

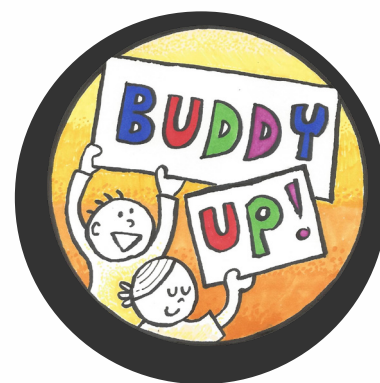
Ripples of Peace



Buddy Up!
From the Market to
the Village

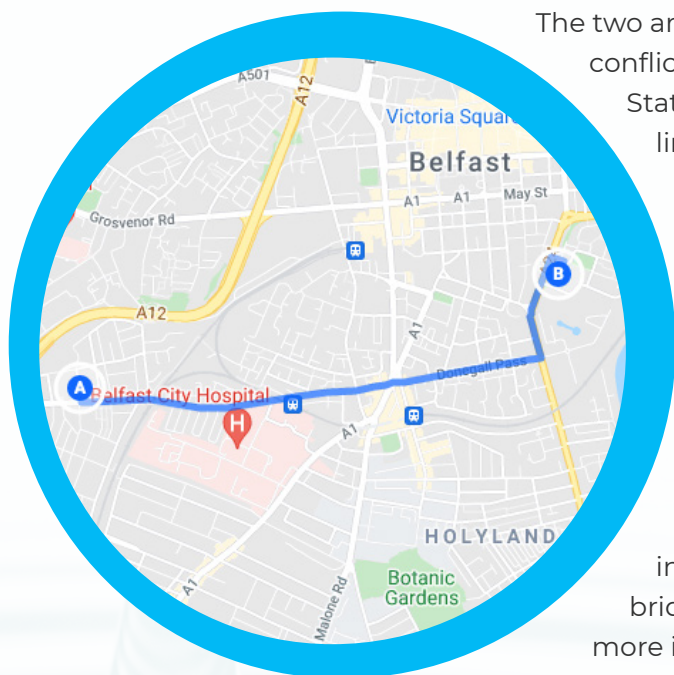


Buddy Up! was born out of the context of a contested society, where generations faced years of entrenched conflict. Children, even today, continue to be educated apart with 93% attending schools primarily within their own community. Over 50 physical peace walls remain as active barriers between neighbourhoods and for families in many areas, a cold peace dominates everyday life. Despite this, Buddy Up! has found that in children there is an enormous appetite for friendship, and their schools when equipped to do so, are eager for peacebuilding. This is the story of one special school partnership, who found that when their two schools began to Buddy Up! 'ripples of peace' were created not only for their children, but for Principals, teachers, and parents!



A New Partnership Begins

As the crow flies, St Malachy's and Donegall Road Primary Schools are separated only by 1.5 miles. Close geographically, the schools are viewed as serving two distinct traditions: at St Malachy's, the Catholic Nationalist Republican families of the Market, while at Donegall Road Primary school, families from The Village, typically Protestant Unionist Loyalist. Held in common to each area is a pride of place and sense of loyalty to the local community with each school at its heart.



The two areas also share the impact of a legacy of violent conflict, ongoing social disadvantage and poverty.

Statistically, the wards rank high in conflict-linked deaths and multiple deprivation. For example, Blackstaff (Village) ranks as the 9th most educationally disadvantaged ward and Central (Market) similarly ranks as the 11th.

In recent years, an increase in pupils from international and newcomer populations have meant that both areas have become home to an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith community. The need to support and grow good relationships, to build inclusive and welcoming schools and build bridges across former divides has become even more important.

It is within this context that in early 2019 St Malachy's and Donegall Road Primary Schools became involved with CRIS and the Urban Villages sponsored Buddy Up! programme.

Very quickly, these two schools found that they had much more in common than they had differences. As their Buddy Up! programme unfolded during the next year new opportunities formed throughout their educational partnership which has grown from strength to strength over time.

This is their story.

Impacting Children: 'These values matter in the real world not just in our class'

In Northern Ireland, most children attend school with peers of a similar community background. CRIS seeks to nurture an appreciation for cultural diversity and inclusion, increasingly important considering that in 2020, police recorded 929 racist and 884 sectarian incidents across the region (PSNI, 2021).

For Julie and Aimee, two teachers in Donegall Road PS, a vital part of Buddy Up! was that it gave students a real chance to build new friendships, providing early exposure to children from a different background, in a safe and fun experience.

Aimee felt it was especially important for her P7 class (ages 11 and 12) because these experiences and skills would equip her students when they moved on to Post-Primary school:

"The programme allowed the children the opportunity to expand their minds- you don't have to be defined by religion; religion doesn't define you. I think it was really important for the P7's to explore that before they go to big school."

For CRIS, the impact of Buddy Up! goes much further than a pupil programme. The themes and values shared and explored will be instrumental in the lives of those young people into the future. Our hope is by introducing at an early age, we can create young people who are understanding and inclusive of all cultures and traditions.

"The pupils had bonded; they had created relationships and it was outside of the norm because it was maybe children who have never had the opportunity to meet... we had done a lot of cultural awareness and diversity lessons in school, but it was all in our classrooms. I think it's so important for them to know that these values we talk about (such as respect) in school also matter outside when you go into a different community. These values matter in the real world not just in our class."

– Aimee, teacher Donegall Road PS



Impacting Teachers: 'That Day I Had My Eyes Opened'

The legacy of division in Northern Ireland has meant that teaching topics viewed as contested can be fraught with tensions. The confidence to address conflict-linked issues has been named as both vital and necessary to the success of Buddy Up! by the teachers involved.

The Buddy Up! Teacher training invites teachers to understand and explore the meaning and history behind the local symbols, flags and emblems associated with and important to communities in Northern Ireland. Because cultural representations can be contentious, few other professional training opportunities would include them. CRIS's training is delivered experientially, and like our pupil programmes, this helps to ensure that school staff understand what their children/young people will be learning. More importantly, it provides a model for facilitating open discussions in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Karen, a teacher from St Malachy's Primary School felt the training had given her increased understanding, confidence and crucially excitement to begin the programme with her P7 (Ages 11- 12) class:

“With the nature of some of the things you’re going to be talking about I don’t think the average teacher would feel confident with that [discussing with pupils]. I would have considered myself to be pretty knowledgeable on those things [other community symbols] but I have to say on that day I had my eyes opened, in a good way.”

– Karen, St. Malachy's Primary School



Buddy Up! aims to provide teaching staff with the confidence to discuss these issues with their pupils. More than that however, CRIS hope to inspire our school staff and leaders to become everyday peacebuilders and realise the power they have as individuals to promote reconciliation within communities.

For many, experiences such as these can offer personal insight and opportunities to reflect on how we perceive the world around us. While the training day may have had a practical purpose for teachers, this personal impact cannot be underestimated and will continue to ripple out to everyday life.

Impacting School Leaders: 'They Were a Mirror Image of Ourselves'

One recent educational policy which supports reconciliation is Shared Education, an initiative that promotes collaborative classroom experiences for pupils from different schools and community backgrounds. Where a partnership hasn't been formed, CRIS can help match schools who they believe may work well together in a peacebuilding partnership.

For many years, St Malachy's Principal Dermot Flynn had wished to become involved with Shared Education but was unable due to the lack of a partner school. When CRIS proposed a new partnership with Donegall Road PS through Buddy Up!, it came as a welcome opportunity.

It was the commonality between the schools that was the most striking feature, enabling staff teams, parents, and pupils to quickly form friendships.

Finding common ground from the outset enabled Principals of both schools to look beyond their own school gates to ask what their collective efforts might achieve for the children and young people:

"With any Principal it tends to be first—what am I getting out of this for my school? And slowly, but surely, as the Buddy Up! Programme went on, we as Principals weren't thinking that way—but instead began thinking—how can our schools work together for the best for us as group? There is a bond. Once you get that trust with another Principal that is when things really develop."

This bond created a partnership which began to open doors creating fast friends as plans for future work between the two schools was ignited. While the Covid-19 crisis has slowed down face-to-face meetings, the schools have continued to participate in Buddy Up! with friendships deepening in a challenging new context. As Dermot's story describes, Buddy Up! has not only impacted children, but importantly, their School Principals. Together, these two school leaders modelled for their whole school community the benefit, inspiration, and the power of their shared school partnerships for peace.

Now that is a legacy!



"When I was in [Donegall Road PS] it was so like our own school—it seemed that they were almost a mirror image of ourselves. I was there 10 minutes and I just felt so much at home. The more people I met the more children I saw, the whole ethos and approach—I loved it from the minute I set foot in it."

– Principal Dermot Flynn



CRIS (Community Relations in Schools)

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