for primary and post-primary curriculum subjects and it directly addresses community relations and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The programme was designed to address questions raised in the literature as well as questions posed by the educational community. Firstly, this relates to the propensity of teachers to avoid controversial issues relating to sectarianism and the conflicted past in Northern Ireland, and secondly, the lack of continuity of teaching and learning resources relating to such issues in the transition from primary to post-primary education. The programme was rolled out to year 6, year 7 and year 8 children throughout the WELB area in 2011-12 and to year 9 children in 2012-13. The programme was implemented either in cross-community or single-school settings in order to investigate the impact of the curriculum and that of contact.

The PRTSCE programme involved the development of enhanced and more carefully designed curricular resources, which brought together existing and new teaching materials and activities that are closely aligned with the primary and post-primary curricula. The programme also extended teacher training through residential training and continuous support by the WELB CASS staff. The overall aims of the PRTSCE programme were to enable teachers to address controversial issues relating to sectarianism and conflict in the classroom with confidence. Furthermore the programme aimed to promote intergroup attitudes amongst pupils. Intergroup attitudes were differentiated into ingroup and outgroup attitudes. Ingroup attitudes refer to an individual’s view of their own community while outgroup attitudes refer to an individual’s view of other communities (e.g. religious, cultural).

Methodology

A rigorous two-year evaluation of the effects of the programme was completed by the Centre for Effective Education at Queen’s University Belfast. The research included a cluster randomised
controlled trial (RCT) to measure the programme effects on child outcomes and a process evaluation exploring its implementation and how it was experienced by pupils and teachers.

The clustered randomisation involved 30 primary and post-primary schools located within the WELB area. Each school was paired with another school who could potentially be their contact partner. Each pair of schools was then randomly allocated to one of three conditions: ‘curriculum and contact’ or ‘curriculum only’ or ‘control’. Pupils in participating schools were asked to complete a pre-test before the programme commenced in December 2011 to March 2012 and again at the end of the programme in May to June 2013.

In total, pre and post-tests were both obtained from 502 pupils in 27 schools. The evidence indicated that the randomisation procedure worked well. There were no significant differences on pre-test means scores between the intervention and control groups for the main outcome variables. Similarly, evidence indicated no significant impact of attrition on key outcome variables.

The study focused on five primary outcomes, which were further differentiated to allow the analysis and comparison of theoretical components and differential target groups. As such, the primary outcomes were:

1. Identity (including identity affirmation and identity exploration)
2. Inclusion of ‘other’ in self (target groups: sectarian ingroup, sectarian outgroup, other religious outgroup)
3. Social distance (target groups: sectarian ingroup and outgroup)
4. Tolerance (target groups: sectarian ingroup, sectarian outgroup, other cultural outgroup)
5. Standing up against injustice (including prosocial behaviour, aggressive behavior and ignoring behavior, self-efficacy)

Additionally, a measure of acculturation (including support for cultural maintenance and contact) was introduced at post-test.

Alongside the analysis of the main effects, a series of exploratory analyses were also undertaken to assess whether there was any evidence that the programme was having differential effects for differing subgroups of children. Specifically, the exploratory analysis considered: the child’s gender, religion, percentage of Free School Meals (FSM) in school, primary and post-primary school attendance as well as the number of lessons taught in the class and the number of lessons delivered by contact.

Findings

Overall, results from the cluster RCT and the process evaluation show that the PRTSCE programme increased learning about people from different religious communities in Northern Ireland and improved intergroup relations. The way the programme was designed and organized, including the extended training and support, enabled teachers to deliver lessons on controversial issues relatively confidently and pupils to enjoy and engage with the learning. Teacher training, teaching resources, methods and activities were regarded as highly successful in terms of their usefulness for teachers and their reception by pupils.
Where the PRTSCE programme was delivered in single identity settings, the enhanced and more carefully designed use of existing resources through the curriculum had a positive effect on pupils compared to what schools normally do. This was particularly evident with regards to the development of a more critical view of pupils’ own religious community (inclusion of ingroup member in self: $d=-.26$, social distance towards ingroup members: $d=-.34$, tolerance of stereotypical ingroup choices: $d=-.34$), a greater acceptance of different traditions (acculturation maintenance: $d=+.24$) and reduced tendency to respond to instances of injustice in an aggressive manner ($d=-.25$).

The addition of contact, which was considered as enjoyable and important by participants, seemed to diminish the effectiveness of the curriculum in relation to pupils’ views towards their own religious community (inclusion of ingroup member in self: $d=-.17$, social distance towards ingroup members: $d=+.03$, tolerance of stereotypical ingroup choices: $d=-.15$). This could be due to different processes being promoted by the delivery of the PRTSCE programme in single identity or shared educational settings. In particular, contact may heighten enjoyment of shared lessons but also awareness of intergroup differences. Such experiences may thus reduce the likelihood of the development of a more critical perspective of pupils’ own religious community. However, findings may also reflect the problems schools have faced in terms of organizing and planning contact and thus the fact that such practical issues tend to reduce the space available for exploring the curriculum more fully.

Contact, in itself, did not lead to negative effects of the curriculum and the findings of this study should not be used to question the importance of contact. Moreover, there was some evidence that the addition of contact to the curriculum encouraged more positive attitudes towards other religious and cultural groups (social distance towards outgroup members: $d=+.014$, tolerance of stereotypical Chinese outgroup choices: $d=+.15$).

Exploratory analyses revealed no consistent pattern of differences between gender, religion or Free School Meal percentage in school relating to the impact of the programme.

While the teaching content and methods were regarded as enjoyable, they were also clearly challenging. Pupils appeared to struggle to cognitively integrate their everyday understandings of relations between Catholics and Protestants with their new learning through the PRTSCE programme. As such, the programme appears to have successfully challenged pupils’ existing schemata relating to community relations in Northern Ireland and they still appeared to be in the process of incorporating this new learning in their existing worldviews.

**Implications and Recommendations**

1. There is a need for further research and evaluation work to be undertaken in this area to inform the future direction of policy and practice. For example, some further work is required in terms of attitudes towards specific outgroups and also in relation to encouraging more positive responses to instances of injustice.
2. The potential of reinforcing intergroup boundaries may be heightened by the introduction of contact and more attention may need to be paid to incorporating teaching that enables pupils to deconstruct notions of social categories and identities, whereby a critical understanding of ingroup differentiation and intersectionality of divergent social categories (such as gender, class and ethnicity) and how they have been impacted by the conflict in the past and present may provide useful tools for exploration.
3. Research and curriculum development work also needs to be undertaken to explore the influence of curriculum on worldviews. In addition, research and curriculum development should consider how children integrate their understandings of relations between Catholics
and Protestants in everyday life, their families, communities, the news and the media with their new learning through the curricular lessons.

4. The evidence from this programme would suggest that there is no requirement to differentiate programmes on the basis of gender or social deprivation (as measured by Free School Meals).

5. While findings from this study support the conclusion that shared education at the very least reduces intergroup anxiety (Hughes 2013) they also send a note of caution for teachers and others developing and delivering programmes like this through contact. There needs to be systems wide acknowledgement of the different processes involved in delivery of programmes both in the curriculum and in contact programmes in particular the careful planning of contact programmes to ensure the following:
   - Building of relationships and social interaction
   - Space within the sessions to ensure the curriculum is fully explored
   - Opportunities for pupils to explore their views and opinions on the “ingroup” and “outgroup” prior to contact.
   - Physical space which is conducive to participatory activities

6. There needs to be high quality training and support for such programmes particularly when teachers and schools are expected to undertake potentially controversial and sensitive issues.

The full technical report for this study is available on the Centre for Effective Education website at: www.qub.ac.uk/cee