

Ripples of Peace



Weaving Friendship
in the Shadow
of the Shipyard



25 years after its beginnings with nursery school children from Shankill and Ardoyne, Buddy Up! continues to make an impact on the lives of children, parents, and staff in school communities across Northern Ireland. Over the last five years, the inter-school Buddy system has been a cornerstone of The Executive Office's Urban Villages initiative, and CRIS have worked tirelessly with schools across the country to forge new relationships and build upon those that exist across some of Northern Ireland's longest-standing interfaces.

Over the course of Urban Villages, Buddy Up! has engaged 2824 children, 252 members of staff and 424 parents. The initiative has allowed us to develop groundbreaking evaluation techniques, our Trust Indicator Framework, which measures our programming by asking that vital question 'are we truly building strong, trusting relationships?'

Most importantly, the last five years have taught us so much, our eyes have been opened to the challenges being faced by our school communities, and we have learned from the stories of hope, the stories of pupils, parents and staff who strive to build a better future for their communities.

Hope Springs Eternal

To trace the slow meander of the Lagan is to walk the history of Belfast. From towpath to tide, you could follow the city's birth from woodland, and come, at the end of your journey, to the memory of its industrial height. It is at this estuary, in the shadow of the Shipyard, where so much of the recent history of Belfast has been written and where this story takes place. Historically, it has been a story of division and conflict, of a turbulence juxtaposed against the rivers gentle flow, but times change, futures brighten, and a difficult past becomes the foundation stone upon which a new story can be crafted. In this edition of Ripples of Peace, we tell a story of hope. This is the story of two schools and two communities who have, through time, care, effort, and love, built a new future for themselves and their children.

St Matthew's and Nettlefield Primary Schools serve the communities of the Short Strand and the Woodstock areas of East Belfast. Over the course of the last century, the interface between the Short Strand and the 'Inner East' has been one which has been fraught with tension and periods of violence. Over the course of the 1970s, the Peace Walls were built, the British Army became a permanent installation, and a buffer zone was created between the two communities.

There is no denying that the history of the interface between Short Strand and the Inner East is complicated. It is blurred by local histories, it has been impacted heavily by outside actors, the communities themselves have been caught in the middle of a national story on more than one occasion. For a long time, it seemed that their destiny was to remain trapped in that stasis, too burdened by their shared history to allow for moving forward.



When people began to look beyond the sensationalism, through the headlines, they found two communities working tirelessly to build something brand new. Like the Lagan carving itself from the rock, the gradual process of change was underway in the streets of East Belfast. Now, reflecting on over two decades of peace, we see two communities who have taken control of their own destinies, we find two schools in this piece who have walked every single step alongside their pupils and their parents and carers.

There are challenges in East Belfast, as there are all over the country. Issues around deprivation, demographics and cynicism pervade our communities, but this is a much-needed story of hope, of struggle and of what can be achieved when communities come together to change the narrative and build something new from the ground up.

Impacting Children

'It's gone from fighting at interfaces to WhatsApp groups'

Children have always been the beating heart of Buddy Up! The model was developed to give children the best chance of making lasting friendships where previously forging connections may have been difficult. The programme is designed to build confidence in new friendships and allow children to explore their similarities and differences in a positive and engaging way.

Over the last number of years, CRIS have worked with St Matthew's and Nettlefield in both P3 and P7, and, for the teachers, the impact on their classes was as clear as day:

"As soon as I gave her the wee evaluation sheet, she couldn't wait to write all the things she loved about it. She was talking about her friend, and I'll never forget sitting in our hall and it was like having two twins, 'I like this, I like this, I like that,' they were literally like 'we're like sisters that were separated!'"

– Mary P7 Teacher at St Matthew's

The impact of Buddy Up! is not limited to the school gates either, Catherine, the P7 teacher at Nettlefield spoke about her class who participated in the programme last year:

"They had WhatsApp groups and were meeting at Connswater. It's gone from fighting each other at interfaces to WhatsApp groups and meetups through Buddy Up! and Shared Ed"

– Catherine P7 Teacher at Nettlefield

When we spoke to the pupils who participated in Buddy Up! this year, they had high praise for their schools, communities, and the programme.

"You and all your mates all live in the Strand, and you all go [to St Matthew's]... We know Buddy Up! is important because you can get to know other people... you get to go over and see what they're like... we wouldn't really get the chance otherwise"

– Jack, P7 pupil at St Matthew's

This sentiment was echoed by the pupils at Nettlefield

'If you're not from Belfast, its hard, when you're from somewhere else. It's hard getting to know somebody in a new place. Buddy Up! is a good way to introduce yourself to other people"

– Allan, P7 pupil at Nettlefield

Buddy Up! will always seek to build on the fantastic work already being done in schools and their communities. This year, we asked schools to implement 'extended buddying,' where the Buddy model was utilised throughout their activities together over the year, not just during the programme. This approach, designed to build real trust and relationships between staff and pupils works best when complimented by an ethos of inclusion and welcome.

"It's all about everyone's faith and celebrating them. Its not just the 12th or St Patricks, its about Eid, Diwali, its about becoming more aware and educating our children who maybe aren't as aware... Theres so much more out there, we always try and make people feel welcome."

– Mary, P7 teacher at St Matthew's

When asked about the one thing they have learned from Buddy Up! the pupils from both schools were in total agreement

"It's a really good thing to make friends, and it's not even that hard"

– Jack, P7 from St Matthew's and Lily, P7 from Nettlefield

Impacting Teachers

'You just feel at ease really quickly'

The importance of teachers in the lives of children is hard to overstate. Often and all at once they are instructors, parents, carers and therapists. Their values and practice can leave indelible marks on the lives of their pupils and, more often than not, the true impact of a teacher on a pupil's life goes underappreciated. At CRIS, we know just how important a teacher's values are to ensuring a positive outcome for their children and it is our belief that, in building the capacity of teachers, we are ensuring a brighter future for their pupils and their school.

In Mary and Catherine, the P7 teachers at St Matthew's and Nettlefield respectively, there are two teachers who live out the values of their schools everyday in their classrooms, and this is reflected in their pupils and their practice.

"I just feel like, as a teacher, you have to be inclusive. I know our school is deemed protestant, but we both take everybody in, we're both unofficially integrated."
(Catherine, P7 at Nettlefield)

This stance of unofficial integration is one that is shared widely amongst schools operating in traditional working-class areas of Belfast, as Mary agrees

"Your classroom is a microcosm of the whole world. You can have so many nationalities, languages... I had a child a few years ago with no English whatsoever, they were mute for 7 months, but you can see his progress from being in the classroom and that's Shared Education in itself!"
(Mary, P7 at St Matthew's)

At CRIS, understanding the dynamic environment facing school staff is integral to ensuring our work remains relevant and impactful for staff and pupils alike. By consulting with teachers, CRIS can keep staff training sessions something to be genuinely looked forward to.

That was my 2nd year [at the training] and you just feel really at ease... Everyone is there for the same reason; the teachers bond quickly, and everyone is singing off the same hymn sheet. I was worried about speaking out, you don't know who's around you, I think you're always taught that - that you're always wary, but it was very comfortable, and it was so nice to get that space out of school, out of a busy classroom, and get that time to plan together. It worked well. More of them would be great!
(Catherine, P7 at Nettlefield)



The more work that can be facilitated between schools, the more the support network grows. Solidarity, between schools, staff, communities, and organisations like CRIS, allows us to meet the challenges facing our schools head on. As teachers know, schools now have far more in common than people may think at first glance.

"When you're linked to a partner school you're getting to see that what is happening in my class is exactly the same as the school across the way. We all have to adapt to the same challenges. You could get a knock on the door, and someone tells you that a new child is starting on Monday, and that's the way it is, you have to go with it."
(Mary, P7 at St Matthew's)

Whatever the future may look like for our schools, CRIS will continue their commitment to empower staff, pupils and communities alike.

Impacting School Leaders 'We are part of each other's DNA'

For over two decades, St Matthew's and Nettlefield have worked in tandem with one another as part of a community wide effort for peace and cohesion. It is not enough to simply declare shared space, its creation must be intentional, it must be deliberate, as acknowledged by St Matthew's principal Aileen Browne who has walked this path for 21 years.



"I remember people being frightened when I came here, frightened of stepping outside here... and we said, good growth takes time, small steady steps make great foundations..."

We have Shared Education pupil leaders and because the parents are seeing this good behaviour modelled, they're allowing them to meet friends outside school, up at Connswater, and that to me, that's incredible."

For Simon McLean, the principal at Nettlefield, fostering aspiration is key to children reaching their full potential and becoming leaders in their community.

"We want our children to feel the hand of history is on them too, are they going to be the next person to do something great? In NI history is never too far away, there's the bad stuff, but really great stuff... you're not very many degrees of separation from people who have changed history... and you're thinking, what can we do to make these children see there is more to life than what they expect and their capability, their access and their journey is within touching distance."

For these school leaders, working together and embedding their practice in the local community has enabled them to achieve the almost inconceivable. It all starts with the values, of the principals and of their schools, and the ripple into the community is clear to see.

"We know our values, we know who we are, we know what we live for, and we know the character we want to exhibit... when you have that foundation, you have good soil for learning... That's why we're so invested in Buddy Up! it's another tool in the toolbox, it's not just a nice experience for kids to meet and hang out... its more than that, it's how do I have the tools for life to be a citizen of the future."

(Simon, principal at Nettlefield)

And it is not only the community in East Belfast that are learning from these schools, but much further afield

"We met some people from Kosovo who were over on an educational visit to see how things went... The prime minister of Kosovo came and then we had a follow up event a couple of weeks ago where we went to the ministers of Kosovo through the inter-parliamentary visit. They were saying how they have been trying to work in the different communities and the difficulties, so they were very interested to hear how we had started."

(Aileen, principal at St Matthew's)

This is a vital time for peacebuilding in our school communities, and it is important that the work done over the last two decades is not allowed to dissipate, for the sake of our pupils and their communities.

“What does the future hold? I'd like to hope that we do move forward intertwined like a thread, then the colours are still apparent, but we're one thread... If you're a melting pot, then everything melts and becomes grey.”

(Simon, principal at Nettlefield)

The Ripples of this story can be felt from the Liganside to the shores of the Adriatic. It is an awe-inspiring story of hope and of resilience. It is one CRIS have been fortunate to play a small role in, but the credit goes to the schools, their staff, their communities and their pupils, for their bravery and their patience.

It is only fair to end on a sentiment which will echo with school staff and parents across Northern Ireland.

“I just know I love the children, and I always try to do my best for them.”

(Aileen, principal at St Matthew's)

Support Building Meaningful Friendships for Peace Join our Buddy Up! Donor Programme

At CRIS we know that 'peace grows at the speed of trust' and building trustworthy and long-lasting friendship takes trust and it takes time. After almost 40 years as a peacebuilding organisation CRIS has proven we are here for the long-term to support children growing friendships to sustain peace.

If you are inspired by these stories, join us in partnership by supporting Buddy Up! by making a donation to this impactful programme.

Information for giving can be found at www.crisni.org or **Donate (paypal.com)** or by contacting CRIS Director of Programmes Emily Stanton at: emily.stanton@crisni.org



CRIS (Community Relations in Schools)

Learn more about us at www.crisni.org

Contact us at info@crisni.org or **07921 851601**

Find us at Unit 6 North City Business Centre - 2 Duncairn Gardens

Follow us on **Facebook** and **Twitter**

Thank you to our Buddy Up! funders:

