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The Value of Enterprise: Overcoming Cultural Barriers in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the evaluation results of a learning intervention which took place in Northern Ireland from 1999-2002. The intervention called the KEY project was funded by the International Fund for Ireland and aimed to bring together young people from conflicting cultural and political backgrounds living in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. The objective was to develop the interpersonal and enterprise skills of the participants by involving them in a range of learning activities. In this way the project hoped to redress the disadvantages of children born into marginalised communities and also to help sustain peace and reconciliation by bringing together young people from different political and cultural traditions. The project involved partnership with selected schools which sent their pupils to four residential enterprise camps. These camps combined traditional classroom methods with outdoor adventure activities and the real-life creation of a business. Participants from different political and cultural backgrounds were grouped for outdoor activities and business creation. The empirical research was gathered using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings suggest that the teamwork and focus required in outdoor activities and business creation can successfully overcome the political and cultural barriers that can impede classroom based learning. The effect of the programme on attitudes to those from different backgrounds will be explored as will the difference in attitude between the genders. Finally, the durable effects of the programme will be explored.

Keywords: enterprise education, cultural barriers, peace and reconciliation, Northern Ireland education

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the content and impact of an intervention that took place in Northern Ireland in the period 1999-2002. This programme, called the KEY project, aimed to redress social disadvantage and overcome religious and cultural barriers through enterprise education. This paper presents the findings of questionnaires and interviews conducted with the participants on the programme, their parents and teachers.

The KEY Project

The KEY project was a joint initiative between two philanthropic organisations, Young Enterprise Northern Ireland and Junior Achievement Ireland. Junior Achievement which was founded in the USA in 1953 commenced operations in the Republic of Ireland in 1995. It currently provides enterprise education to over 30,000 primary and secondary school children many of whom are living in areas of disadvantage. The sister organisation Young Enterprise Northern Ireland, shares many common characteristics with Junior Achievement. This year alone, Young Enterprise Northern Ireland expects to deliver programmes to in excess of 40,000 school children in Northern Ireland covering over 250 Primary Schools and 80% of all post

primary schools in Northern Ireland. In contrast to Junior Achievement, Young Enterprise Northern Ireland secures 75% of its funding through the public sector. It has been operating in Northern Ireland since 1986. The KEY project, designed and delivered by these two organisations, was envisaged as a supplement to the national educational system for young people aged between 14 and 16 years. Over a three year period 900 young people from partner schools sent their pupils on four residential sessions. They were drawn equally from three communities, Northern Ireland Catholic, Northern Ireland Protestant and Republic of Ireland. The objective was to redress the disadvantages of children born into marginalised communities by raising their aspirations and self-esteem and by teaching them enterprise skills. The project aimed to help sustain peace and reconciliation by bringing together young people from different traditions and breaking the cycle of hostility to those of a different political and cultural tradition. The project combined traditional classroom methods with outdoor adventure activities and the real-life creation of a business. The course was delivered by both KEY project staff and business volunteers.

Locating the KEY intervention

The KEY project can be seen as an intervention targeting economic disadvantage but also bearing some of the characteristics of a peace education intervention. It could be argued at this point that the peace education dimension in the program is implicit rather than explicit. In Northern Ireland the pursuit of social and economic equity is frequently considered in conjunction with religious and cultural differences. Finnegan (1998:1367) reports that policy targeting resources on Northern Ireland's most disadvantaged areas and peoples frequently has the objective of 'reducing community differentials between Catholics and Protestants'.

Although the project has separate objectives as identified above, there is some evidence to suggest that what an individual does when he or she comes in contact with a second culture has an effect on such factors as self esteem and academic performance (Phinney, 1991 and Coleman, 1995 in Coleman, 2001). Thus, the objectives of the programme can be seen as being highly interrelated. There are a number of strategies that target economic disadvantage including efforts to increase the quality and quantity of participation in the labour market. One of the main program initiatives in this area is programmes aiming to develop employability for youth. According to Anderson (1998) such programs tend to include summer programs and out of school youth programs. KEY is an example of such a program and it addresses both general employability as well as enterprise education. According to Hynes (1996: 11) enterprise education may be described as the process or series of activities which aims to enable an individual to assimilate and develop knowledge, skills, values and understanding that are not simply related to a narrow field of activity..

The benefits of camp adventure programs in helping participants to overcome cultural barriers have been documented by Edginton and Martin (1995). The camp provides a laboratory for diversity giving participants the opportunity to explore the customs, commitments history and language of different cultural groups. It can also help combat myths and stereotypes by exposing participants to real interaction and providing the opportunity to gather accurate information on those from different cultural groups. It can also provide diverse role models for participants interacting as they do with counsellors, mentors and tutors from varied backgrounds.

The KEY programme although not explicitly described as peace education by its organiser appears to utilise some of the seven principles guiding a pedagogy of peace suggest by Shapiro (2002). The emphasis in the KEY project on team working and co-operative enterprise building incorporates many of these principles and helps participants to find a way to live together often by focusing on shared tasks in a neutral environment. In this way the KEY programme shares many characteristics with the peace workshops for Jews and Palestinians run by the School for Peace (Feuerverger, 1998:1) which aims to break down the ‘barriers of fear, hate and mistrust that have saturated their daily existence.’

Evaluation Methodology

The KEY project was independently evaluated annually using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This paper presents results from three years annual evaluation reports and reflects upon the one of the key objectives of the programme – to sustain peace and reconciliation between the participants from different religions and cultures on the programme.

Due to the nature of the programme, three stakeholder groups were identified for the purposes of the evaluation. These groups consist of the participants, their parents and teachers. Questionnaires were the main method used each year to gather information from participants. In line with the agreement with the funding body, the International Fund for Ireland, the programme intake is divided broadly evenly among Northern Ireland Catholic schools, Northern Ireland Protestant school and Republic of Ireland schools. It is also divided evenly among male and female participants. Each year a c.33% representative sample was taken from the population of participants. This sample completed a pre-test questionnaire on the first morning of their first day of the programme and post-test questionnaire on the last day of their last day on the programme. KEY staff were responsible for distributing and collected these questionnaire and response rates were extremely high varying between 80 -100%.

Questionnaires were designed using relevant indicators from the Life and Times Survey and OECD research. The questionnaires were designed specifically for analysis by SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 11, which facilitates large scale data sets and multi-dimensional analysis. Some elements of the pre and post test questionnaires were designed to track attitude change and therefore consisted of similar questions to facilitate comparative analysis. In the first two years of the programme, group interviews were also used to explore the opinions of participants. In the case of the parents, information was sought from a representative sample of parents attending the graduation ceremonies for completing participants held one month after the end of the programme. Short individual and small group interviews were used to elicit their opinions. In the case of the teachers, information was sought from a representative sample of teachers who had attended the programme with the participants. In depth individual and small group interview were used with this stakeholder group. With the permission of parents and teachers, interviews were audio-recorded. These audio tapes were then transcribed and analysed using the outline view function of Microsoft Word. Themes were identified from the transcripts and representative quotes selected.

Results from the KEY Intervention

This section of the paper will present a selection of the quantitative and qualitative results from three key stakeholder sources: parents, teachers and the participants themselves.

Participant Feedback

Quantitative findings show that over the first three years of the programme, on average 76% of participants agreed that the programme gave them a better understanding of those from other religions. Participants also appeared less hostile to connections with those from other religions as shown in tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: I wouldn't mind being taught by a teacher of a different religion.

Year	2000	2001	2002
Pre Test	71%	74%	70%
Post Test	86%	89%	70%

Source: Participant Pre and Post Test Questionnaires KEY Project 2000, 2001, 2002

When asked whether they would mind being taught by a teacher of a different religion, there were large shifts in opinion in 2000 and 2001 with a c.15% increase in the number of participants saying that they would not mind such an occurrence. In 2002 there was no movement on this indicator.

Table 2: I wouldn't mind if a relative were to marry someone of a different religion.

Year	2000	2001	2002
Pre Test	71%	71%	67%
Post Test	80%	84%	70%

Source: Participant Pre and Post Test Questionnaires KEY Project 2000, 2001, 2002

Similarly when asked if they would mind if a relative were to marry someone of a different religion there were quite large movements in 2000 and 2001 with a smaller shift in opinion in 2002. One of the reasons for the smaller movements in 2002 appears to be the schools' selection of participants for the programme. In the first two years of the programme, 2000 and 2001, the schools tended to select their more able students and the gender distribution was broadly even. However, as their confidence in the programme grew and their knowledge of the benefits increased, the schools started to select some of their more troubled students who tended to be male. In 2002 the gender distribution was 70% male and 30% female. As the following cross-tabulations reveal, this over representation of males affects the overall averages as the males on this programme consistently appeared less open to attitudinal change in terms of those from different backgrounds.

Gender Cross-tabulations

The relationship between gender and peace and reconciliation was explored by using cross tabulations. Generally the findings from each year suggest that male attitudes are significantly more entrenched than those expressed by female participants and that the females participants seemed more open to living together with those from a different religion.

In general the males started the programme less open than the females to connections with those from a different religion. In addition, at the end of the programme they males also seemed to display less movement in opinion than females with regard to these connections. The following statistics highlight the polarity of attitudes and levels of hostility demonstrated by each group according to their gender. For example in 2001 after completing the programme;

- 73% of males compared with 86% of females strongly agree that they now have more understanding of other religions.
- 43% of males compared with 64% of females would prefer to live in a mixed religion neighbourhood.
- 11.1% of males would mind a little or a lot if taught by a teacher of another religion. Only 2% females who responded stated they would mind a little.

During interviews in 2000 and 2001 participants spoke openly about religion and their perception of other religions. It was clear that many barriers had been broken down during the programme and that many participants had made friendships with people they would not otherwise have spoken to. The findings suggest that the teamwork and focus required in outdoor activities and business creation can facilitate the process of just learning to be together.

Parent and Teacher Feedback

During interviews with parents and teachers a number of common themes emerged which will be illustrated below using quotes. Firstly, the parents interviewed were very positively disposed to the concept of their children meeting and mixing with people from other religions and backgrounds. This was the case even when they admitted that they had not been exposed to the same sort of interaction. In other words many parents who had not had the opportunity to learn to live together were happy that their children were engaged in that process.

'We live in what you might call a ghetto with the peace line at the top of our street. The kids fight and throw stones at each other and I think its great for them to meet each other away from all that and see what that they don't have horns on their head, they're just normal people trying to get on with their lives, find a job, bring up a family. My generation thinks too much about the past, it's right to do this with the kids because they're the future.' (Parent)

'We grew up in a more fearful environment; I still wouldn't go into the city in the evening. I think they're freer and meeting each other like this helps a lot.' (Parent)

'I think (the peace and reconciliation dimension) is great, she had a chance to meet other people and that's where we all need to move on.' (Parent)

'The most obvious thing is that she's more open, more broad minded in terms of dealing with different sides. Now when she sees fighting on telly she says 'I know these people and they're not bad.' She's much more relaxed.' (Parent)

'Students from different areas and different religions normally wouldn't get a chance to come together and experience the good points of working together. It gives them a chance to break down the barriers and see the benefits of teamwork.' (Teacher)

The second theme to emerge from interview with parents and teachers was the development of intercultural friendships and romances on the programme which are being sustained over large geographical distances. For some of these new friends however, meetings can only take place on 'neutral ground'. Just because they as individuals have learned to be together, their immediate communities have not necessarily made the same leap.

'They made tremendous friends and developed their own social and interaction skills among their own peer group and I think they've made friends for life.' (Teacher)

'You can see the effect in some boy/girl relationships and with friends. They phone each other and some of my kids arranged to meet others in Belfast and go to an exhibition.' (Teacher)

'We're a Catholic school and although the other Protestant school is only 200 yards away it's a case of 'never the twain shall meet'. The kids you will hear are rioting are separated by one street. Now they've made friends, they meet on common ground, they still won't go into each other's areas so they go somewhere neutral and they still keep in touch with people they met.' (Teacher)

The third theme points to the softening in hostility as the participants learned literally to live together over the four residential sessions. The teachers were present during these residential sessions and thus were in an ideal position to observe how the participants responded to meeting people from a different background. They spoke of the role of symbols at the start of the programme and how interaction based around tasks overcame cultural symbols and barriers.

'At the beginning they held back, you could see by the last residential they were very confident. They spoke about religion very openly. We were very pleased.' (Teacher)

'They weren't sitting in their school groups for each meal and they even changed groups between meals and were comfortable. They even told me they'd had discussions about religion ... so there is more understanding there.' (Teacher)

'After the first weekend there was maybe ambivalence towards the group they had met, our kids reckoned that the other kids were different. By the end of the programme, that had turned around completely. The quality of their value judgements about the kids from other schools had matured so much.' (Teacher)

'The wearing of [Celtic and Rangers] football shirts was very important to begin with but then they gave them up.' (Teacher)

The final theme to emerge was concerns about the influence of family and community attitudes. In many cases the participants had learned how to live together on a short term basis but some teachers felt that they were returning to communities which had not necessarily learned the same lesson.

'How far they take it into their communities is another matter. In North Belfast, feelings run very high and some of the kids will say 'Well the ones I know are alright but not that lot.' It's mainly to do with the family and community messages. I hope it will transfer but they need to be strong to stand up to what's going on around them.' (Teacher)

'The children got on really well but the problem is beyond the children. Because of the areas they live in it's difficult for them to utilise it. The programme gets them out of that and gives them an opportunity to interact and be friendly but it can still be hard for them when they go back.' (Teacher)

Interviews reveal that participants clearly leave this programme with a greater understanding of and openness toward friendship with people from different religions and backgrounds. They

discuss their differences on the programme and work together on shared projects and activities. The statistics tracking attitudes in this context however, do not display the radical movement that is evident from the interviews with teachers and parents.

Durability of Programme Benefits

Quantitative data gathered 18 months after the 2000 programme reveal that 77% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they had greater understanding of those from other religions and backgrounds. However, participants were less willing 18 months after the programme to accept a teacher of a different religion than immediately after the programme. They were also more inclined to live in a single religion neighbourhood. However, 33 % of participants rated the peace and reconciliation dimension as the most important aspect of the KEY project.

Discussion

Drawing on research from Coleman, Casali and Wampold (2001) these results can be interpreted in the context of a non-linear process describing how the participants in the KEY project dealt with individuals from a second culture. Traditionally it would have been assumed that when faced with having to deal with someone from a different culture, an individual would move in a linear way starting with separation from his/her own culture then onto an acculturation stage and finally ending at assimilation of the other culture. However Coleman et al (2001) suggest that there is a possibility of maintaining involvement with one's culture of origin and developing competence in a second culture. They offer three additional descriptions of second culture acquisition – alternation, integration and fusion. For some KEY participants, discussion and collaboration on the programme with those from a second culture is contrasted with a day to day existence where cultural separation is the strategy supported by the home and peer group. In these circumstances, some participants are clearly utilising the alternation strategy – where he or she associates with two cultural groups but not at the same time. Although the participants clearly have learned how to learn to live together during the programme there is limited evidence to suggest that the integration strategy or fusion strategies are being used to help them live together in their communities. In other words there is limited evidence that they are choosing to have their culture of origin co-exist with the second culture (the integration strategy) or to blend both cultures (the fusion strategy).

Summary and Conclusions

Whilst the KEY project has the stated objective of targeting disadvantage it also has a spin off effect of overcoming cultural barriers through the medium of enterprise education. The

evaluation of this intervention highlights a softening of hostility, an increase in communication and the building of friendships across the traditions promoting greater understanding of people from other backgrounds. The quantitative results in this context however, do not display the radical movement that is evident from the interviews. Throughout the evaluation, male attitudes appeared more entrenched than those expressed by females. Longer-term evaluation suggests that once back in their own cultures there is some hardening of attitudes again perhaps due to the impact of family and community. The neutral and safe environment created by the KEY programme and the focus on specific activities and tasks facilitates participants being together. Over time they learn how to live together in the residential setting provided by the programme with the support of very positive teachers and KEY staff. However, when they return to the more complex home environment they must make extra effort to meet each other and deal with a greater range of negative forces urging them to remain separate. These findings may be suggestive that inter-cultural interventions must be delivered in an incremental on-going basis perhaps in the community if those from different religions and traditions are to learn to live together in a sustainable way.

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