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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*

JOINT EVALUATION REPORT

Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate – Republic of Ireland
Education and Training Inspectorate – Northern Ireland

*Dissolving Boundaries Programme
2010/2011*

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CONTENTS

Section		Page
1.	INTRODUCTION	1
2.	SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION	1
3.	KEY AREAS OF ENQUIRY	4
4.	SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS	8
5.	CONCLUSION	10
	APPENDIX	

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 RATIONALE

The Dissolving Boundaries (DB) programme uses information and communications technology (ICT) to facilitate cross-cultural educational linkages between schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

In 1998, the Taoiseach (Republic of Ireland) and the Prime Minister (Great Britain and Northern Ireland) took part in an event of historic and educational significance. A video-conference link between a school in Northern Ireland and a school from the Republic of Ireland was established. The occasion marked the first time in which two political leaders had used an ICT resource in schools across both jurisdictions. This virtual meeting led to the start, in 2000, of the DB programme, managed by the Schools of Education at the University of Ulster (UU) and at the National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth.

The DB programme is overseen by a steering committee. This comprises representatives from the two programme management teams and also of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Republic of Ireland and the Department of Education (DE) Northern Ireland, the two co-funding departments of the DB programme.

In June 2010, both DE and DES agreed that a formal evaluation of the DB programme be conducted. This decision arose from a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), Education Sectoral Committee, where it was decided that a joint evaluation be undertaken to ensure that the DB programme was delivering on its original objectives effectively, efficiently and economically.

1.2 DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES PROGRAMME

The DB programme invites primary, post-primary and special schools in both jurisdictions to form partnerships and to develop a relationship based around a particular curriculum-related project. The DB programme's key aims are three-fold:

- to engage pupils in collaborative, curricular-based projects;
- to promote mutual understanding through collaborative cross-border links; and
- to promote sustainability of the use of technology in schools.

The UU and the NUI, Maynooth operate the DB programme and work directly with the participating schools. This work includes initiating and monitoring school partnerships.

2. SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

2.1 TERMS OF REFERENCE/EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in Northern Ireland and the DES Inspectorate in the Republic of Ireland, on behalf of DE and DES, conducted a joint evaluation of the DB programme during the academic year 2010-2011. This evaluation sought to report on the extent to which the DB programme has achieved its key aims. The impact of the 'enterprise' strand of the DB programme, through which ten cross-border school partnerships have been formed at both primary and post-primary level, was also investigated.

In carrying out this evaluation, ETI evaluated:

- the quality of the leadership and management of the DB programme;
- the quality of the provision in a representative sample of primary, post-primary and special schools; and
- the achievements and the standards attained by the pupils.

The evaluation of the DB programme conducted by the DES focused on four main areas of enquiry. These key areas of enquiry ascertained the quality of:

- management and leadership;
- planning;
- teaching and learning; and
- support for pupils in primary, post-primary and special schools.

Both the ETI and the DES Inspectorate identified the main strengths and areas for development of the DB programme through the examination of relevant documentation, visits to schools, meetings with principals, teachers, pupils and with the DB programme management teams.

Recommendations are made in this evaluation for DE (Northern Ireland), for DES (Republic of Ireland), for the DB programme management teams, for participating schools and for Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland. (See Section 4.2)

2.2 SCHOOL SELECTION

The evaluation of the DB programme in the Republic of Ireland was conducted in sixteen schools, including special schools and '*enterprise*' schools. A wide range of schools was identified and selected for evaluation, in accordance with the following criteria: large/small schools; urban/rural locations; geographically dispersed schools; all-Irish medium schools (scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge) and single sex and co-educational schools. The school visits took place in March 2011. Ten inspectors from the DES Inspectorate, five teams of two inspectors, conducted the evaluation, working together on a cross-sectoral basis.

In October 2010, ETI selected and visited a representative sample of fourteen schools which comprised the three phases of primary, post-primary and special schools. There was a balance sought in school management type, which included controlled, maintained, Irish medium and integrated schools.

2.3 METHODOLOGY

A broad range of data-gathering methods was employed. Following meetings with each inspection team, self-evaluation exercises were completed by the two DB programme management teams, ie, in NUI, Maynooth and in UU. A review of documentation in relation to the DB programme was also undertaken.

In preparation for the DB evaluation, an ETI inspector attended the DB Planning Conference in September 2010. At this conference, teachers from existing DB school partnerships met and planned for the coming year; new school partnerships were also established.

Prior to the school visits in Northern Ireland, every school involved in the DB programme, both past and current, was invited to complete an on-line questionnaire. Approximately 44% of these schools completed and submitted the on-line questionnaire. In the Republic of Ireland, all participating schools were invited to respond to an on-line questionnaire at the end of the evaluation phase. There was a response rate of 31% from schools participating in the DB programme in the Republic of Ireland. The information obtained from the on-line questionnaires in each jurisdiction was analysed to inform this evaluation and to augment the evidence arising from the visits to the sample of schools. (See Appendix)

During the school visit stage of the evaluation in both jurisdictions, the inspectors conducted interviews with school personnel, including principals, class teachers and DB programme teacher co-ordinators, to discuss the whole-school approaches to the programme and to examine the impact the initiative has had on the pupils' learning. The quality of training and support which teachers have acquired for the implementation of the DB programme in their school was ascertained. Interviews with focus groups of pupils were also conducted to find out about their experiences of the programme. Inspectors evaluated the quality of teaching and learning which pupils receive in the context of the DB programme sessions, including 'live-link' sessions. Pupils' work samples, whole-school and classroom planning documentation were reviewed. Inspectors also reported on pupil progress in the development of a variety of skills.

The schools visited by ETI were invited, prior to the visits, to complete a self-evaluation proforma based on their work in the DB programme, which formed the basis for discussion with the visiting inspector.

2.4 QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE TERMS

For the purposes of this evaluation, a number of quantitative and qualitative terms are used which should be interpreted as indicated in the tables below:

Quantitative	% of Occurrence
almost all	more than 90%
most	75%-90%
majority	50%-74%
fewer than half	25%-49%
a small number	16%-24%
a few	up to 15%

ETI Inspectors relate their judgements to the following six performance levels:

Outstanding
Very good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

DES Inspectors relate their judgements to the following four performance levels:

Performance Level	Example of descriptive terms
Significant strengths	Excellent; of a very high quality; very effective; highly commendable; very good; very successful; few areas for improvement
More strengths than weaknesses	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; fully appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; adequate
More weaknesses than strengths	Fair; scope for development; experiencing difficulty; evident weaknesses that are impacting significantly on student/pupil learning
Significant weaknesses	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties

3. KEY AREAS OF ENQUIRY

3.1 QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

- The strategic leadership of the DB programme in both the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland is very good. In particular, the programme has contributed to and utilised international research to ensure that it is focused on improving the quality of the learning experiences for the participants. The DB programme management teams do not have a sufficiently rigorous and systematic approach to self-evaluation with the participating schools, focused on the outcomes for the learners; this has been identified in their own priorities for improvement.
- The DB programme seeks to enable learners to develop a clearer understanding of different social, economic, political and cultural perspectives through their experience of dissolved boundaries at many levels. The school links across the two jurisdictions involve different school management type, size and geography. The work of the programme in Northern Ireland is not linked explicitly enough by schools with the aims of the School Community Relations Programme (SCRIP). Specifically where a school is both in the DB and SCRIP programmes, the online environment is not used frequently enough as a tool to promote community relations across a divided society.
- The school partnerships are not rigorous enough in their quality assurance of the final piece of work of the pupils, as a result, there is insufficient focus on the quality of the learning experience; this is an issue for the DB programme management teams.
- The DB programme management teams in both jurisdictions provide very good initial training and on-going support to all the participating schools. This support includes initial set-up and a helpline for technical support.
- Very good communication and collaboration with the partner school has been established and maintained in almost all schools visited as part of this evaluation. In the best practice, in approximately one-third of these schools, the senior management team (SMT) has a clear view of the potential to increase links with the partner school outside the parameters of the DB programme. In a small number of school partnerships, methods of communication such as

video-conferencing, telephone and e-mail contact are used to monitor progress and to adjust plans as necessary. In Northern Ireland, almost one-third of the schools report a lack of consistent reliability in the use of the technology to support the programme. An over-reliance on one mode of communication, in a few instances, has led to limited contacts with the partner school. It is recommended, as identified by DB programme management teams, that consideration be given by teachers to planning for and utilising the alternative forms of communication available through the programme.

- There is very good management and leadership of the DB programme in a majority of the schools visited. This evaluation highlights the need to ensure that the DB programme does not lie solely with the ICT co-ordinator or class teacher involved, but that the principal, SMT and staff are clearly aware of its impact on the quality of learning. In schools where best practice was observed in both jurisdictions, it was found that participation in the DB programme is highly valued and that capacity building among members of the teaching staff is developed so that the future sustainability of the benefits of the programme within the school is ensured. In these schools, there is an evident strong spirit of collegiality and co-operation among the teaching team.
- In the Republic of Ireland, there is very good provision for the DB programme in schools where a significant cohort of pupils from various countries and of different religious backgrounds was enrolled. In these schools, the DB programme enables the pupils to work well in teams, thus breaking down barriers within and outside the school. In a few schools, however, inspectors highlighted the need to set clear expectations for ensuring equality, diversity and the inclusion of all pupils.
- In a small number of schools in the Republic of Ireland, it was found that there was insufficient emphasis on ensuring that the DB programme, over time, involves more classes and increases the number of school partnerships made.
- There are very good opportunities for the effective professional development of teachers. For example, at the planning conference, the participating teachers are trained well in the use of the virtual learning environment, with a particular focus on effective learning/teaching through the use of digital technology. In addition, the teachers view examples of completed projects. This sharing of good practice, however, is not developed sufficiently and there is insufficient rigour in the evaluation of the outcomes of the school projects for the learners.
- There are effective links with a range of stakeholders. In Northern Ireland, the DB programme management team links with C2K, the Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS) of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), and the Curriculum Council for Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to ensure that the DB programme supports the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) to meet the current and future needs of learners. In both jurisdictions, the liaison with the Joint Business Council (JBC), comprising the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC), ensures a greater emphasis on the development of pupils' entrepreneurial skills through jointly-presented projects.

- The programme makes very good use of ICT facilities in a safe and secure environment. The DB programme management teams ensure that there is a high profile given to e-safety and to pupils working in a secure on-line environment. The teams have planned for the ongoing progression in the use of elements of ICT, for example, widening the communication from forums and wikis to include class blogs, podcasts and photo-sharing activities.

3.2 QUALITY OF PROVISION

- The overall quality of the provision of DB in the schools visited during the evaluation ranged from satisfactory to very good; in most schools, it was good or very good.

3.2.1 QUALITY OF PLANNING

- The quality of the school planning documentation in relation to the DB programme is good in most of the schools evaluated, particularly in established partnerships.
- The DB programme management teams place strong emphasis on the importance of detailed action planning at the outset of each partnership. Most of the schools (89%) who responded to the on-line questionnaire in the Republic of Ireland reported that an action plan for the DB programme with the partner school had been formulated. In Northern Ireland, 61% of the schools incorporate the DB programme into the School Development Plan for the school. (See Appendix) There is, however, a variation in the quality of planning. Where a culture of planning is well-established in the school, the clear benefits and positive impact of the planning documentation on the quality of the DB programme provided are evident. In this best practice, in fewer than half of the schools visited, learning intentions are clearly identified, the pupils contribute to the planning process, there is considered use of learning activities and there is evaluation of the impact on pupils' learning.
- In the least effective practice, the planning consists of a list of activities to be completed, with limited evaluation on the learning attained by the pupils. In these schools there is insufficient clarity in the planning to incorporate cross-curricular themes, to facilitate progression in the pupils' learning and to ensure that the learning from involvement in the DB programme is disseminated more effectively within the school.

3.2.2 QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

- In the majority of schools, the quality of the teaching and learning resulting from the DB programme is very good. The teachers provide high levels of enthusiastic and effective support for their pupils' learning.
- In most schools, the DB programme has facilitated a greater emphasis on the learning process and encouraged the participating teachers to focus on effective learning and teaching strategies. Almost all schools implement a broad range of teaching approaches in the delivery of the DB programme. Most of the schools who responded to the on-line questionnaire in both jurisdictions reported that teachers used a greater range of teaching and learning strategies as a result of their participation in the DB programme.

- There is a strong, inclusive ethos within most of the school partnerships. This encourages participation from all the children, including in particular, those children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. The nature of the on-line learning environment is motivating and appropriately challenging given the openness and transparency of the learning and participation by each child. In Northern Ireland, over a ten-year period, a majority of the special schools have been involved in the DB programme. The special schools involved in the evaluation reported that there is limited cognisance of the particular needs of their pupils in the programme. For example, the schools report that there is insufficient face-to-face contact at the start of the partnership to create a more meaningful context for the pupils in special schools.
- In a majority of school partnerships, effective use is made of a range of ICT tools and other resources, which are well matched to specific learning objectives and provide high-quality support for classroom practice. Good learning outcomes are demonstrated through pupils' knowledge of ICT and through their familiarity with the use of a variety of technology.
- The '*enterprise*' strand of the DB programme has made a significant positive impact on the outcomes for pupils. Inspectors noted that, as a result of schools' participation in this aspect of the programme, pupils across both jurisdictions were developing very good entrepreneurial skills.
- There is very good alignment between the aims of the DB programme and the curriculum in both jurisdictions. In Northern Ireland, the DB programme management team encourages the participating schools to gain ICT accreditation. There is very good use made of the CCEA support materials in planning projects with a particular focus on the development of literacy. It is timely that the programme management team should now consider a greater focus on the development of numeracy.
- School responses from the on-line questionnaires in both jurisdictions indicate that the purposeful promotion of cross-cultural integration is emphasised. However, inspectors in the Republic of Ireland found that pupils in more than half the schools they visited did not have a deep understanding of the traditions or community of their partner school and that little emphasis was placed by the schools on the exploration of cultural similarity and difference.

3.2.3 QUALITY OF SUPPORT

- Very good teaching is evident in special schools in the Republic of Ireland, where tasks are differentiated and where learning targets in pupils' Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are linked with specific elements of the DB programme. In the majority of the schools visited, inspectors from both jurisdictions reported that the DB programme facilitates the implementation of differentiated learning activities.
- In most schools in both the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, inspectors commended the whole-school emphasis placed on having an 'acceptable use policy' for the Internet. Schools ensure that the AUP is signed by parents and pupils. Good practice is also evident through the display of visual resources in the pupils' immediate learning environment and through pupils' familiarity and understanding of internet safety issues during the DB programme activities.

- Pupil engagement and interest in the programme is very positive in the majority of the school partnerships; the pupils have ownership of the learning. The DB programme provides opportunities for pupils to acquire and develop key skills and knowledge in almost all schools visited during the evaluation. The investigative and practical approaches to learning and the sense of an external audience create high levels of motivation. Whilst the teachers facilitate the setting up of the partnership, the pupils increasingly take responsibility for the outworking of the individual projects.
- Given the examples of the high levels of learning by the pupils, not enough teachers maximise opportunities for the summative assessment of the learning, in particular, thinking skills and personal capabilities. The formal recording of the attainment of pupils and the tracking of their progress in the DB programme is not sufficiently rigorous.

3.3 ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

- In most of the schools, the pupils engage in their learning enthusiastically and with good levels of independence and confidence. The pupils have good opportunities to communicate in a range of meaningful curricular contexts, enabling them to apply and develop a range of skills across the curriculum, for example, communication and ICT skills.
- The DB school partnerships provide very good opportunities for the development of a wide range of the pupils' skills such as thinking, personal and social skills. For example, the pupils engage in working collaboratively, applying their organisational and planning skills, and developing their ability to problem-solve and to think critically and creatively.
- Pupils with SEN are achieving well through the DB programme. Through the medium of ICT, the pupils are enabled to overcome barriers to learning and they can better access aspects of the curriculum. Pupil engagement and interest in the programme is very positive and most schools promote the creation of an inclusive environment which supports learning and celebrates achievement. In a small number of schools, pupil engagement could be further enhanced through greater comparability with the profile of pupils in the partner school.
- There are very good opportunities for the pupils to develop their digital and media literacy through the DB programme. In addition, the pupils benefit from interaction with other pupils beyond the boundaries of the classroom. In both jurisdictions, in schools where there was very good practice the pupils experience increased mutual understanding of different perspectives.

4. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

4.1 OVERALL SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS

- In the majority of schools, the DB programme achieves its key aims.
- The strategic leadership of the programme in both the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland is very good.

- The DB programme management teams, in both jurisdictions, provide very good initial training and on-going support to all the participating schools.
- Very good communication and collaboration with the partner school has been established and maintained in almost all schools.
- There is very good management and leadership of the DB programme in a majority of the schools.
- There are very good opportunities for the effective professional development of teachers.
- There are effective links with a range of stakeholders.
- The DB programme makes very good use of ICT facilities in a safe and secure environment.
- The overall quality of the DB provision in most schools is very good.
- The quality of the school planning documentation, in relation to the DB programme, is good.
- In the majority of schools, the quality of the teaching and learning is very good.
- In most schools, the DB programme has facilitated a greater emphasis on the learning process and has encouraged teachers to focus on effective learning and teaching strategies.
- There is a strong, inclusive ethos within most of the school partnerships.
- In a majority of schools, effective use is made of a range of ICT tools and other resources.
- The '*enterprise*' strand of the DB programme has had a significant positive impact on the outcomes for pupils.
- There is very good alignment between the aims of the DB programme and the schools' curricula.
- Pupil engagement and interest in the DB programme is very positive in the majority of the school partnerships.
- In most of the schools, the pupils engage in their learning enthusiastically and with good levels of independence and confidence.
- The DB school partnerships provide very good opportunities for the development of a wide range of the pupils' skills.
- Pupils with special educational needs are achieving good standards of work through the DB programme.

4.2 OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

Dissolving Boundaries Programme Management Teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The DB teams should facilitate the schools in developing more rigorous and systematic action planning and self-evaluation processes.• The DB team should ensure a greater focus on special schools in Northern Ireland in the school partnerships.
Schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools should disseminate the learning from involvement in a DB partnership across all classes and ensure that progression in the pupils' attainments and learning experiences is carefully planned for, tracked and evaluated.• The boundaries between mainstream and special education should be dissolved further.
Education and Library Boards (ELBs) in Northern Ireland
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ELB officers should be made aware of the depth and quality of the work achieved through the DB programme and should assist in the dissemination of the examples of effective practice, for example, through the Area Learning Communities.• ELB officers should disseminate the pedagogical approaches through ICT from DB programmes in the further development of the Schools Community Relations Programme (SCRIP).
Department of Education (DE)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• DE should encourage the DB programme management team to identify more clearly the links for schools between the work of DB programmes and other initiatives such as SCRIP, Extended Schools, Specialist Schools, and the Entitlement Framework.• DE should ensure that the outcomes of the DB programme are linked more clearly to the principles of the Cohesion, Sharing and Inclusion policy.
Department of Education and Skills (DES)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The DES should encourage a renewed emphasis by the schools on the exploration of cultural similarity and difference within school partnerships.

5. CONCLUSION

The overall provision in respect of the DB programme in both jurisdictions is of a high quality. Some very good features of highly effective practice have been reported in each of the areas of enquiry evaluated. There are areas for further development in maximising the potential the DB programme has to offer in aspects of its provision. The DB programme has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement. This is a valuable programme supporting high quality work which is being undertaken in the participating schools.

ETI ANALYSIS OF ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRES – 44% response

Management Type	Primary	Post Primary	Special	TOTAL
Maintained	17	4		21
Controlled	11	3		14
Integrated	2	1		3
Special			3	3
TOTAL	30	8	3	41

Key ETI responses received from online questionnaire:

- all the schools are aware of the key aims of the DB programme;
- 61% of the schools incorporate the DB programme in the school's development plan;
- in 63% of the schools, there is dissemination of the work in DB across the whole school;
- all schools agree or strongly agree that involvement in the DB programme has clearly led to 'dissolved boundaries' amongst the pupils and staff;
- 71% of the schools have carried out an evaluation of the benefits for the school of involvement in the DB programme; 54% of the schools have responded to the findings of the evaluation;
- 99% of the schools agree or strongly agree that there is a positive change in pupils' values and attitudes, e.g. open-mindedness, acceptance, self-confidence, empathy, sense of curiosity, as a result of participation in the DB programme;
- 99% of schools expressed the view that the DB programme provides value for money; and
- 98% of schools agree or strongly agree that pupils are more engaged with their learning as a result of their participation in the DB programme.

DES ANALYSIS OF ON-LINE QUESTIONNAIRES – 31% response

SECTOR	Primary	Post Primary	Special	TOTAL
	16	10	1	27

Key DES responses received from online questionnaire:

- all schools agree or strongly agree that their school is aware of the key aims of the DB programme;
- 89% of schools agree or strongly agree that an action plan for the DB programme with the partner school has been formulated;
- 85% of schools agree or strongly agree that there is capacity in their school to support and sustain the DB programme;

- 89% of schools agree or strongly agree that teachers use a greater range of teaching and learning strategies as a result of their participation in the DB programme;
- 93% of schools agree or strongly agree that the DB programme in their school links purposefully with other aspects of the curriculum;
- 96% of schools agree or strongly agree that the DB programme in their school makes effective use of a range of ICT tools and other resources;
- 96% of schools agree or strongly agree that there is very good support for pupils in the on-line environment regarding ICT safety;
- 89% of schools agree or strongly agree that they would like their school to continue its involvement in the DB programme in the future; and
- 85% of schools agree or strongly agree with the view that the DB programme provides value for money.

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