

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Queen's University Belfast		
Unit of Assessment: 23 (Education)		
Title of case study: Promoting Peacebuilding through Early Childhood Education		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2003-2010		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Prof Paul Connolly Prof Tony Gallagher Prof Berni Kelly Prof Sarah Miller	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Education Professor of Education Professor of Social Work Professor of Education	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: Connolly: Oct 2003 – Dec 2019 Gallagher: May 1992 – present Kelly: August 2005 – present Miller: July 2002 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Research led by Connolly at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) informed the development of a pioneering preschool programme, Media Initiative for Children, which seeks to promote respect for diversity. The programme has been adapted and delivered in eight countries. It is estimated that adapted versions of the Media Initiative for Children have now been delivered to at least 8,000 preschool children in these countries. Children in Northern Ireland, Ireland and Kyrgyzstan have shown more inclusive attitudes after taking part projects based on Media Initiative for Children. In Northern Ireland and Ireland, the programme has increased the awareness, confidence and competence of teaching and afterschool staff in dealing with diversity issues.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Pioneering research by Connolly, Kelly and Professor Alan Smith (Ulster University) demonstrated, for the first time, that children as young as three years old were capable of holding and demonstrating sectarian and racist attitudes [1, 2]. Data from a random sample of 352 children aged 3-6 years across Northern Ireland provided clear evidence of the effects of the continuing religious-ethnic conflict and divisions in Northern Ireland on the awareness and attitudes of children as young as three [1]. This indicated that early childhood represented a significant period where children begin to acquire and internalise ethnic attitudes and prejudices. However, it also indicated that this provided a window of opportunity to promote the development of positive attitudes towards ethnic diversity and inclusive identities.</p> <p>This research directly inspired a charity based in Northern Ireland, Early Years – The Organisation for Young Children, to develop a new and innovative preschool education programme that sought to address these attitudes directly and to promote awareness of and respect for diversity amongst young children. The programme – the Media Initiative for Children: Respecting Difference Programme – was holistic in its approach. It not only provided a comprehensive curriculum and associated resources but it also provided comprehensive training and ongoing support for preschool staff and management committees. Moreover, it also sought to reach out directly to parents and local communities through regionally-broadcast media messages and workshops and activities for parents.</p> <p>Connolly and a team of researchers at Queen's provided direct support to Early Years in the development of this programme. In 2004, they [together with Siobhan Fitzpatrick of Early Years] conducted an initial pilot study of the Media Initiative programme in 10 preschool settings in</p>		

Northern Ireland. This involved 165 children aged 3-4 years old. This evaluation model used by the pilot study was a quasi-experimental design. The study found that, after participating in the pilot programme and in comparison to a control group, children had a significantly increased ability to recognise instances of exclusion, and to understand how being excluded makes someone feel [3].

This pilot was instrumental in enabling Early Years to secure significant funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies to further refine and develop the programme over the coming years, informed by the pilot evaluation. During 2008/09 the programme was then subject to large-scale summative evaluation, undertaken by the Queen's team, in the form of a year-long cluster randomised controlled trial. The trial involved 74 preschool settings and individually tested the awareness and attitudes of 1,181 children aged 3-4 years old and their parents and teachers. This evaluation found that strong evidence that the Media Initiative was effective in improving outcomes for children, both in relation to socio-emotional development and with regard to recognition of and respect for cultural diversity [4].

3. References to the research

[1] Connolly, P., Kelly, B. and Smith, A. (2009) Ethnic habitus and young children: A case study of Northern Ireland, *European Early Childhood Research Journal*, 17(2): 217-232.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930902951460>

[2] Connolly, P. (2011) Using survey data to explore preschool children's ethnic awareness and attitudes, *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 9(2): 175-187.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X10387898>

[3] Connolly, P., Fitzpatrick, S., Gallagher, T. and Harris, P. (2006) Addressing diversity and inclusion in the early years in conflict-affected societies: A case study of the Media Initiative for Children – Northern Ireland, *International Journal for Early Years Education*, 14(3): 263-278.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760600880027>

[4] Connolly, P., Miller, S. and Eakin, A. (2010) A Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial Evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children: Respecting Difference Programme. Belfast: Centre for Effective Education

(<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5da9c5717e42095872ed2a55/t/5e3b03411dd2df314c5d38fb/1580925807741/mifc-crt.pdf>)

4. Details of the impact

In 2012, a global network of early childhood practitioners and academics, the International Network Group on Peace Building with Young Children, produced an International Toolkit Manual which was directly shaped by the research at QUB and by the Media Initiative for Children [A]. This Toolkit was designed specifically for practitioners working with young children and families in regions experiencing or emerging from conflict. In this impact period it has been adapted for implementation in the Balkans (2013-17), and for evaluation by the research team at QUB Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (2017-20) [A], [B]. In addition, the Media Initiative for Children has formed the basis for further initiatives in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Northern Ireland and Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Media Initiative for Children programme formed the basis for a GBP1,200,000 cross-border project, 'Rural Respecting Difference Programme' which is being jointly funded by the Special EU Programmes Body, together with the Irish government's Department of Rural and Community Development and the Northern Ireland Executive's Executive Office. This three-year programme was launched in April 2018 and has been delivered by the Early Years charity [D]. The project featured a number of teaching methods, including the use of specially created persona puppets, designed to develop emotional literacy and empower young children [C].

By November 2020, a total of 51 pre-school, daycare and after-school settings had taken part in the programme; 33 of these settings, with a total of 1,019 children, were located in Northern

Ireland, while 18 settings, with 468 children, were from the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. Thus, in total, 1,487 children, aged between 2 and 12 years, had benefited from the programme. 197 parents had also taken part in the programme. A further 22 settings had been recruited to take part in the third and final year of the project.

Moreover, this programme also had a beneficial impact on professional practice and on the provision of the pre-school and childcare settings in question; a total of 77 practitioners from these settings were trained in the delivery of the programme [D]. The programme is designed to become embedded in the future practice of the pre-school settings so that it can continue indefinitely [D]. One practitioner explained how it had benefited their project:

When we introduced the Rural Respecting Difference puppets into the setting we found that some of the children connected with them immediately. They found connections and similarities between the puppets and themselves and were keen to share these with the staff and their parents. This in turn has developed their willingness to accept the feelings of others.

Since engaging in the programme, the staff team are acknowledging the benefits of working in a more diverse environment and we are continually working on ways to involve the children in activities that extend their knowledge of their own traditions and those of others [D].

This programme was preceded by an earlier cross-border project which was also called 'Rural Respecting Difference Programme' and was also based on the Media Initiative for Children. This GBP421,000 project was funded by the EU's Regional Development Fund. 2,750 children in 35 schools and 24 afterschool settings took part in the programme which ran from May 2012 to October 2014 [D]. The settings were located across four counties in Northern Ireland and four border counties in the Republic of Ireland. The programme's aim was to recruit schools and afterschool settings in areas which had experienced high levels of conflict. In this instance, a slightly older, five to eight-year old age group was targeted. Much of the activity carried out under this programme took place in the latter half of 2013 and in 2014 [E].

Each school and afterschool setting received a package of learning resources, including a set of specially designed puppets (persona dolls), and a home learning pack, and staff and parents in each setting were offered a two-day training course in the delivery of the resources. The training was also offered to school Boards of Governors and to management committees. Parents were offered two workshops on the content and outcomes of the programme and received a pack of resources to support learning at home. Four follow-up support visits were also provided by a designated Early Years Specialist to assist with implementation of the programme [E].

Each setting is supported to participate in a shared project with another setting from the programme, allowing children and staff the opportunity to explore and celebrate differences which they may not encounter within their own community or setting. A Good Relations Mentor will provide support to develop an action plan, ensuring the ethos of the programme is embedded within practise long beyond the duration of the programme.

A project evaluation report concluded that the programme had increased the awareness, confidence and competence of teaching and afterschool staff in dealing with diversity issues. Nearly all the school and afterschool settings (55) had completed a Good Relations Action Plan which formed an optional part of the project [E]. The report also said that the staff who were involved reported examples of changed attitudes and behaviours amongst children; for example, "looking out for others, talking about feelings, thinking about others' feelings, reacting differently and more positively to difference." [E].

Eastern Europe

Adapted versions of the Media Initiative programme were developed and delivered in six countries in eastern Europe between March 2013 and 2017: Serbia, Croatia, Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo and (from 2015 – 2017) Montenegro [F]. This work received EUR1,300,000 of funding from the European Union – Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) Civil Society Facility (CSF). The project was taken forward, in two phases, by PRECEDE (Partnership for Reconciliation through Early Childhood Education and Development in Europe). Early Years was a key partner in this network, together with civil society organisations in each of the countries involved.

The programme consisted of a training for trainers course, followed by training at local level within pre-school settings. The PRECEDE programme also supplied sets of resources and other support to the preschool teachers. Towards the end of the programme, nationally tailored toolkits were developed in each country to provide a long-term resource for the preschool teachers. [F]

Across the six countries, a total of 65 pre-school settings and 2,970 children, aged 3 – 7 years, took part in the programme. A total of 140 pre-school teachers were trained in the programme's approach. 1,280 parents also took part. [F]

An independent evaluation of the programme was carried out by researchers at the University of Zagreb and the University of Belgrade, involving 41 of the participant educational settings in four of the six countries [G]. This evaluation confirmed that the programme had provided a significant beneficial impact on both children and parents:

... the application of the model developed within the PRECEDE project helps increase understanding of the importance of and respect for diversity among parents and early and preschool-age children. ... the implementation of the model for developing respect for diversity has contributed to creating a stronger willingness among children to socialise with all children in an educational group. This change in children's behaviour was also recognised by parents. The application of the model brought about changes in parents' beliefs, which is most visible in their different attitudes towards diversity, and empowered parents to contribute actively to the appreciation of diversity among their children. [G]

According to one of the national civil society organisations which helped deliver the programme, PRECEDE has had a lasting impact on national teacher training and pre-school curricula. In Serbia, the PRECEDE training programme on the development of respect for diversity in early years for the in-service professional development of teachers was nationally accredited and has been offered throughout Serbia from 2016 [F]. PRECEDE has also influenced national frameworks for the pre-school curriculum in Croatia, Serbia and Albania; respect for diversity has been specifically identified as a topic to be covered for the first time [F].

Central Asia

In both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, UNICEF has adapted national children's TV cartoon series in each country to incorporate a focus on diversity and peacebuilding. This adaptation is based directly on the Media Initiative programme and on the underpinning research described above [H] [I]. Adapted educational programmes have been created in both countries, with the support of Early Years. The impact of these programmes in early years settings is being evaluated by a joint team from the University of Lancaster and Queen's University Belfast, led by Connolly, through the GBP2,000,000 LINKS programme. This programme is funded by the UK Government's Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) and the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR).

In Tajikistan, UNICEF estimates that, in 2019 and 2020, up to two-thirds of all children aged 4 – 6 years (66.5% = 425,029 children) in the country watched a series of TV cartoon programmes

which drew on the work of the Media Initiative [H]. The programmes formed part of a series called “Magic Box” produced by UNICEF in partnership with Tajikistan’s Ministry of Education and Science. The series was broadcast on the national state TV channels, TV Bahoriston and TV Sinama. [J]

In addition to the national TV broadcasts, since 2018, the programmes have been shown in a total of 65 early years centres in two areas in the north of Tajikistan – Zeravshan Valley and Ferghana Valley. In these centres, a total of 150 early years’ teachers received training on multilingual education and peace education. 2,835 children from different ethnic backgrounds have been involved in this initiative. 55% have been from the Uzbek population, 42% from the Tajik community and 3% from a Kyrgyz background. 3,797 parents have also been involved. [J]

In Kyrgyzstan, a pilot study was carried out in 48 kindergartens between October 2018 and June 2019 in the Batken and Issyk Kul regions of the country. These areas are close to the border with Kyrgyzstan and were selected because they have been particularly affected by conflict. The Magic Journey was shown in 31 of these kindergartens to a total of 464 children, mostly (432) from the Kyrgyz community. The study found that “... there is clear evidence that exposure to Magic Journey is associated with increased willingness to be inclusive in general and improved attitudes towards gender differences.” [K]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[A] The International Toolkit is available here: <https://www.early-years.org/international-publications>

[B] Letter from Early Years

[C] ‘[Puppet play encourages young children to respect difference](#)’, news release, 16th October 2018, issued by the Special EU Programmes Body. Further information also available here: <https://keep.eu/projects/20033/>

[D] Information on the Rural Respecting Difference Programme provided by Early Years on 4th November 2020, including the quoted testimony from an anonymous practitioner participant.

[E] [Media Initiative for Rural Children Cross-borders: Rural Respecting Difference Programme Evaluation Report](#), December 2014.

[F] Email dated 7th November 2020 from the Director of the Serbian NGO, Pomoć deci which was one of the civil society organisations responsible for implementing the project.

[G] Bouillet. D. and Miškeljin, L. ‘Model for Developing Respect for Diversity at Early and Preschool Age’ in *Croatian Journal of Education*, Vol.19; No.4, 2017, pp: 1265-1295. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15516/cje.v19i4.2567> The extract quoted is on p. 1280.

[H] Letter from UNICEF Tajikistan (January, 2021).

[I] Letter from UNICEF Kyrgyzstan (January, 2021).

[J] Emails from UNICEF official, dated 26th August 2020 and 30th June 2020.

[K] LINKS Kyrgyzstan Research Team *The Impact of Magic Journey on the Attitudes of Children, Teachers and Parents Towards Gender and Ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan: Findings of a Pilot Study*, draft report, March 2020 (unpublished). The information from this report was also supplemented by email correspondence from one of the team.