



Interim report
Executive Summary

August 2000

This executive summary presents information from both primary and post-primary interim reports and hopes to highlight aspects of the project that may be of assistance to teachers as they undertake work on the project for the next academic year.

1 *Project impact on teachers and pupils*

Findings suggest a positive attitude among those involved in the Dissolving Boundaries project. Pupils and teachers are enthusiastic and committed to the work. With a small number of exceptions, respondents see Dissolving Boundaries as exciting, yielding some benefits in the present and promising more to come. All express a strong belief that the project should continue and are keen to be part of it.

1.1 *Motivation to work*

81% of teachers in the post-primary sector considered that pupils' motivation had increased with the use of computer conferencing. These pupils showed greater interest in the subject area, and homework as well as classwork improved. 77% of pupils themselves thought that participation in the project had made their school work more interesting, with 58% of them agreeing that the project had assisted understanding of the subject. In some cases independent research and the exchange of different points of view had increased interest and understanding in the subject.

1.2 *Improved ICT skills*

Recognising that measurement of improvement is based on self-reporting, findings indicate that 80% of post-primary pupils felt that the use of computer conferencing had assisted their development in ICT.

Many teachers in the primary sector regard their involvement in the project as part of staff development in ICT.

1.3 Social dimension

In the post-primary sector responses to the pupil questionnaire reveal that over 70% of pupils see the Project as helping them relate to pupils from other schools. The student café in the conferencing area of the Northern Ireland Network for Education (NINE) was seen as playing an important role here. In the teachers' view, the café provided a forum for exchange of information which helped pupils appreciate a culture other than their own.

In the primary sector, all teachers interviewed spoke very positively about the whole idea of communication between children from both sides of the border. Pupils themselves had never had this type of contact through school and were enthusiastic and excited about corresponding with peers across the border.

Pupils in both sectors expressed interest in following up ICT links with actual face to face contact.

The report emphasises the social element of the project as this forms a basis for a working relationship. Frequent contact should be maintained and more attention should be given to visual communication between pupils.

The report also recommends the inclusion of instant messaging by pupils and teachers. This would allow linked schools to know when their opposite numbers were on-line, and would make possible live exchange of information and ideas. The closer the links between teachers as well as pupils, the greater the opportunities for shared understanding and joint planning.

2 Factors enabling successful inter-school work

2.1 Good curriculum match

In those schools which had a good curricular overlap, pupils enjoyed differing perspectives on study topics. Some schools made a conscious effort to base the project in the curriculum. This was seen as more important in Northern Ireland where there is no Transition year corresponding to that in the Republic. Transition year (fourth year in post-primary) has a

degree of flexibility which allows teachers to accommodate the requirements of the Northern schools. But this is not a straightforward matter either, as sometimes it involves teachers being involved in subject areas in which they do not specialise. In the primary sector, finding common areas of work was not such a problem. Particularly for final year pupils at primary school in Northern Ireland who had completed Transfer and Assessment tests, the project provided what one teacher described as a “completely new venture” which proved to be a stimulus for work.

2.2 Timetabling of project work

In the post-primary sector, 57% of teachers reported that project work was carried out as part of the normal classroom timetable. The perception of project participation as “extra work” was countered in one school by incorporating Dissolving Boundaries into their ICT assessment for the summer term. In the primary sector, all of the work with pupils was carried out during normal school hours although teachers used lunchtimes and after school to input information on computers. The report suggests that integrating the project into the timetable is better than not having it in the timetable.

2.3 Access to computers – how is this managed?

In one primary school, the computers are situated in the classroom of the teacher involved in the project. In the majority of cases, in both primary and post-primary sectors, computers are situated in a resource room or computer lab separate from the classroom and pupils come to that room to do their work. This results in limited access to the computers and featured as a concern for the majority of teachers. In some cases in the post-primary sector, this restricted access led to pupils being asked to limit their involvement to out of school hours. However some schools offered strategies for overcoming this problem such as:

Strategy 1 (post-primary): A maximum of 10 pupils go to the computer suite while the remainder attend their regular lesson. Pupils were sometimes supervised in the computer lab by a technician who assumed the role of teacher for these sessions.

Strategy 2 (primary sector): One partnership arranged for pupils to be organised into 5 partner groups, one for each day of the week with time allocated as such. Thus there was daily contact over a short period of time when each group took turns to communicate.

Strategy 3 (both sectors): One, or more, IT sessions per week is set aside for the project. This actively incorporates the project into the teaching schedule.

Many teachers felt that each session at the computers should be at least one hour. To save time, one teacher prepared for the IT session by logging individual pupils on to NINE before their arrival in the computer suite.

Access to computers in some cases determined the size of the group chosen to participate in the Project.

This evaluation was carried out before the 4 new Dell computers were linked to the Internet. With these in place, problems of access should be alleviated in the coming year.

2.4 Size of working groups of pupils

One of the big challenges of this project is how best to work with groups of pupils. 62% of post-primary teachers worked with subgroups. Pupils were organised into groups of various size. The preferred subgroup sizes were less than 8 pupils. 10% of teachers used whole class communications, while the remaining 28% of teachers used a combination of both. One of the dangers of working with groups is that pupils can feel that they need to catch up on classwork if they are out of the class doing project work. This can be a de-motivating factor. Also, the report asks if pupils were familiar with skills needed in group-work such as team-building and co-operation.

2.5 Use of computer conferencing

The Dissolving Boundaries conference in NINE is a private conference and access is granted only to named participants. Teachers emphasised the importance of providing such a safe environment for the exchange of messages between pupils. An overwhelming majority of

teachers in the post-primary sector (86%) regarded computer conferencing as a good means of communication between pupils. Post-primary pupils themselves were also very positive regarding the value of computer conferencing, with 94% of them agreeing with the statement that this was a good means of communication.

To date, over 2000 messages have been posted in the Dissolving Boundaries conference in NINE. What the pupils value is the enjoyment of the computer conferencing itself, and also because it sometimes makes otherwise mundane work more enjoyable. Although the majority of teachers reported no improvement in literacy skills, 45% of pupils felt that computer conferencing had a positive influence on their writing. It might be concluded that those subject areas in which students regularly write essays found little added advantage while those subject areas with fewer opportunities for essay writing found the experience of computer conferencing beneficial.

2.6 Frequency of messages

Frequency of messages is a motivating factor in the Project. When asked how often they would have liked to exchange messages, 37% of post-primary pupils believed daily contact would be best; 28% felt every other day would be best; and 24% opted for twice a week.

If partner schools input messages regularly, and each school endeavours to reply within a certain time frame, this motivates pupils. Conversely, findings show that pupils of all ages can be discouraged if they feel that their link school is not responding and there is an imbalance of messages. 'Little and often' is the advice given by primary school teachers when asked about frequency of messages between pupils.

2.6.1 In the primary sector, teacher to teacher communication was considered very important and a central element to the success of each project. Successful communication was a feature in the majority of projects, although frustration was expressed occasionally when there was an imbalance in the number of messages exchanged.

2.7 Use of videoconferencing

In the post-primary sector, despite high levels of preparation, pupils found this medium quite daunting at first although pupils themselves stressed the importance of the visual in conjunction with computer conferencing. Teachers recognised that the oral and presentational aspects of the project were very important and considered that pupils should persevere in spite of shyness. Improved diction and considered use of language were also seen as valuable outcomes of videoconferencing.

2.8 Sense of Audience

The sense of audience that both computer and video conferencing provide motivates pupils. Teachers reported that pupils put much more effort into research and presentation of work knowing that others would read this work.

2.9 Pupils' age

The report draws attention to the fact that projects work better if pupils in participating schools are of a similar age.

2.10 Sustainability issues

The report highlights the measures taken to ensure that schools would continue to use technology as a means of communication after the official end of this project. In order to encourage sustainability, the report emphasises that the project should be an aid to learning in the curriculum and not seen as outside "mainstream" classwork.