

# Addressing diversity and inclusion in the early years in conflict-affected societies: a case study of the Media Initiative for Children<sup>1</sup>—Northern Ireland

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This article reports on the development and systematic evaluation of an innovative early years programme aimed at encouraging young children to respect differences within a deeply divided society that is emerging out of a prolonged period of violent conflict. The programme, the Media Initiative for Children—Northern Ireland, has been the product of a partnership between a US-based organization (the Peace Initiatives Institute) and NIPPA—The Early Years Organisation, and has been supported by academic research and the efforts of a range of voluntary and statutory organizations. It has attempted to encourage young children to value diversity and be more inclusive of those who are different from themselves through the use of short cartoons designed for and broadcast on television as well as specially prepared curricular materials for use in pre-school settings. To date the programme has been delivered through 200 settings to approximately 3500 pre-school children across Northern Ireland. This article describes how the programme was developed and implemented as well as the rigorous approach taken to evaluating its effects on young children's attitudes and awareness. Key lessons from this are identified and discussed in relation to future work in this area.

## Introduction

This article reports on the development and systematic evaluation of a major new initiative developed in Northern Ireland aimed at encouraging young children to

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value cultural diversity and respect difference. The initiative, the Media Initiative for Children—Northern Ireland (MIFC-NI), is aimed primarily at three- to five-year-old children and consists of three one-minute cartoons that have been designed for and broadcast on television and a range of curricular materials developed specifically for use in nurseries and pre-school settings to complement the messages contained in the cartoons.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the attempt to integrate the use of mass media messages with high-quality curricular materials and community outreach, the other factor that has made this initiative innovative has been the fact that it has been designed within the context of a deeply divided society emerging out of a prolonged period of armed conflict.

In relation to this latter point, while there have been a number of studies that have been published over recent years beginning to explore older children and young people's experiences and perspectives living in conflict-affected societies (Koplewicz *et al.*, 2003; Connolly and Healy, 2004; Muldoon, 2004; Jones, 2005; McEvoy-Levy, 2006), there remains a notable lack of research on younger children's attitudes and experiences in conflict-affected societies. Of the handful of studies that currently exist, they certainly suggest that children in the early years are aware of the events surrounding them and are also beginning to acquire an awareness of the divisions that exist and the sense of 'us' and 'them' that can emerge from this (Bar-Tal, 1996; Connolly *et al.*, 2002). In relation to Northern Ireland, the only study to focus specifically on children in the early years published to date is that by Connolly *et al.* (2002) that proved to be influential in the development of the MIFC-NI. Their study involved a survey of a random sample of 352 children aged three to six years that was stratified to ensure that it was broadly representative in terms of geographical area, socio-economic background and the proportions of the two majority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland—Protestants (who generally consider themselves to be British) and Catholics (who generally consider themselves to be Irish).

This survey found that only a very small proportion of three to four year olds demonstrated an ability to recognize the divisions that exist between Catholics and Protestants. Moreover, the tendency to associate with one or other of these two communities and also to make prejudiced statements about 'the other side' only really began to emerge by the ages of five and six, although the rate of increase appeared to be rapid and exponential at this point so that by the age of six one-third of all children were already found to be demonstrating an awareness that they belonged to one of the two main communities and one in six (15%) made prejudiced statements about the other community during the survey, without prompting.

However, while the majority of children at the ages of three to four were not explicitly recognizing and/or identifying with the two main communities in the region, this was not to suggest that children of this age were unaffected by the continuing divisions that exist. More specifically, Connolly *et al.* (2002) found a clear tendency for children at this age to begin to adopt and internalize the cultural preferences of their respective communities. Thus, for example, when shown the British Union flag and the Irish Tricolour flag and asked if there was one they liked the best, the majority of Protestant three year olds (60%) chose the British flag and

the majority of Catholic three year olds (64%) chose the Irish one. Similarly, when shown a photograph of an Orange March (a parade associated with the Protestant community), only 3% of Protestant three year olds said they did not like the marchers compared to 18% of Catholic three year olds (see Connolly *et al.*, 2002).

In providing evidence, for the first time, of some of the effects of the conflict on young children's attitudes and awareness in the early years, this research proved to play an important role in supporting the efforts of a number of organizations working in Northern Ireland who were already coming to recognize the need to begin working more explicitly on issues of cultural diversity and difference with young children. Two such organizations were NIPPA—The Early Years Organisation, the largest early years provider in the region, and the Peace Initiatives Institute (Pii), a US-based organization that at the time this research was published was already in the process of visiting Northern Ireland with the aim of facilitating the development of an innovative new media initiative aimed at encouraging children to respect differences and be more inclusive of one another. It was through the partnership that developed between NIPPA and Pii, which was itself supported by systematic baseline and evaluative research provided by Queen's University and the involvement and expertise of a number of other individuals and organizations/agencies, that the MIFC-NI was born.

This article describes the development of the MIFC-NI between 2002 and 2006 and the partnerships and relationships that have evolved between the key organizations and agencies during this period. It also reports the key findings of the evaluations conducted to date on the effectiveness of the MIFC-NI and the key lessons that have been learnt from all of this. The article begins with a brief outline of the background to the initiative and how the partnership between Pii and NIPPA emerged and developed. It then describes the development of the cartoons and curricular materials and how these have been piloted and evaluated. In doing this it also highlights some of the problems experienced during this process and the attempts made to address these. The article concludes by drawing out the key issues to emerge from this whole process and the lessons learnt to date.

## **Background**

For over a quarter of a century, from the late 1960s through to the mid-1990s, Northern Ireland experienced a prolonged period of armed conflict. This conflict, that has been termed euphemistically 'the Troubles', resulted in over 3600 deaths and well over 40,000 people being injured (Morrissey & Smyth, 2002). Not surprisingly, such levels of violence led to significant population shifts, with Catholic and Protestant communities either being forced out of certain areas or choosing to move to other areas for their own safety. It has been estimated, for example, that just within the first few years of the violence (1969–72) between 8000 and 15,000 families were forced to leave their homes and live elsewhere (Smyth, 1998, p. 15). Moreover, and as Boal (1999) has identified in his broader analysis of urban trends in the region, there was a 'ratchet effect' whereby intense periods of violence tended to

significantly increase levels of segregation that would then never return to their previous levels during later times of relative peace (see also Murtagh, 2002, 2003).

Even since the relative peace that has accompanied the paramilitary ceasefires of the mid-1990s, social, political and economic segregation therefore has remained one of the main legacies of this period of conflict. Data from the 2001 Census, for example, reveals that a quarter of all wards (25%) in Northern Ireland have a population that is at least 90% Catholic or Protestant. In fact, well over half of all wards in Northern Ireland (58%) have a population that is at least 75% Catholic or Protestant.

This has been the context within which NIPPA—The Early Years Organisation has developed and grown since it was established in 1965. For a variety of reasons Northern Ireland always had a very low level of pre-school provision through the formal education sector. NIPPA was established to develop a range of playgroups and parent and toddler groups to meet this need. However, ‘the Troubles’ had a particular impact upon NIPPA and its development. While its initial focus was on supporting the needs of private nurseries and other early years providers, this soon shifted within the context of the violence to include a much greater emphasis on supporting local communities develop and sustain their own voluntary playgroups. These playgroups were often established as a means of communal support and a way of creating at least one ‘safe space’ away from the violence. By the mid-1980s some 800 NIPPA groups were established, providing services to over 30,000 children under five. Moreover, the fact that these groups were themselves organized together into 19 branches meant that a relatively rare space was also created for playgroup leaders from across the divide to meet together and support one another.

For much of this period, the nature and extent of the violence meant that NIPPA adopted a strongly ‘non-sectarian’ stance with the aim of creating and maintaining safe spaces for children and their families that were unaffected as far as possible by the conflict. However, the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994 and the wider peace process that emerged from this has created a new climate whereby organizations such as NIPPA have been able to reconsider their values and ethos and their contribution to ‘building the peace’. For NIPPA, the experience from its playgroups suggested that the communal divisions were still having an impact on young children’s attitudes and could be seen at times reflected in their play. This, in turn, led NIPPA to recognize the need to adopt a more explicitly ‘anti-sectarian’ approach to its work. Fortuitously, it was at the time when NIPPA was beginning to plan and develop its anti-sectarian approach that the research by Connolly *et al.* (2002) was published.

Just at the time this report was published in Northern Ireland, and in a parallel development, members of the Peace Initiatives Institute (Pii) were also visiting Northern Ireland. Pii was established in 2001 in Colorado, USA, to explore ways of contributing to building peaceful societies in conflict-affected areas of the world through a focus on children and young people. Pii’s vision was and remains to create a different dialogue, greater understanding and less strife among populations in conflict throughout the world. Its mission is to engage in countries in conflict by

creating a media initiative aimed at making children more aware of the benefits of respecting differences between themselves and others, and acting accordingly. Pii holds a worldview that convincing young children to respect differences between themselves and others will reduce violence in any conflict-affected society over the long term. Many of the founding members of Pii had a business background and believed that their leadership skills and media knowledge could be used to good effect to promote such a message. A key element in Pii's strategy was that any successful programme would require the development of partnerships with local organizations and leaders who had insight into the conflict and culture of local situations.

In October 2002, Pii convened a meeting in Northern Ireland with the Glencree Centre for Reconciliation at which a range of individuals working in education, community relations, government, media and non-profit organizations were invited to discuss a relatively new approach to peace-building in Northern Ireland. Facilitated by Pii, the discussion focused on ways of using the media to reach young people with messages that emphasize the value of respecting differences among themselves and others. One of the organizations represented at that meeting was NIPPA as well as those responsible for the research on three to six year olds published just a few months before (Connolly *et al.*, 2002). Not surprisingly, one of the core outcomes of the meeting was to focus efforts on younger children in the early years. Soon after this initial meeting, a number of further meetings took place specifically between Pii and NIPPA at which some of the possible ways in which this project could be taken forward were considered in more detail. Through these meetings, Pii and NIPPA entered into a formal partnership to lead the development and implementation of what had now become known as the Media Initiative for Children—Northern Ireland. This partnership was supported by an Advisory Council including many of those who attended the initial meeting convened by Pii. Membership of the Council was wide-ranging and included representatives from the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland, Channel 4, the two regional universities and several NGOs. This, in turn, ensured that the MIFC-NI gained a community-wide legitimacy.

### **The development and delivery of the pilot MIFC-NI**

As indicated above, the MIFC-NI was always conceived as a media-based educational programme. As such, the intention was to use television air time to reach multiple audiences throughout Northern Ireland while the interactive education of early years children was to be accomplished in the pre-schools. Television messages were a critical strategic component as it was believed that many of the audiences receiving the MIFC-NI's messages could have reacted negatively or even with fear and concern about the subject matter of sectarianism (i.e. negative attitudes and relations between Catholics and Protestants). Showing the cartoons on television was, therefore, an important method for defusing such fear and preventing distortions or misperceptions about the programme that might otherwise be created by people or organizations not fully understanding the MIFC-NI's intent or content.

Within this overarching framework, one of the first decisions made in relation to the development of the MIFC-NI was that it should not just address the issue of sectarianism but should focus also on other dimensions of difference. Many early years educators were already engaged in work with children around diversity issues so it was felt that this could provide a welcome foundation for the new programme to build on. More pragmatically, and given the history of armed conflict and the physical and social scars this had left, it was felt also that a sole focus on sectarian differences would be very difficult for early years settings to deliver. Moreover, early feedback from parents suggested a much greater level of support for a broader-ranging approach to addressing diversity. As such it was decided to develop the initial programme around three dimensions of difference: disability, 'race' and cultural differences (i.e. differences between Catholics and Protestants). This strategy allowed for other differences to be addressed in future modules.

In order to develop the cartoons, Pii commissioned a local company that specialized in producing advertising messages to develop three one-minute cartoons, one on each of the three dimensions. The cartoons, produced with computer-generated animation, used a common cast of characters involving children in a park setting (see Figure 1). Because a critical element of the programme was to create new positive 'stories' about what it meant to be different to replace the existing negative ones dominant in the Northern Irish culture, Pii commissioned a professional storyteller known and respected by both cultures in the Northern Ireland conflict to write scripts for each of the three films and child actors were hired to voice the characters (all three cartoons can be viewed online at [www.mifc-pii.org](http://www.mifc-pii.org)).



Figure 1. The four main characters from the Media Initiative for Children—Northern Ireland (original in colour). From left to right: Jenny, Jim, Kim and Tom. Copyright: Peace Initiatives Institute



The issue of disability was addressed in one of the cartoons through the character Tom, who wore a corrective eye patch. The use of corrective eye patches among young children is a relatively common practice in Northern Ireland and was felt to be one of the most commonly occurring visible disabilities in the region. Moreover, feedback from playgroups suggested that the wearing of eye patches tended to attract much teasing and name-calling. It was therefore felt that this would be a useful basis from which to encourage children to explore many other forms of disability through the curricular materials being developed. The issue of 'race' was addressed in the second cartoon through the experiences of Kim, a Chinese character. The choice of Kim reflected the fact that the Chinese community represents the largest minority ethnic group within Northern Ireland and is also found to be the most likely to experience racist harassment in the region (Connolly, 2002). For the third cartoon that focused on cultural differences, it was decided to dress two of the characters in Rangers and Celtic soccer shirts—two teams that have strong historical and contemporary associations in Northern Ireland with the Protestant and Catholic communities, respectively. The storyline for this third cartoon also began with the characters playing different games that were, again, associated with the two main majority ethnic communities.

When the main characters and storyboards for the cartoons had been created, NIPPA was able to start developing curriculum materials and resources to be used in pre-school settings. The intention was to provide early years practitioners with a turn-key package of resources and suggested activities to help them develop positive attitudes to difference among children in their centres. The resources they started to develop included hand puppets representing the four main characters, jig-saws, feelings cubes, lotto games and posters. The curriculum being developed fitted into the Northern Ireland pre-school curriculum on personal, social and emotional development. Partnership with parents and home links were seen as crucial to the programme, so exercises related to this were built in from the start. This included sample letters to go home with children suggesting activities and giving prompts to encourage conversations with parents and children around feelings, disabilities, different sports, different cultural events and similar issues.

From the start, NIPPA and Pii felt that the practitioners who were to work with the children around cultural diversity might have difficulty teaching the materials concerning cultural differences that are often the source of sectarian controversy in their communities. However, owing to the pressure of time and the need to focus energy on the development of the media pack the only training available at this point was to familiarize practitioners with the cartoons as well as reference to previous experience many of them had in dealing with diversity issues of some kind.

### **Evaluation of the pilot MIFC-NI**

During the pilot programme, the cartoons were broadcast for six weeks during February and March 2004 by purchasing advertising space during children's

television on the main commercial television stations: UTV, Channel 4 and RTE. Alongside this, the curriculum materials were piloted for a three-week period in five playgroups. During this period, the playgroups typically devoted about half an hour per day to activities chosen from the pilot curriculum. The playgroups were chosen carefully to create an overall sample that was broadly representative of the diverse range of social backgrounds that exist in the region. More specifically, the characteristics of the five settings were:

- a Catholic setting in an urban interface area with a history of sectarian tensions and violence;
- a Protestant setting in a staunch working-class urban housing estate;
- a mixed setting in an urban, affluent middle-class area;
- a Catholic setting in a rural area with a history of sectarian tensions and violence;
- a Protestant setting in a rural area with little experience of sectarian tensions and violence.

For the evaluation of the pilot programme in these five settings, five further settings were also chosen to match these initial five as far as possible and to act as a control group. They subsequently received the curricular materials to use following the completion of the pilot evaluation. In total, 193 children aged three to four years took part in the pilot programme (105 in the intervention group and 88 in the control group). Fifty-five per cent were male and 45% female. In addition, 53% were Protestant, 37% Catholic and the remaining 10% were from mixed backgrounds or not classified.

The evaluation of the pilot programme comprised two elements. The first element involved the use of a quasi-experimental approach, designed and undertaken by one of the present authors (Paul Connolly), aimed at ascertaining the actual effects of the programme on young children's attitudes and awareness, while the second involved a half-day seminar conducted with the playgroup leaders who took part in the pilot, to ascertain their feedback. The findings from the two elements will be outlined in turn.

### *Findings from the quasi-experimental design*

A research instrument was designed specifically for the purpose of the evaluation and, because of the limits of space, will be described below alongside the discussion of the findings.<sup>3</sup> The attitudes and awareness of the children across all 10 settings were initially tested during the week before the pilot programme and then again during the week immediately following the pilot programme. Pre- and post-test data for a total of 95 children in the intervention group and 70 children in the control group were gained and these form the basis for the analysis to follow. The evaluation itself focused on the extent to which the pilot programme met three specific objectives, and the measures used and findings in relation to each of these three objectives will now be outlined in turn.



Table 1. Children's descriptions of the photograph of the playground scene

Coding of responses	Examples
Reference made to the belief that the fourth child was 'lonely' and/or had no friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'She's on her own'</li> <li>• 'He has no friends'</li> <li>• 'She's standing on her own. She's sad'</li> <li>• 'They're playing. That girl is not play, she's on her own'</li> </ul>
Reference made to the belief that the fourth child was purposely being excluded by the other three children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Nobody is letting her play'</li> <li>• 'Because she is sad. She is standing there. They won't let her in to look at the toy'</li> <li>• 'He wants somebody to play with him. They don't like him'</li> <li>• 'She's just looking and nobody's going to play with her'</li> </ul>

*Objective 1: to increase young children's ability to recognize instances of exclusion.* In relation to this first objective, the children were shown a photograph of a playground scene with three children huddled together looking at something that one of them was holding. A fourth child was standing a little distance away looking on. This fourth child was expressionless, looking neither happy nor sad. The children were simply asked to describe what they could see in the picture. The children's responses were recorded verbatim and then coded into one of three categories. Two of these categories related to differing levels of awareness of exclusion (see Table 1 for examples) and the third represented no awareness shown. The findings from this test are shown in Table 2. As can be seen, while no change was found in relation to the control group, a significant change was found for the intervention group with the proportion of children believing that the fourth child was being purposely excluded

Table 2. The effects of the pilot programme on young children's descriptions of the photograph of the playground scene

Coding of children's responses	Intervention group*		Control group**	
	Before	After	Before	After
No awareness shown	68 (72%)	36 (38%)	50 (71%)	52 (74%)
Reference to fourth child being lonely and/or has no friends	15 (16%)	11 (12%)	8 (11%)	8 (11%)
Reference to fourth child being purposely excluded	11 (12%)	47 (50%)	12 (17%)	10 (14%)
Total	94 (100%)	94 (100%)	70 (99%)	70 (99%)

\* $p < 0.0005$ ,  $\chi^2_2 = 32.806$ ; \*\*  $p = 0.895$ ,  $\chi^2_2 = 0.221$ .

Table 3. The effects of the pilot programme on young children's descriptions of how the fourth child in the photograph of the playground scene feels

Coding of children's responses	Intervention group*		Control group**	
	Before	After	Before	After
No reference made to the fourth child feeling 'sad', 'unhappy' or equivalent term	53 (56%)	31 (33%)	51 (73%)	47 (67%)
Reference made to the fourth child feeling 'sad', 'unhappy' or equivalent term	41 (44%)	63 (67%)	19 (27%)	23 (33%)
Total	94 (100%)	94 (100%)	70 (100%)	70 (100%)

\* $p = 0.001$ ,  $\chi^2_1 = 10.416$ ; \*\*  $p = 0.461$ ,  $\chi^2_1 = 0.544$ .

by the other three rising from 12% to 50% after participating in the pilot programme.

*Objective 2: to increase young children's ability to understand how being excluded makes someone feel.* For this second objective, after the children were asked to describe what they thought was happening in the playground photograph, the fourth child was pointed out without any comment being made about him/her and the children were simply asked to state how they felt s/he was feeling. Their responses were coded in terms simply of whether or not they described the fourth child as 'sad', 'unhappy' or a related term. The children's responses in the intervention and control groups are shown in Table 3 both during the pre-test and post-test. As can be seen, while no change took place within the control group, a significant change was found for the intervention group, with the proportion of children believing that the fourth child was sad rising from 44% to 67%.

*Objective 3: to increase young children's willingness to be inclusive of those who are different from themselves.* In relation to this third objective, the children's attitudes were measured by showing them a range of photographs of individual children and asking them if they would like to play with each child. They could reply 'yes', 'no' or 'don't know'. If they replied 'yes', they were then asked whether they would like to play with them 'sometimes' or 'all the time'. Ten photographs were used in all, comprising: a Chinese boy and girl; a boy and a girl who both wore a corrective eyepatch; a boy and a girl wearing a Celtic soccer shirt; a boy and a girl wearing a Rangers soccer shirt; and a white boy and girl with no other distinguishing features.

The findings were analysed in two ways. First, the average overall response of each child was calculated both before and after the programme. For each child, their mean score varied between 0 (i.e. not willing to play with any of the 10 children) to 4 (i.e. wanting to play with all 10 children 'all the time'). The pre-test and post-test mean

Table 4. The effects of the pilot programme on young children's general willingness to play with others

Changes in children's willingness	Intervention group*	Control group**
Increased willingness (positive ranks)	47 (50%)	21 (33%)
No change (tied ranks)	18 (19%)	18 (28%)
Decreased willingness (negative ranks)	29 (31%)	25 (39%)
Total	94 (100%)	64 (100%)

\* $p = 0.015$  (one-tailed), Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z = -2.155$ ; \*\*  $p = 0.974$ , Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z = -0.033$ .

scores for each child were then compared to see whether their willingness to play with others had either remained the same or increased or decreased. The findings are summarized in Table 4. As can be seen, while no change was found in the control group, a moderate effect was evident for the intervention group ( $r = 0.223$ ) in terms of an underlying tendency for children to increase their willingness to play with others.

Second, the children's specific responses to each of the photographs were analysed to ascertain whether the pilot programme had any effect in terms of increasing the children's willingness to play with those who are different from themselves. As such the children's responses to the photographs of the Chinese boy and girl as well as the boy and girl wearing the corrective eyepatches were studied. In addition, the Catholic children's responses to the boy and girl wearing the Rangers soccer shirts were analysed, as were the Protestant children's responses to the boy and girl wearing the Celtic soccer shirts. Overall, only two significant effects were found in relation to the children's responses to the Chinese girl and the girl wearing a corrective eyepatch. The findings in relation to both of these are shown in Tables 5 and 6, respectively. As can be seen, and on both occasions, while no changes were evident in relation to the control group, there was an increase in the willingness of children who participated in the pilot programme to play with these two girls.

In relation to the other photographs, there was no evidence of any change in the children's willingness to play with these other children. This was a particularly significant finding. While the programme therefore appeared to have achieved some measurable success in terms of encouraging young children to be more inclusive of others in relation to disability and 'race', it did not seem to have had any effect in relation to the third difference—Catholic and Protestant children's attitudes towards one another (as measured through their willingness to play with the children wearing Celtic and Rangers soccer shirts). This finding was certainly disappointing and encouraged a considerable degree of reflection about the pilot programme and, in particular, the approach being taken in relation to cultural differences leading eventually to a realization that it was not appropriate to approach the issue of cultural

Table 5. The effects of the pilot programme on young children's willingness to play with the Chinese girl pictured

Children's responses to whether they would like to play with the Chinese girl	Intervention group*		Control group**	
	Before	After	Before	After
No	26 (28%)	21 (22%)	15 (23%)	10 (16%)
Don't know	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)
Yes, sometimes	29 (31%)	25 (27%)	23 (36%)	30 (47%)
Yes, all the time	38 (40%)	48 (51%)	26 (41%)	22 (34%)
Total	94 (100%)	94 (100%)	64 (100%)	64 (100%)

\* $p = 0.029$  (one-tailed), Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z = -1.887$ ; \*\* $p = 0.617$  (two-tailed), Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z = -0.500$ .

differences in the same way as those relating to disability and 'race'. More specifically, a re-analysis of the baseline data from the pilot evaluation showed that while there was already a pre-existing tendency for children to be less willing to play with the children wearing corrective eyepatches and also the Chinese children, no such tendencies were found among Catholic and Protestant children's willingness to play with those wearing Celtic and Rangers shirts. It would appear, therefore, that the pilot programme had been attempting to address a problem (children's unwillingness to be inclusive) that was simply not evident among the children in relation to differences between Catholics and Protestants. It was therefore not surprising to find that the pilot programme had no effects given that there were no differences in attitudes between Catholic and Protestant children in the first place.

On reflection it was realized that this finding actually confirmed those of the earlier study by Connolly *et al.* (2002) in that only by the ages of five and six do children begin to explicitly recognize that they belong to one community or the other and that some tend to develop negative attitudes and prejudices on the basis of this. However, and as this study also revealed, this did not mean that young children were unaffected by the conflict. As the study also found, even by the age of three and four children were already beginning to acquire and internalize the cultural preferences of their own communities and this, in turn, provided the foundations upon which their ethnic identities were then formed in the years to follow (see Connolly, 2003). One important lesson from this, therefore, was that while it was appropriate to continue to address negative attitudes and prejudices that the children may have towards disability and 'race', it was more appropriate in relation to the Protestant/Catholic divide to focus more on widening children's experiences and awareness of a range of

Table 6. The effects of the pilot programme on young children's willingness to play with the girl wearing a corrective eyepatch pictured

Children's responses to whether they would like to play with the girl wearing a corrective eyepatch	Intervention group*		Control group**	
	Before	After	Before	After
No	32 (34%)	21 (23%)	15 (23%)	10 (15%)
Don't know	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	3 (5%)
Yes, sometimes	21 (23%)	26 (28%)	26 (40%)	31 (48%)
Yes, all the time	38 (41%)	44 (47%)	24 (37%)	21 (32%)
Total	93 (100%)	93 (100%)	65 (100%)	64 (100%)

\* $p = 0.006$  (one-tailed), Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z = -2.505$ ; \*\* $p = 0.635$ , Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test,  $Z = -0.475$ .

cultural events and symbols associated with a variety of communities. It was felt that this would be more appropriate given the findings from the previous research and those from the pilot programme. More specifically it was believed that it would help to encourage the children to recognize and develop positive experiences of and attitudes towards other events and symbols beyond those associated with their own communities and thus help to prevent what was already emerging as an extremely partial and partisan cultural awareness.

#### *Findings from the half-day seminar*

Following the pilot programme, the leaders and assistants from the 10 playgroups were invited to a half-day seminar which provided them with an opportunity to share their experiences and to feed back their observations on the programme and any concerns they may have had. The general feedback from the participants was overwhelmingly positive. They reported that the children were very attracted to the cartoons and were soon able to recognize and recall the storylines and to sing the common signature tune associated with the three cartoons. Moreover, the participants felt that the resources and range of recommended activities provided through the curricular materials were also appropriate for the children, complemented the messages underpinning the three cartoons and could be used with little preparation or additional effort.

Beyond these general comments, perhaps the key issue to emerge from the playgroups was the widespread sense of discomfort experienced by early years educators with regard to addressing the third difference associated with Protestant and Catholic

divisions. Many participants in the seminar acknowledged that they had perhaps downplayed this third dimension in their playgroup work. This was an important finding in that it highlighted the actual difficulty of dealing with issues related to conflict and division in a society where the consequences of these issues are still raw and painful. Furthermore, asking the early years educators to address this issue was inviting them to break through what had developed into a societal norm of silence and avoidance (Gallagher, 2004).

Two main lessons emerged from this. The first was a recognition of the need for more rigorous training in order to provide practitioners with the awareness as well as the reflective and practical skills that would give them the confidence to break through the cultural constraints that were clearly at work. One of these constraints was the belief among some early years educators that this type of diversity work (especially in relation to differences between Catholics and Protestants) was not actually appropriate or necessary for pre-school children. Through a number of activities devised for the training sessions, including one that asked participants to think of their own earliest memories as a child of meeting someone different from themselves, it proved possible to use the practitioners' personal experiences to recognize the significance of issues of diversity and difference for young children.

Another constraint was the fear that many practitioners had of parents and how they may react to the programme. Many of these practitioners lived and taught in communities with histories of strong preference for one of two religions. Yet overwhelmingly the response of practitioners and parents to the MIFC-NI pilot programme was found to be positive and supportive. Many expressed gratitude that some materials were at last available with which they could begin to communicate about the topics of controversy within their communities. However, there were a handful of occasions when parents did come into the early years settings to raise concerns and/or complaints about the programme. These underscored the need to provide early years practitioners with the training and ongoing support necessary to be able to have the skills and confidence to deal with these. Alongside the initial training in which incidents such as this are discussed and role-played, a resource pack has also been produced providing examples of some of the incidents that have occurred and that outlines how these might best be responded to.

The second main lesson to emerge from the experience of the pilot project was the effectiveness of the curriculum and the parental communications as well. By providing the opportunity for parents to actually view the curriculum materials and cartoons it was possible to allay many of the fears and anxieties they may otherwise have had of their children participating in a programme aimed at addressing what were perceived by many as very sensitive issues.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, five key lessons have been learnt from the piloting of the MIFC-NI: the need to forge grassroots partnerships between various organizations and agencies around a common vision; the need for a comprehensive programme of training and



support for pre-school settings engaged in delivering diversity programmes; the need for such programmes to engage meaningfully with parents and thus develop a community outreach approach to its work; the way in which the use of mass media has helped not only to attract the interest of young children but has also helped to avoid the development of misunderstandings and distorted perceptions among the wider population of the nature of the MIFC-NI that was a very real fear given the sensitivity of some of the issues being addressed; and finally the importance of research not only in terms of providing an evidence base upon which to make initial decisions about the focus and direction of the programme but also in evaluating its delivery and actual effectiveness.

Overall, these key lessons have helped to inform and influence the subsequent development of the MIFC-NI. Following the pilot phase, the initiative itself was formally launched in April 2005 and a further and much more substantial evaluation undertaken involving 56 playgroups and just over 1000 three- to four-year-old children. It is hoped that the findings from this evaluation will also be ready and made available towards the end of 2006. Since its launch, the MIFC-NI has also been increasing its reach across Northern Ireland. There are now over 200 pre-school settings in Northern Ireland that have been trained to provide the programme and an estimated 3500 children have actually participated in it. Moreover, market research undertaken by Lyle Bailey International, media advisors to the MIFC-NI, indicates that in relation to the broadcasting of the cartoons on television to date, around three-quarters of parents and pre-school children in Northern Ireland (77% in both cases) will have been exposed to at least one of the cartoons.

In addition, there are ambitious plans to develop the MIFC-NI further. One key objective is to make the curricular resources available to every pre-school setting across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland by the end of 2008. Moreover, the MIFC-NI has attracted increasing interest from the statutory sector in Northern Ireland with responsibility for nursery schools and nursery classes across schools generally. Representatives from the statutory sector have joined the Advisory Council and efforts are being made to align the curriculum as closely as possible with the revised Northern Ireland curriculum and to explore how the MIFC-NI may be delivered through nurseries in this sector and, possibly, be adapted and developed for use in Key Stage 1. Also, and at the time of writing, work is underway to produce a fourth media message and related curriculum materials on the theme of bullying. This message is being sponsored by the offices of the Northern Ireland Commissioner of Children and Young People (NICCY) and the Ombudsman for Children Office (OCO) in the Republic of Ireland and is aimed at being used on a cross-border basis.

Overall, therefore, the Media Initiative for Children—Northern Ireland is still in its early stages of development and much has still to be done and achieved. It is certainly hoped that the lessons that continue to be learnt from the MIFC-NI as it develops and grows will be of relevance and help to others interested in developing new and innovative ways of promoting cultural understanding among young children.

## Notes

1. Copyright: The Peace Initiatives Institute.
2. For further information on the Media Initiative for Children—Northern Ireland, including an opportunity to download and view the cartoons, please visit: [www.mifc-pii.org](http://www.mifc-pii.org)
3. A copy of the research instrument used for the evaluation of the pilot programme is available from the lead author on request.

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