

# **PROMOTING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND/OR ENRICHING THE CURRICULUM? THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE 'IRELAND IN SCHOOLS' FORUM TO BRINGING IRELAND INTO THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

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The 'Ireland in Schools' (IiS) forum was set up in 1993 by Professor Patrick Buckland,<sup>1</sup> formerly of the Institute of Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool, in response to British government briefings to promote mutual understanding between Britain and Ireland. IiS provides free teaching resources relating to Ireland and aiming at specific parts of the national curriculum in England and Wales for schoolchildren of all ages. The motivations behind IiS were initially political, but the project has since taken on an educational life of its own, and its credo has become "making learning fun" (IiS homepage). This paper aims to present IiS, placing it in a political and educational context, and to determine whether the initial objectives of "underpinning the peace process in Ireland by fostering better understanding of Ireland in Britain through young people" (IiS homepage) have been achieved. Using information provided by IiS, questionnaires, and telephone interviews, I shall focus on the motivations behind teachers' decisions to use Ireland as a subject matter and on their pupils' reactions.

## **Background to 'Ireland in Schools'**

Building on the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, the Framework Documents released by the Governments of Ireland and the United Kingdom on 22 February 1995 stated the common intention to arrive at a political settlement to end the conflict in the North of Ireland based on the principle of consensus. The documents stipulate that "a collective effort is needed to create, through agreement and reconciliation, a new beginning founded on consent, for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands" (Framework Documents). In fact, few concrete initiatives were undertaken at government level to address the latter part of this equation, namely "the peoples of these islands." Not surprisingly, the emphasis has been on improving links between the North and the South of Ireland and across the internal divide within Northern Ireland. East-West links have not taken pride of place. The British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body (BIIPB), established in 1990, originally comprised 25 members of the UK Parliament and 25 members of the Irish Parliament (Oireachtas) with the remit to develop understanding between elec-

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1 The author would like to thank Patrick Buckland for making available a large amount of information on IiS for this paper, especially during a personal interview with author, 6 June 2008.

ted representatives of the UK and Ireland.<sup>2</sup> As a result of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, two projects aimed at promoting mutual understanding received funding from the British and Irish governments, albeit on a small scale: Causeway and the East-West Schools programme.<sup>3</sup> Causeway, or the Conjoint Inter-Nation Programme for Young People of the Islands of Britain and Ireland, is a British-Irish youth exchange programme administered by the British Council and Léargas with the assistance of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland: “Causeway’s aims are the development of better understanding and the improvement of the long-term relationship between the peoples of Ireland and the United Kingdom” (Causeway). The East-West Schools programme is “a schools-based programme initiated under the Good Friday Agreement to strengthen school partnerships and to encourage friendship and understanding between young people in Ireland and the United Kingdom” (British Council).<sup>4</sup> As the tables below show, the scale of these schemes has been relatively limited. In the nine years for which figures are available, fewer than 2,000 young people from the UK have been involved in Causeway, and in 2007 there were a mere seven UK-based projects.

*Table 1: Number of Causeway Projects and Participants 1999 -2007*

Causeway	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	TOTAL
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>UK</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Ireland</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Participants</b>										
<b>UK</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>1739</b>
<b>Ireland</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>2074</b>

Source: Table compiled by author from data made available by Causeway

As for the East-West programme, data for 2002 and 2003 indicate that fewer projects came to fruition in England and Wales than elsewhere in the British Isles and that the budget was not taken up completely.

2 The BIIPB publishes bi-annual reports on its activities. The author has examined these reports and found very few references to ‘mutual understanding’ apart from the Warrington project mentioned below.

3 Data courtesy of Des Burke and Lorraine McDyer at Léargas.

4 It is funded by the Department of Education and Science (Ireland), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (England), the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, the Scottish Executive Education Department, and the National Assembly for Wales. Both schemes are managed by Léargas and the British Council.

Table 2: Number of East-West Programme Projects and Percentage of Budget Used, 2002-2003

EAST-WEST PROGRAMME	IRELAND	ENGLAND AND WALES	SCOTLAND	NORTHERN IRELAND
2002	12	9	4	2
2002 % budget used	86%	30%	100%	100%
2003	23	17	5	6
2003 % budget used	99%	50%	100%	100%

Source: Table compiled by author from data made available by Des Burke and Lorraine McDyer at Léargas

Parallel to political initiatives, there were a number of local and civic initiatives in the 1990s aimed at building bridges between Ireland and Britain at grass-roots level. The umbrella group WIRE (Warrington Ireland Reconciliation Enterprise) evolved as a constructive response to an IRA bombing in the centre of Warrington, a small town in the North-West of England, on 20 March 1993. The explosion claimed the lives of two young boys, aged three and twelve, and wounded 56 others, leaving the local community shocked and appalled, and provoking a wave of indignation and sympathy across the nation, in Ireland, and worldwide. The victims' families and members of the local community strove to come to terms with the tragedy by finding ways to foster closer links between Britain and Ireland – and in the hope of preventing further acts of hatred. Groups involved in WIRE included the Warrington Project, liS, and the Warrington male-voice choir. Among the key participants were Colin and Wendy Parry, whose twelve-year-old son was killed in the blast and who went on to found the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace, a registered charity named after the two young victims of the bombing. Opened in 1995, the charity continues to work on peace projects and with victims of political violence.<sup>5</sup> liS was involved in this project, as teachers in the Warrington area tried to respond to the bewilderment of the local schoolchildren in the aftermath of the bombing. As the BIIPB's appraisal of the Warrington project attests:

When we were in Warrington, teachers in the schools said that the Monday after that bomb children came to school and asked "why?" which they found they could not answer. The credit goes to the people who realised they should find an answer to that question and should be able to explain why [...]. These people have tried to find an answer. They have done that in ways that can be understood by children of six years reading books about giants and getting into discussions of stereotyping and by 16-year-olds looking at newspaper reports of the Troubles and learning historical analysis,

5 "We are an educational peace charity. We inspire people to lead more peaceful lives by participating in our educational programmes. This enables them to better understand conflict and by doing so to reduce or eliminate violence from conflict situations affecting them" (Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace). The foundation opened a Peace Centre in Warrington in 2000.

the evaluation of sources and distinguishing between facts, opinion, prejudice and bigotry. It is a very useful introduction to the study of history. (Corston 57)

Initially working together, as a response to a specific tragedy, the individual components became more independent.<sup>6</sup> liS has endeavoured to find ways of introducing Irish themes into the classroom to heighten awareness of Irish culture, history, and society and to promote the positive aspects of Ireland.

### **Ireland in the English Classroom Pre-Peace Process**

Prior to the peace process, English pupils were unlikely to encounter Ireland in the course of their schooling, and what knowledge English people had of Ireland stemmed almost exclusively from media reports on the Troubles with their onus on decontextualised acts of violence (Miller; Parkinson; Curtis; Butler).<sup>7</sup>

Those schoolchildren who did come across the topic of Ireland would probably have done so in the context of a history lesson. Mary Hickman, in her unpublished studies of history teaching in Catholic schools in England, concluded that “the history of Ireland in texts is the history of its contact with England, when Ireland proved problematic for England” and that it tended to concentrate on flashpoints (“Problematic Irish” 56). Such a perspective contributes to reinforcing the image of Ireland and the Irish as being difficult, unruly, and rebellious. The author’s own PhD examined O-Level, GCSE and A-Level history<sup>8</sup> syllabuses from 1970 to 2000 and found that, at least until 1990, English pupils tended to be presented with teaching modules and subsequent exam papers under the broad headings of English history, British history, European history, and world history. British history dealt with mainland Britain, whereas European history meant Continental Europe, and Irish history was touched upon only when it impacted directly on British history (e.g. the Home Rule question and Gladstone). Irish history, thereby, unintentionally or not, was ‘squeezed out.’ Ann Doyle has studied the portrayal of Ireland in English school textbooks and highlighted their Anglo-centric nature: “In Britain and Ireland, great misunderstanding and large-scale ignorance remain about each other’s histories. This, I believe, is directly related to the notion of ethnocentrism” (315).

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6 The umbrella organisation WIRE no longer exists, but the Foundation for Peace, liS, and the male-voice choir all continue their initial agenda of promoting peace and fostering closer links between Britain and Ireland and within the island of Ireland.

7 Personal contacts also impact directly on an individual’s knowledge of Ireland, with perception depending on the various cameo reports from Irish family, friends, neighbours, workmates, and British soldiers stationed in Northern Ireland.

8 O-Levels, now called GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education), are taken at the age of sixteen, A-Levels at the age of eighteen in England and Wales.

In order to evaluate pupil perceptions of Ireland, Paul Bracey and Alison Gove-Humphries<sup>9</sup> undertook a case study of 93 eleven-year-olds in 2001. Their primary aim was to determine the sources of knowledge about Ireland. Their findings showed that knowledge of Ireland was considerably less than knowledge of England; that historical knowledge was predominantly Anglo-centric and that history was less significant than other forms of knowledge in building up impressions and notions about Ireland. Television proved to be the main influence on pupils' images of Ireland, which were dominated by reports of violent conflicts (Bracey & Gove-Humphries 202).

### Why Teach Ireland in England?

It is not at all unreasonable to pose the question why, after all, an English pupil should come into contact with Ireland in the course of his/her schooling. First and foremost, Northern Ireland is part of the same nation-state. Mary Hickman remarked in her PhD thesis that "Ireland is consequently an unknown country even though geographically close" ("Incorporation" 367). Secondly, the islands of Ireland and Britain share a common past, which obviously impacts on the present but which is often ignored by a significant number of English people. Furthermore, the Troubles have directly affected the lives of people on the British 'mainland,' which was a prime target for bombings in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s and is still, in 2012, deemed to be under threat from dissident republicans opposed to the peace process, which they consider a sell-out to the British state and Unionists. Partly due to a shared past and to the geographic proximity of the two islands, the Irish community constitutes one of the largest ethnic minorities in Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> Although the Irish are white, and thus considered by many to have been assimilated into mainstream British society, certain Irish groups have lobbied the government to be considered as a separate ethnic group, thus becoming eligible for funding to finance their specific needs. Indeed, Irish people living in Great Britain have been subjected to discrimination and intimidation, especially as a backlash to IRA terrorist attacks (see Hickman & Walter). Finally, the UK is a multicultural society and promotes itself as such. Consequently, the heritage of each one of its diverse components needs to be recognised and valued as suggested by the 2000 Parekh Report:

The Irish community in Britain as insiders-outsiders is uniquely relevant to the nature of its multicultural society. For generations, Irish experience has been neglected owing to the myth of the 'homogeneity of white Britain' but it illuminates Britishness in much the same way that the experiences of black people illuminate whiteness. (Parekh 32)

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9 Paul Bracey is Senior Lecturer in Education at Northampton University, and Alison Gove-Humphries is History Coordinator for the Birmingham Local Education Authority; both are closely associated with IIS.

10 According to the 2001 Census, 1.3% of the English population ticked the "White Irish" box, making them the second largest ethnic minority after those who described themselves as "Indian" (2.1%); see also O'Keeffe-Vigneron.

This justifies teaching Ireland as a means of recognising and reflecting diversity in English schools. Paul Bracey, in his 2007 PhD thesis entitled "Perceptions of an Irish Dimension and its Significance for the English History Curriculum," explores this element and articulates the case for teaching Ireland. In an article co-written with Alison Gove-Humphries he points out the following:

The history National Curriculum states that an Irish dimension, along with an English, Scottish or Welsh dimension should be "taught where appropriate" – hardly a strong endorsement for its place in a history departments programme of study. Nevertheless, people from Ireland represent the largest minority group in Britain and a number of studies suggest that an understanding of Irish experiences has much to contribute to multicultural/anti-racist issues. (202)

### **'Ireland in Schools' (IiS)**

'Ireland in Schools' describes itself as "a national network of volunteers which provides free teaching and learning resources for primary and secondary schools in Britain" (IiS homepage). Patrick Buckland has personally overseen this project and has continued to spearhead it in retirement. The inspiration behind the project was to support the peace process and the needs of the Irish community in Britain. Its initial aims, as advertised on the website, were political, "underpinning the peace process in Ireland by fostering better understanding of Ireland in Britain through young people." It relies on private funding.<sup>11</sup> As time has gone by and against the background of a successful if imperfect peace process, the onus has been more on promoting an educational platform under the motto of "making learning fun and challenging" (IiS).

The website constitutes the hub of IiS. Teachers can download 'off-the-peg' teaching material and lesson plans, designed for particular age ranges and key stages.<sup>12</sup> IiS also makes available CD-ROMs. In addition, teachers can contact IiS through the website with specific requests, e.g. developing a new course of work on a particular theme. In this case, IiS suggests sources and provides materials and primary sources which teachers and educationalists may rework, the aim being that the material produced is fed back into the bank of materials available for anyone to access and use freely. Several teachers have organised themselves into groups according to schools or geographic areas and work together to devise, test, and put into practice new schemes of work. A hard core of motivated teachers, lecturers, and educational-

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11 Patrick Buckland explained that government funding was offered in the early stages of the forum, but he declined this aid since it came with strings attached and he preferred to remain independent. Private benefactors and sponsors are primarily responsible for the funding.

12 Key Stage 1 corresponds to five-to-seven-year-olds, Key Stage 2 to seven-to-eleven-year-olds, Key Stage 3 to eleven-to-fourteen-year-olds and Key Stage 4 to ages fourteen-sixteen.

ists is particularly active in this area.<sup>13</sup> The rationale is to try and offset the tendency to see Ireland as a 'problem,' which is how it has often been presented via the media and how it has been perceived by British 'mainlanders.' In order to increase understanding of Ireland and the conflict, multiple sources are used to counteract the traditional one-dimensional portrayal of all things Irish. In a resolutely cross-curricular approach, the topic of Ireland breaks down the boundaries between academic subjects and enriches the curriculum using literature, poetry, music, art, history, geography and citizenship classes and creating Irish pathways, both vertically and horizontally, through the curriculum.

As we have seen, Ireland has hitherto been considered a sensitive subject in schools. Mary Hickman concluded that teachers who chose to broach the subject did so in order to redress what they saw as a void: "This suggests that those with an Irish identity are mainly concerned with the best means of rectifying what they perceive as a deficiency in curriculum content" ("Incorporation" 383).

liS has not shied away from tackling contentious issues, notably the Troubles in general, its key events, and the Famine.<sup>14</sup> The starting point is often a question, and the schemes aim at providing different perspectives and encouraging pupils to develop their thinking skills. For example, a scheme of work on the Republican hunger strikes of 1980-81, designed for Key Stage 4 students is called "Hunger Strikers: Criminals or Prisoners of War?"<sup>15</sup> and a project on the Famine aimed at Key Stages 2 and 3 begins with the question: "Why Did Baby Bridget Die?"<sup>16</sup>

As already mentioned, liS endeavours to accommodate Irish topics within the pre-existing national curriculum. Thus, a scheme of work entitled "1916: 'Fighting for whom?'"<sup>17</sup> examines the significance of this date for different communities as a means of exploring notions of identity, which is part of the curriculum. The Troubles are approached as a vehicle for explaining the past through the present. In this instance, a group of secondary school teachers based in Nottinghamshire and known as the Nottingham Pilot Scheme undertook to test secondary pupils' knowledge and understanding of the Troubles, seeking to address pupils' apprehensions, as a preliminary to devising a course of work on the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Their initial test revealed: (1) an uncertain grasp of basic facts coupled with confusion about the multiplicity of political and paramilitary organisations; (2) a lack of sympathetic under-

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13 These include Paul Bracey and Alison Gove-Humphries as well as Darius Jackson, Lecturer in History and Citizenship at the University of Birmingham's School of Education, and Marian McQueen, Blackpool LEA National Strategy Consultant.

14 <[http://iisresource.org/Documents/0A4\\_HA\\_Con\\_Issues\\_Worksheets\\_A4\\_Sheets\\_pdf](http://iisresource.org/Documents/0A4_HA_Con_Issues_Worksheets_A4_Sheets_pdf)> (10 Aug 2009).

15 <[http://iisresource.org/h\\_strikes.aspx](http://iisresource.org/h_strikes.aspx)> (10 Aug 2009).

16 <[http://iisresource.org/Documents/0A4\\_Why\\_Did\\_BB\\_Die.pdf](http://iisresource.org/Documents/0A4_Why_Did_BB_Die.pdf)> (10 Aug 2009).

17 <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/91194/1916-crosscurricular-approaches-to-the-Easter-Rising-the-Western-Front>> (10 Aug 2009).

standing of the nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland; (3) a sense of overload as pupils felt they had to address the whole of the history of Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations.

The group went on to devise a course of work that would widen pupils' knowledge of the Irish Question, taking into account these findings and trying to avoid over-burdening them.<sup>18</sup> As an introduction, Republican and Loyalist murals were used to explore the different symbols and codes of the divided communities in Northern Ireland. Poetry, literature, art, and music were all effectively combined to weave a variety of perspectives into the cross-curriculum approach favoured by liS.

### **Granuaile**

Ireland in Schools offers several schemes of work featuring Grace O'Malley/Granuaile, a(n) (in)famous Irish sea captain of the 1600s. The national curriculum incites primary schools to work on the topic of a female figure of significance. Traditionally, Florence Nightingale has been a popular choice, but liS put forward a course of work presenting an alternative: Grace O'Malley (see Jackson, Bracey & Gove-Humphries). This character has also been proposed as a female counterpart to Sir Francis Drake as a way of challenging stereotypes. One scheme of work designed for Key Stage 1 has as its starting point the question "Should We Call Grace O'Malley a Pirate?" At Key Stage 2, another scheme embarks upon a comparison announced in its title "The Pirates Grace O'Malley and Francis Drake: Goodies or Baddies?"<sup>19</sup>

This topic sparked indignation from one of Britain's best-selling newspapers, *The Daily Mail*. One example of the deep-rooted reticence concerning Ireland is an article by Sarah Harris which appeared on 28 December 2004, entitled "Move over Florence: schools are told to ditch 'jaded' heroine Nightingale and give history lessons about a female Irish pirate." As the format of the article suggests, Florence Nightingale and Grace O'Malley are pitted against each other as binary opposites (Hickman, "Binary Opposites" 50-58), with photos showing a wild and wanton Irish woman opposite one of the saintly epitomes of British civilisation. The conservative newspaper takes offence at the fact that the official education watchdog, the QCA (Qualification and Curriculum Authority), opted to promote the work of liS and suggest an alternative "woman of significance" to teachers on its website. *The Daily Mail* bemoaned the fact that the QCA "believes that 'teachers and their pupils can only benefit by taking more account of Ireland and its stories.'" The newspaper goes on to criticise the proposal, citing "historians": "But the watchdog was attacked by historians for downgrading Miss Nightingale in favour of politically correct Left-wing

18 <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/29720/SHP-Getting-behind-the-Headlines-in-Northern-Ireland>> (10 Aug 2009).

19 See also Bracey, Gove-Humphries, & Jackson, for more information on these schemes of work.

fashion [...]. Dr David Starkey said there is 'no contest' between Florence Nightingale and Grace O'Malley – whom he had never heard of."<sup>20</sup>

Quite apart from their visual representation, the cameo descriptions of the two women are rife with stereotypes: we are told that Florence "collected statistics to show many military deaths were preventable, leading to improvements in medical and surgical practices," whereas her Irish 'counterpart' "stormed castles and was involved in cattle-rustling." In a similar vein, we learn that Grace was nicknamed Grace the Bald after cutting off her hair, slaughtered hundreds of Spaniards, was twice imprisoned, whilst Florence was known as the Lady of the Lamp and awarded the Royal Red Cross by Queen Victoria.

### Author's Study

In order to try and examine the impact that liS has had on English schoolchildren, the author sent out 70 questionnaires in May 2009 to a list of teachers posted on the liS website "Thank you" page, i.e. who had actively contributed to liS. Twenty-two responses were received in total, of which twenty were completed; consequently, these can only be analysed from a qualitative perspective. Several responses were followed up by telephone interviews in order to clarify, or gain more insight into, teachers' perceptions. The twenty completed responses came from fifteen teachers, four educationalists, and one community worker. The following tables give an overall view of their profiles.

Table 3: Religion of respondents

RELIGION	Church of England	Roman Catholic	Protestant	None
	5	9	3	3

Table 4: Identity of respondents (in their own terms)

IDENTITY	British	Irish	English	Welsh
	14	3	2	1

Table 5: Irish background of respondents

IRISH BACKGROUND	Yes	Distant	No
	10	2	8

20 In fact, the newspaper names a single historian, Dr David Starkey, a prominent TV commentator.

Table 6: Type of school where respondents work

<b>TYPE OF SCHOOL</b>	<b>State Primary</b>	<b>Catholic Primary</b>	<b>C. of E. Primary</b>	<b>State Secondary</b>	<b>Catholic Secondary</b>	<b>C. of E. Secondary</b>
	2	6	1	4	2	10

In order to try and assess the motivations of liS users, questions focussed on teachers' motivations as well as on the perceived reactions of pupils and parents. The following motivations emerged, in descending order of occurrence:

- reasons of identity: the Irish background of teachers themselves or pupils in their schools;
- a personal interest in Ireland and/or Northern Ireland;
- a wish to promote diversity in the classroom in order to reflect Britain's multi-cultural society;
- pedagogical reasons and curriculum enrichment;
- prompting by educational coordinators to use liS material.

When asked about pupils' reactions to studying topics related to Ireland, teachers noted a general reaction of enthusiasm coupled with excitement. What is striking, but not particularly surprising, is that the most positive reactions appear to have come from children of Irish backgrounds. Teachers remarked on their pupils' sense of pride in the fact that their Irish roots were being recognised, valued, and, for some, even discovered, as the following quotes reveal:

"They were very enthusiastic particularly charting family connections on a large map of Ireland on wall in hall." (Teacher, Catholic Primary)

"Pupils even at an early age find it interesting. They discover their Irish roots or speak of parents visiting Ireland." (Teacher, Catholic Primary)

"Most pupils thoroughly enjoyed taking part in the project. The greatest emotion expressed was a sense of pride from pupils with names such as Murphy, McMahon, O'Brien etc who hadn't realised they had Irish roots! [...] There was a noticeable increase in the number of children wearing Ireland football kits for PE lessons after the first Irish week." (Teacher, Catholic Primary)

It is evident that an Irish topic sits very neatly with the notion of teaching for diversity. Children of Irish descent build bridges between their past and present. It may be beneficial to those not of Irish descent in that they experience at first hand proof that classmates are from diverse backgrounds. But is the work of liS building bridges between Britain and Ireland?

Other pupils evoke a feeling of awakening to past events, an increased awareness, and resulting empathy towards the Irish:

"Pupils became aware of historically what led to the hatred of the British by citizens of Ireland especially during the potato famine when wheat was sent to England." (Teacher, State Primary)

"Most of the children knew very little about Irish history prior to project. Were able to demonstrate empathy with the plight of children during potato famine by the end."  
(Teacher, Church of England Primary)

In one instance, the teacher described a sense of shame felt by English pupils as they discovered past wrongdoings or misdemeanours: "A lot of shame from English students. Usual reaction: 'How could we treat them like that?'" (Teacher, State Secondary). When asked about their colleagues' reactions, users of liS material cited apprehension due to the unfamiliarity of the subject matter and fear of extra work. There was also a feeling that the topic was not relevant, with some colleagues asking "Why Ireland? Why not Britain?"

"Some teachers, who aren't from an Irish background, have expressed a wish to celebrate Britishness in the same way that we celebrate Irishness in Irish Week, but as yet they haven't been driven enough to drum up enough enthusiasm to lead it in school. They seem to resent us having an Irish week, but can't be bothered to organise events to celebrate their Englishness!" (Teacher Catholic Primary)

According to the teachers, the feedback from parents was overwhelmingly positive. Again it has to be mentioned that the responses were most enthusiastic from those of Irish descent, as the following quotes demonstrate:

"Positive responses from parents with Irish relatives – all enjoyed the Assembly on St Patrick's Day. Only one negative response who asked why Ireland and not Scotland?"  
(Teacher, Catholic Primary)

"We did a 'sharing' with parents at the end of the project, which was well-received."  
(Teacher, Church of England Primary).

"Parents enjoyed our first liS celebration in the hall as an evening of music (Irish ballads), Irish dancing (children from school), food (Irish stews and Guinness), art/literacy display." (Teacher, Catholic Primary)

Only a few negative reactions were reported, which, although anecdotal, attest to lingering prejudices against the Irish and at the same time underline the importance of the work of liS and the necessity to paint a more positive picture of Ireland to counterbalance stereotypes:

"One parent reacted adversely to the monthly newsletter informing parents of forthcoming events when we informed them of the first Irish Week. I seem to remember some sarcastic questions from him about whether the children would be learning about bomb-making techniques and terrorism." (Teacher, Catholic Primary)

## Conclusion

It would appear that liS contributes to promoting mutual understanding by breaking down barriers between English schoolchildren and Ireland. The network strives to challenge the established stereotypes of the Irish in an attempt to offset the tendency to view Ireland as a problem and the Irish as problematic. It also seeks to promote understanding of the historical, social, and political landscape, as well as literally putting Ireland on the map. Regarding the specific context of the Troubles, liS sets out to throw light on key events, providing background knowledge which paves the way to

demystifying the topic by providing the keys or codes necessary for understanding. The main benefits identified by respondents are children (re-)discovering their Irish heritage and the promotion of a positive image of Ireland. The excellence of the teaching materials makes liS attractive; the study suggests that its users have different motivations, ranging from their own connections with Ireland to teaching for diversity or simply the quality and accessibility of the teaching resources.

Exactly how successful has liS been in promoting mutual understanding between England and Ireland? It is obviously impossible to quantify. Taking into account the number of schools actively using liS material, it has to be said that the impact can only be marginal: judging by the responses received to the questionnaires, liS appears to be more prevalent in Catholic schools (which account for a mere 9.8% of Primary and 9.6% of Secondary schools nation-wide) than in non-denominational or Church of England schools. liS remains a small-scale forum with no national or official remit or funding, but there is evidence that its outreach is mushrooming: the number of visits to the website is increasing, as is the number of pages viewed per visit. Moreover, Republic of Ireland schools are using liS material on Northern Ireland, and liS has been cited on the QCA website under the headline "Innovating with history."

liS is undoubtedly enriching the curriculum in schools where its material is being used. Placing the onus on creativity and drawing on literature, music, visual arts etc., it aims to "make learning fun" whilst striving to provide models of best pedagogical practice. According to its founder and main pivot, Patrick Buckland, "liS has taken off – due to the quality of teaching material it provides."<sup>21</sup>

Twelve years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, Ireland no longer represents such a controversial topic in Britain, which may reduce barriers felt by certain teachers who in the past were reluctant to tackle contentious issues. On the other hand, this may dissuade others who are politically motivated and who may look to more burning issues in the context of modern-day Britain, such as militant Islam. However, as this article goes to press, Northern Ireland is once again hitting the headlines in the British media due to the rise of dissident Republican activity, making the study of Ireland in the English classroom as relevant as ever before.

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21 Personal interview with author, 6 June 2008.

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