



Research Update

Cross-community integration and mixing: does it make a difference?

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Introduction

For many years, policy intervention programmes in Northern Ireland have attempted to address prejudice and stereotyping through increasing contact between Protestants and Catholics. Schemes such as the programmes of the Community Relations Council, the introduction of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH) in the Northern Ireland curriculum and programmes for groups of young people from different backgrounds have often been seen as key to the diminishing of violence.

From 2003 to 2005, the **Young Life and Times** (YLT) Survey has monitored changing attitudes to community relations issues among 16-year olds across Northern Ireland. One aim of doing so is to contribute to policy-making on community relations and evaluation of policy. All young people who celebrated their 16th birthday in February of each survey year were asked to participate, and between 2003-2005, 2,545 16-year olds did so. YLT is a daughter survey of the **Northern Ireland Life and Times** (NILT) survey, which has recorded the attitudes, values and beliefs of the adult population (18 years or older) in Northern Ireland on a wide range of social policy issues since 1998. In each year, 1,800 respondents take part in NILT. Some of the questions asked on community relations in NILT were asked in YLT. In addition, the YLT surveys also included some open-ended questions, and around one third of respondents in each survey year took the opportunity to make comments. The strength of feeling within some of the comments suggests that many 16-year olds are ashamed of what has gone

on in the past in Northern Ireland and what is still going on. Many young people bemoaned the lack of opportunity to mix and integrate, and blamed adults and the lack of political leadership for this. But does more integration and mixing really make a difference to attitudes towards community relations?

For this Research Update, data from three YLT surveys (2003-2005) have been pooled to create one dataset, and data from the 2002-2004 NILT surveys have been combined to create another pooled dataset.

Cross-community projects

The earliest year in which any of the YLT respondents started school was 1987. EMU and CH were introduced into the Northern Ireland school curriculum with the Education Reform Order (Northern Ireland) in 1989. Thus, most YLT respondents could have been expected to have had the opportunity to take part in school-based cross-community projects. Over three quarters (77%) of respondents said they had had contact in school with pupils from other religious backgrounds, the majority of them (59%) indeed through inter-school projects. Respondents who attended secondary schools were least likely to have had cross-community contact (72%). There was no difference between respondents who attended schools with either an almost exclusively Catholic or almost exclusively Protestant intake (73%). Overall, one half of respondents (53%) considered that they had taken part in a cross-community

scheme. Among those who had taken part in these cross-community projects, 75% described their contact as either positive or very positive. Only 4% of participants said that this contact was negative or very negative.

The merged YLT surveys showed that 20% of those who lived in mixed neighbourhoods reported they had no friends at all from the other main religious community compared to 32% of respondents who lived in predominantly Protestant areas, and 42% of respondents who lived in Catholic areas. More strikingly, fewer than one in ten (9%) respondents attending religiously mixed schools had no friends at all from the other religious community, compared to 31% of respondents attending schools with an exclusively or majority Protestant intake and 40% of respondents attending schools with an exclusively or majority Catholic intake.

Impact of cross-community initiatives

But how is participation in cross-community projects related to young people's feelings towards members of the other main religious community? The vast majority of comments received from YLT respondents would suggest that participation in cross-community projects had a positive effect, as the following two examples from the 2005 survey show:

'I think cross-community projects should be introduced for adults as well as young people because they could help to resolve some of the problems with the troubles.'

'I think that relationships between contrasting communities in Northern Ireland are improving, especially between young people. I also think that this is to do with special programmes that schools

Table 1: Feelings towards other main religious community by attendance of cross-community projects and mixed schools

	%		
	Feelings towards other religious community		
	Favourable	Neither favourable nor unfavourable	Unfavourable
Catholics			
Taken part in cross-community event	42	49	9
Not taken part in cross-community event	33	54	13
Did attend planned integrated school	46	48	6
Did not attend planned integrated school	39	52	10
Protestants			
Taken part in cross-community event	41	49	10
Not taken part in cross-community event	26	58	15
Did attend planned integrated school	43	51	6
Did not attend planned integrated school	36	52	12

Source: YLT, 2003-2005

are following, and getting involved in more inter-community project.'

However, some respondents were also critical about these projects and did not think that they would make any difference to community relations:

'No amount of money-grabbing cross-community projects will unite two sides blissfully ignorant of any progress. Even if the two sides were somehow magically reunited, people would find something else to stir up trouble about.' (2003)

Others believed that they were artificially arranged or politicised:

'Sometimes in the organised events to integrate Protestants and Catholics, it can feel like we're being pushed together by the government etc. and it's awkward - not always because of sectarian prejudices, but just because you know that you're automatically expected to get on with people you don't know!' (2005)

'Too many things are set out as cross-community. Every day we can sit on mixed buses. Will that become cross-community for the sheer sake of labelling it in that way?' (2005)

Table 1 shows that, statistically, participation in cross-community events and attendance of planned integrated schools (5% of all YLT respondents attended such schools) was indeed positively related to the

feelings that respondents had towards the other main religious community. This is true for both Protestants and Catholics. Respondents who attended planned integrated schools were significantly less likely to report negative feelings towards the other religious group.

Other influencing factors

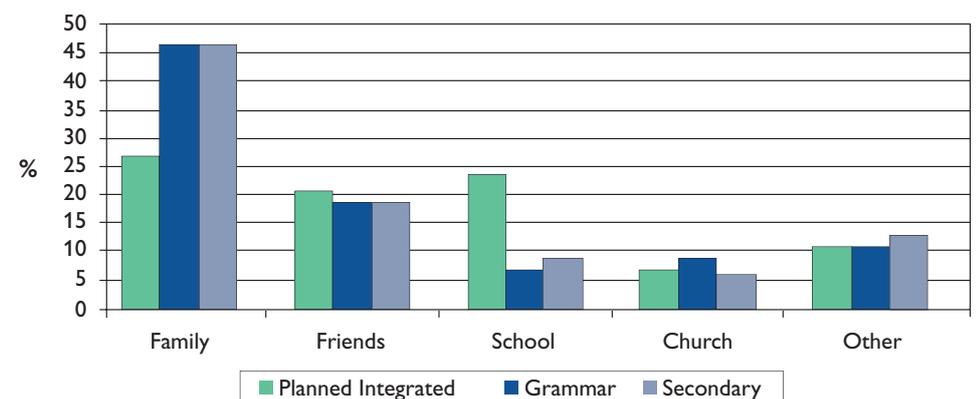
Even though participation in organised cross-community events appears to be one way of improving community relations, as Figure 1 shows, the main influencing factors on how respondents felt about the other religious community

were family (45% of respondents saying this) and friends (19%). Interestingly, whilst overall fewer than one in ten (9%) YLT respondents said that school was the main factor influencing their views on community relations, this proportion was significantly higher (24%) among respondents who attended planned integrated schools. The other interesting aspect of the data is that fewer (just over one quarter, 27%) respondents attending planned integrated schools felt that their parents were the main influencing factor compared to 47% of all other respondents. Whether respondents had attended a cross-community project or not did not impact on what they saw as the main influencing factor. In many comments, parents, the older generations in general, and politicians were seen as the main cause for continued socio-religious segregation and prejudices:

'I don't think relations between Catholics and Protestants will ever really improve because religious prejudices are passed down from parents to their children. Religious hatred is not a natural thing; it is not in-born, it is created by people.' (2005)

'I believe that tension between communities is caused by bigoted politicians, I often feel that if the younger generation were placed in their position, fighting and mocking would decrease. I feel that our local MP's within infamous sectarian areas are doing nothing to help bring peace.' (2005)

Figure 1: Most important influence on views of the other main religions community, by type of school attended



Source: YLT, 2003-2005

Perception of community relations

YLT data provide evidence that the participation in cross-community projects in general - and attendance at planned integrated schools in particular - was linked to more positive perceptions of the other main religious community. But does the fact that, due to the 1989 Education Reform Order, more 16-year olds had the opportunity to take advantage of cross-community projects than adults translate into a more optimistic view on community relations compared to the adult population in Northern Ireland? Three questions were asked in both YLT and NILT to determine respondents' views on the state of community relations, i.e. whether respondents thought that:

1. Community relations were better now than 5 years ago;
2. Community relations would be better in 5 years time than they were now;
3. Religion would always make a difference to how people in Northern Ireland feel about each other.

Even though a substantial minority of YLT respondents commented very critically on community relations, the majority of statements suggested that 16-year olds were quite upbeat about the future in Northern Ireland:

'As I am 16, I think our generation has bypassed the worst of the Troubles and so I don't think community relations are as bad as they seemed to be then.' (2004)

'I think they have improved. I mean they aren't perfect but at least bombs aren't going off in Belfast every day. I just hope we continue to try and make things better and peaceful for everyone.' (2004)

There was little difference between YLT and NILT respondents in terms of their feelings about community relations now compared to five years ago. Over 80% of both YLT and NILT respondents also agreed that religion will also determine in future how people in Northern Ireland feel about each other. However, YLT respondents were significantly less optimistic than their adult counterparts about community relations in five years

time. In fact, just over one third of all YLT respondents (37%) felt community relations would be better in five years time compared to just under half (47%) of all NILT respondents.

On first sight, a possible explanation for this data could be that 16-year olds, compared to the adult population, might think that community relations had already improved so much that further improvement would be unlikely. However, the fact that 14% of all YLT respondents compared to just 8% of all NILT respondents did think that community relations in five years time would actually be worse suggests that 16-year olds were not only *less* optimistic, but indeed were more *pessimistic* in their views. Protestant YLT respondents were the most pessimistic, with 17% saying community relations would be worse. An alternative explanation for the pessimism among 16-year olds might paradoxically lie in the virtual disappearance of fatal sectarian violence from day-to-day life in Northern Ireland. Most YLT respondents do not have the personal experience of living through the worst of the Troubles and so may not realise what progress has been made.

Both NILT and YLT respondents were also asked whether they would prefer to live in mixed-religion neighbourhoods, work in mixed-religion workplaces and send their children to mixed-religion schools. Again, overwhelmingly, YLT respondents commented positively about mixing in work, home and school:

'If people were to work and learn in the same place, I think they would learn to get along better and leave their differences behind.' (2005)

'More mixed estates and schools for both religions to live in and attend would help community relations. I attended a mixed primary school and have lived in a mixed area for 8 years and would not have it any other way.' (2005)

However, again, YLT respondents were less likely than NILT respondents to support religious mixing. Fifty-four percent of YLT respondents compared to 75% of NILT respondents said they would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood. Preferences for a mixed workplace were 70% and 86% and for mixed schools 45% and 60% respectively.

Table 2 shows that respondents who had experienced cross-community schemes or who went to planned integrated schools were significantly more likely to be in favour of mixing. The difference was most noticeable in relation to mixing in schools, where 85% of those attending planned integrated schools were in favour of mixed religion schools compared to just under half (49%) of grammar school students and 38% of students who attended secondary schools.

Conclusions

The data presented provide evidence that participation in cross-community schemes and attendance at planned integrated schools are positively related to how favourably young people from different religious backgrounds in Northern Ireland feel towards each other. The findings of the YLT survey also suggest that planned integrated schools in particular have a significant impact on how their students view the other main religious community.

Table 2: YLT respondents' preferences for religious mixing by participation in cross-community schemes and type of school attended

	%				
	Attended cross-community project	Did not attend cross-community project	Planned integrated school	Grammar	Secondary
Neighbourhood	56	41	76	55	50
Workplace	73	61	87	69	69
School	44	38	85	49	38

Source: YLT, 2003-2005

Those YLT respondents who either attended planned integrated schools or participated in cross-community projects were significantly more likely than their counterparts who did not have these opportunities to favour mixed neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools. Overall, however, 16-year olds who due to their age have had less exposure to the most violent sectarianism during the Northern Ireland conflict, but more opportunities to take part in organised cross-community schemes than the adult population, are less optimistic about the future of community relations in Northern Ireland. The majority of comments from YLT respondents on

community relations, however, show that there is a desire for more optimism, for more mixing and for a peaceful future. Perhaps the following quote is evidence for young people's wisdom and realism about what contributes to their position on community relations:

'I think that today both religions are mixing more than ever. I think youth groups, schools and religious groups are to thank for this. Some families will always carry anger as a result of incidents which occurred during the troubles and this bitterness will be passed on from one generation to the next. However, today I think

tension between each group has been reduced and people are mixing a lot better.' (2005)

Only the future will tell whether or not young people growing up in more peaceful times can overcome the bitterness of the past. What seems certain is that increased contact through participation in cross community schemes and attendance at integrated schools has impacted positively on attitudes towards the 'other' main community in Northern Ireland. This evidence suggests that such policy interventions have had significant success and should continue to be resourced.

Key Points

- 77% of YLT respondents had had contact in school with pupils from other religious backgrounds. 53% had taken part in cross-community projects, three quarters of which were described as either positive or very positive. 5% of YLT respondents attended planned integrated schools.
- Those who took part in cross-community activities or attended planned integrated schools were more likely to feel favourably towards people from the other main religious community.
- 47% of all YLT respondents regarded their family as the main influence on how they view people from the other religious community. Respondents attending planned integrated schools were much more likely to see their school as the main influencing factor on their views.
- Respondents who attended planned integrated schools or participated in cross-community projects were more likely to be supportive of religious mixing in their neighbourhood, the workplace and in schools.
- Overall, the 16 year olds who took part in the YLT surveys were less optimistic about community relations and less in favour of religious mixing than adults responding to the NILT surveys.

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