



Research Update

Cross-community schemes: Participation, motivation, mandate

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With

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Introduction

Since 2003, questions on community relations and cross-community contact were included in the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey conducted each year by ARK among a representative sample of 16 year olds living in Northern Ireland. We found that young people from both the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland who participated in cross-community projects or attended planned integrated schools had more favourable views towards people from the other main religious community and were also much more likely to have friends from socio-religious backgrounds that differed from their own (Schubotz and Robinson, 2006).

We also know from previous research that participation in long-term cross-community projects can improve attitudes of young people who have grown up in socially disadvantaged and religiously segregated areas (Schubotz, 2005). However, previous YLT surveys left a number of questions unanswered, for example:

- What is the duration and frequency of meetings in cross-community projects?
- What activities do such projects involve and to what extent are these activities young-people initiated, or

at least to what extent do young people have some say about the content?

- Do young people feel that they as individuals crucially contribute to the success of the project?
- What motivates young people to take part in cross-community projects?
- What motivates youth leaders to organise such programmes? What support do they have in their communities?

In order to answer these questions, we designed a mixed-methods project which was undertaken in 2007/08. This project involved:

- A set of questions asked in the 2007 YLT survey, primarily to assess 16 year olds' attitudes to cross-community projects and their levels of participation in projects that take place outside school;
- Focus groups conducted with current participants of four cross-community projects, primarily to explore young people's motivation to take part in these projects;



From left: Claire, Aaron, Laura, Maria, Bróna, Felicity

- One-to-one interviews conducted with leaders and organisers of these cross-community projects, primarily to find out about their mandate to run these projects.

Eight peer researchers were trained to assist the adult researchers in identifying cross-community projects and in conducting focus groups with participants and one-to-one interviews with organisers. The peer researchers were recruited among respondents to the 2007 YLT survey, thus they were all 16 years of age at the start of the project. One condition of their employment as peer researchers was that they themselves had been involved in cross-community projects outside of school.

In this Research Update we report the key findings from the 2007 YLT survey and the focus groups with young people. The YLT survey was conducted in August and September 2007. Everyone living in Northern Ireland who celebrated their 16th birthday in February of the survey year and was registered to receive Child Benefit was invited to take part in the survey. Of the 1,925 eligible 16 year olds, 627 responded to the survey, a response rate of 33 percent.

The peer researchers were trained in January 2008. They themselves identified four projects in which focus groups and interviews would be conducted. Two of these were Belfast-based projects, one project was based in Derry/Londonderry, and one project in Armagh. Fieldwork took place from January to April 2008. A data analysis day was held with peer researchers in April 2008, at which key findings and core themes that emerged during the research were identified.

Participation in cross-community projects

Four in ten respondents to the 2007 YLT survey (40%) had participated in cross-community projects outside school. Catholics (45%) were just a little more likely than Protestants (41%) to say that they had attended such projects. Three in ten respondents who had ever attended such projects were also currently involved in cross-community schemes. This means that approximately 12 percent of all 2007 YLT respondents were involved in cross-community projects outside of school at the time the survey was conducted. The proportion of Catholics involved in such projects was somewhat higher than the proportion of Protestants (34% and 26% respectively).

Respondents who came from not well-off family backgrounds were a little more likely to have ever participated in cross-community projects, as Table 1 shows.

The vast majority of respondents described the contact they had with people from different religious or ethnic backgrounds during the latest cross-community project they took

part in as positive. In total, 88 percent of respondents described their contact as positive or very positive. Only four respondents in the whole sample described their contact as negative or very negative.

Nearly two thirds (65%) of respondents who had participated in a cross-community project outside school said they had been actively involved in the organisation and the running of this project at least to some extent. We tested whether some young people were more likely to be actively engaged in cross-community projects than others. However, statistically we found no difference between males and females, between Catholics and Protestants and between young people attending different school types. Respondents who said they came from not well-off families were somewhat less likely to say they were not at all involved in these programmes than respondents from average well-off and well-off families, but again, statistically this difference was not significant.

Those actively involved in the running of programmes were a little more likely to report positive experiences from this project. However, nearly nine in ten respondents (89%) who said they were not very much or not at all actively engaged in these programmes also reported positive contact experiences.

Attitudes towards community relations programmes

From 2003-2006 YLT collected over 1,000 diverse comments and statements on the state of community relations in Northern Ireland. Participants in the

2007 survey were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with five of these statements from previous YLT respondents. These statements were:

- *'If more cross-community projects were formed relations between different religions would be better.'*
- *'Sometimes cross-community events can feel awkward - not because of sectarian prejudices, but because you are automatically expected to get on with people you don't know.'*
- *'The sectarian hatred is now being directed towards minority ethnic communities, especially foreign workers coming into Northern Ireland.'*
- *'Most people would like to have more friends of a different religion, but never have the opportunity.'*
- *'No amount of money-grabbing cross community projects will unite the two sides. Even if they were somehow magically reunited, people would find something else to stir up trouble.'*

Over eight in ten respondents (82%) agreed or strongly agreed that relations between different religions would be better if there were more community relations projects. Support for this view was strongest among respondents who attended cross-community projects outside school (61% agreeing strongly) and among pupils who attended planned integrated schools (52% agreeing). On the other hand, only 29 percent of respondents who had never attended a cross-community project agreed strongly.

Though this result would suggest strong support for cross-community projects in general, 71 percent of YLT respondents shared the view that the set-up of cross-community projects can create awkward feelings because of the assumptions that are being made about how well people will get on.

Respondents were then asked to agree or disagree whether sectarian hatred from their point of view was now more directed towards minority ethnic

Table 1: Participation in cross-community events outside school by family financial background

	%			
	Not well off	Average well off	Well off	All
Ever participated in cross-community projects	43	38	40	39
Currently involved in such programmes	36	29	25	29

communities and migrant workers living in Northern Ireland. Over two thirds of respondents (69%) to the 2007 YLT survey shared this concern. This was also evident in a number of open responses received in the survey.

'There will always be problems about community relations in NI. It used to be Catholics and Protestants fighting each other. Now the foreign workers are the subject of abuse.'

'I think that even if the community relations between Catholics and Protestants does improve, all the hatred between these two groups will move to other groups such as the Polish.'

The fourth statement related the participation in cross-community projects to the issue of residential and educational segregation in Northern Ireland. A number of respondents to YLT surveys in the past had commented that they lived in single-religion neighbourhoods and attended single-religion schools and therefore simply had not the chance to make friends from other religious backgrounds. Indeed, nearly half of all 2007 YLT respondents (49%) agreed that people lack the opportunity to have more friends of a different religion. Pupils attending planned integrated schools were more likely than any other category of young people to disagree with this statement (34% disagreeing), but interestingly those who had never attended a cross-community project outside their school context were almost twice as likely to disagree as respondents who were participating in such a project at the time they completed the YLT survey (23% and 12% respectively). One respondent to the YLT survey commented in relation to this question:

'There really should be more cross community youth clubs and schools and neighbourhoods in Derry. There is only one cross community club called R.E.A.C.H. Across and there is only 2 cross community schools.'

Respondents who regarded themselves as members of the Catholic community

in Northern Ireland were significantly more likely to agree with the view that people lacked the opportunity to meet friends from different religious backgrounds than respondents who said they belonged to the Protestant community and those who saw themselves as neither. This finding was backed up by two other statistics related to socio-religious residential and educational segregation. Firstly, respondents living in mainly Catholic areas were most likely to agree with the view that people lacked the opportunity to have friends from other religious backgrounds (63%). Respondents living in mainly Protestant areas and mixed areas were much less likely to take this view (42% and 43% respectively). Secondly, respondents attending schools with an exclusive or mostly Catholic intake were also more likely to agree with the lack-of-opportunity statement than respondents attending schools with a predominantly or mostly Protestant intake or respondents attending mixed schools (Figure 1).

Interestingly, respondents living in small villages were just as likely as respondents living in a big city to agree or disagree with the above statement, thus the view sometimes expressed that rurality would decrease the opportunity for socio-religious mixing was certainly not supported by the 2007 YLT survey.

Finally, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a statement that suggested that regardless of the level of funding available to community relations projects, they were not going to make a contribution to improved community relations. Almost half (46%) of respondents agreed with this statement. Respondents who had never attended cross-community projects were somewhat more likely to agree than respondents that were currently involved in such programmes (48% and 38% agreeing), but statistically this difference was insignificant. The comments received by the YLT survey partially reflected the statistics:

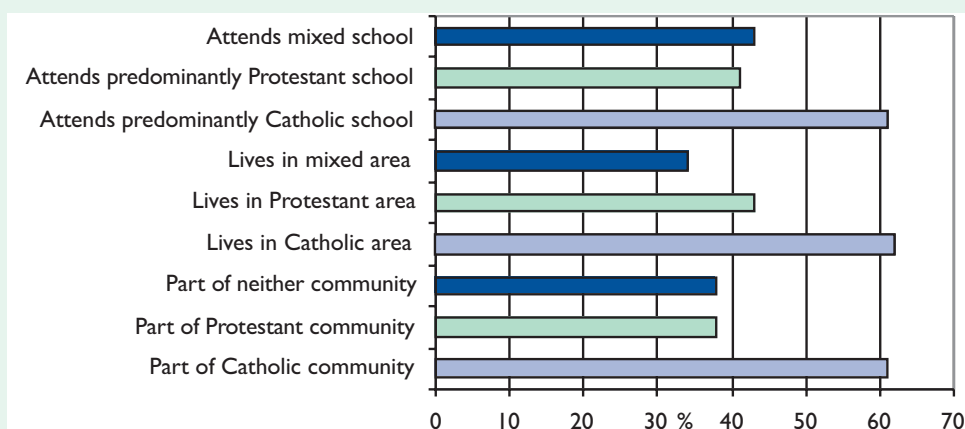
'There is a lot of projects to do with community relations but there doesn't seem to be a positive outcome from the hard work going into the projects. There doesn't seem to be a focus on what should happen after projects are finished and how they should put what they have learnt into action and change NI for the better.'

'The two sides will always have a problem with each other, no amount of activities can change that.'

Cross-community projects and friendship patterns

Previous YLT surveys found that integration and socio-religious mixing

Figure 1: Respondents agreeing that most people don't have the opportunity to meet friends from different religious backgrounds. By religious mix of school, religious mix of area and socio-religious belonging.



resulted in more cross-community friendships for 16 year olds (Schubotz and Robinson 2006). As Table 2 shows, the 2007 survey strongly confirmed this finding with regard to cross-community projects that took place outside of the school context. The proportion of respondents who said they had more than ten friends from other religious backgrounds was significantly higher among those who attended cross-community projects (51%) at the time the survey was undertaken. Only seven percent of respondents who said they currently attended cross-community schemes had no friend from other religious backgrounds compared to 32 percent of respondents who had never attended a cross-community project. This is a statistically significant difference. Catholics were more likely to have no Protestant friend at all than vice versa, however Catholics who had attended cross-community projects were more likely than Protestants to have ten or more friends from different religious backgrounds.

16 year olds who were involved in cross-community projects when the survey was undertaken also had more contact to other people or to friends from other religious backgrounds than 16 year olds who had not been involved in cross-community projects as Figure 2 shows.

The difference was largest in relation to the question how often they socialised or played sports with people from other religious backgrounds, but less marked in relation to cross-community friendships.

Figure 3 shows that participation in cross-community projects was also related to the proportion of friends respondents had from other ethnic or racial backgrounds, with respondents who never attended such projects being most likely to say that all their friends were from the same background as they were themselves. Interestingly there was also a statistical relationship between attending cross-community schemes and the proportion of disabled friends that respondents had. Perhaps this

Table 2: Number of friends from the other main religious community by attendance of cross-community projects outside school (YLT 2007)

	(%)	
	None	More than 10
Catholics		
Not taken part in cross-community event	37	13
Had taken part in cross-community event	16	39
Currently attends cross-community project	11	54
Protestants		
Not taken part in cross-community event	30	21
Had taken part in cross-community event	8	36
Currently attends cross-community project	4 (n=1)	48
No religion		
Not taken part in cross-community event	21	21
Had taken part in cross-community event	12	38
Currently attends cross-community project	0	44
All		
Not taken part in cross-community event	32	18
Had taken part in cross-community event	12	38
Currently attends cross-community project	7	51

Figure 2: Respondents, by participation in cross-community projects, saying they do the following things 'very often' with people from different religious

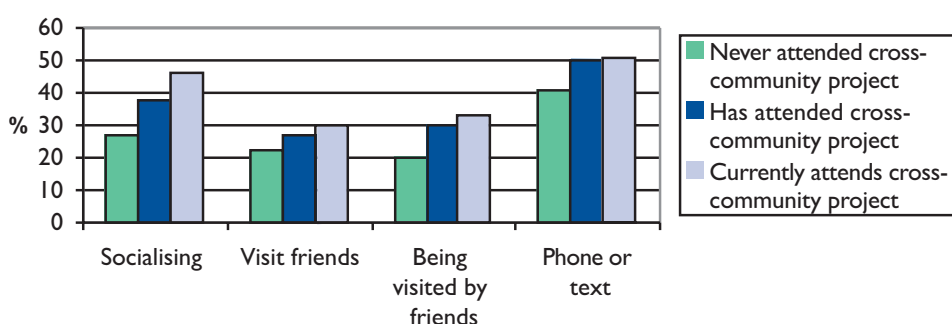
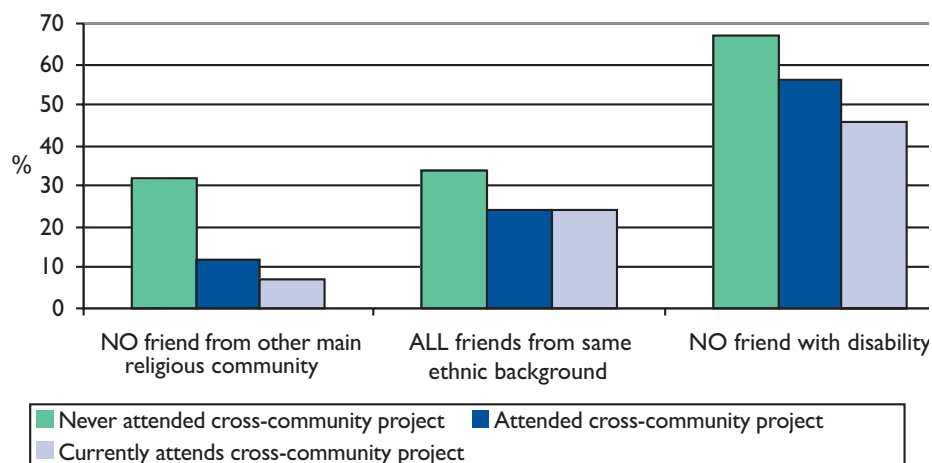


Figure 3: Respondents' friendship patterns by attendance of cross-community projects



finding suggests that cross-community projects are indeed good platforms for young people to consider their attitudes and perceptions towards people that are different to them in general and not just with regard to their socio-religious background.

Support for integration

How does participation in cross-community projects relate to respondents' support for integration? Figure 4 shows that respondents that were involved in cross-community projects at the time when the 2007 YLT survey was conducted were most supportive towards mixed religion environments. However, it is noticeable that the support for mixed religion schools was significantly lower than for mixed religion workplaces and neighbourhoods. The attendance of cross-community schemes was also statistically unrelated to respondents' school type preference.

single-religion schools (52%) and respondents having no religion being most likely to favour mixed religion schools (67%).

Some of comments received in the YLT survey supported these statistics and showed that Catholic young people are indeed more likely to be affected by the segregation due to the expectation that Catholics attend Catholic schools.

'Community relations will never get better in NI if the two main religions live in different societies and are always apart. As a Catholic I know hardly anything about other religions and I would like this to change.'

Motivation for participating in cross-community events

In the follow-up project to the 2007 YLT survey we were interested in finding

- The Ulster Project (Belfast)
- Voice Project (Armagh City and Keady)

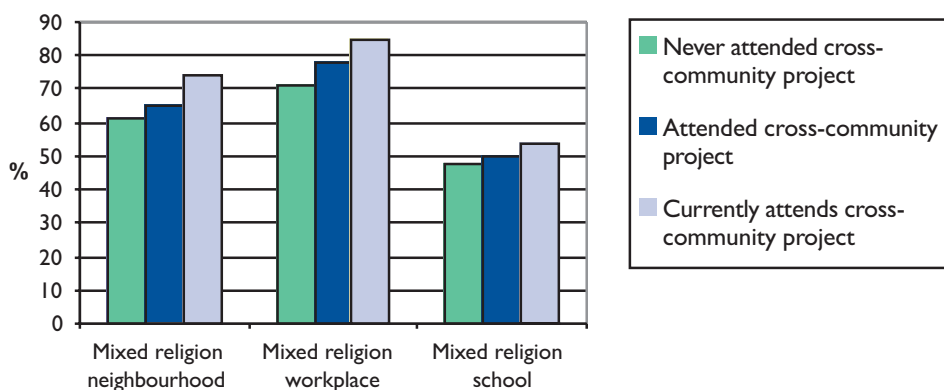
Culture Crosslinks is run by the Youth Initiatives Trust, which aims to mobilise young people to make a vital contribution to their community and to reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The Crosslinks project focuses on performing arts and aims to connect the many cultures in Belfast through working together on a performance. They meet on a weekly basis for two-three hours.

R.E.A.C.H. Across is a cross community project for 14-17 year olds based in the City of Derry. The sole purpose of this project is integration. R.E.A.C.H. Across offers different means of bringing communities together, e.g. through fun activities but also supporting young people in aspects that are relevant to their education and career, such as writing of application forms and CVs. On two nights a week R.E.A.C.H. Across is open for three hours in the evening for young people to come along and meet.

The Ulster Project was the longest established cross-community project we investigated. It was set up during the mid-1970s when the Northern Ireland conflict was intense in order to promote reconciliation between Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants. Each year, the Ulster Project offers a mixed religion and gender group of 15-16 year olds the opportunity to travel to America and experience diverse cultures. During their stay, these young people take part in fun activities, but also in community service projects and worship. Community relations issues are directly addressed during an activity called 'Discovery', a weekly session solely to discuss matters that participants felt important in relation to sectarianism in Northern Ireland and racism in the USA.

The **Voice Project** was initiated by the Armagh Youth Council, Creative Youth Partnership and the Southern Education and Library Board and

Figure 4: Support for integration by attendance of cross-community projects



The main factors associated with a preference for mixed religious schooling were:

- whether a respondent himself or herself had attended a planned integrated or a religiously mixed school (90% and 81% of these respondents respectively favoured mixed religion schooling for their own children), and
- whether a respondent was Catholic, Protestant or had no religion - Catholics being most likely to favour

out what exactly motivates young people to attend cross-community projects that were not a part of their school curriculum. In order to do this we conducted focus groups in four cross-community projects that were identified by the peer researchers working on this project. These four projects were:

- Culture Crosslinks (Belfast)
- R.E.A.C.H. Across (Londonderry/Derry)

encompasses a number of local initiatives located in County Armagh. We held focus groups in Armagh and Keady. Voice differed from the other three projects in that it was partially embedded in the statutory youth work sector. The local initiatives linked to the Voice Project are youth-led projects that would not exist without young people's grassroots demand. The main aim of Voice is to bring young people from County Armagh, regardless of their backgrounds, together to engage in different creative workshops. Similar to Crosslinks, young people in the Voice project are engaged in many arts and performance based activities, however, during the focus group discussions we also collected evidence for other activities that are organised locally by young people, such as charitable events, or visits to other countries.

Most young people had been encouraged to join their projects through contact with the project staff, all of whom had a background in youth work. However, some young people also mentioned that they were encouraged to become involved through family members, friends or past participants who had previously been involved in their projects and had enjoyed this experience. The **Ulster Project** was an exception in that young people were selected to join either through an essay competition or were nominated by their church. The following quotes give evidence for the different motives which encouraged young people to join the cross-community projects:

'I was interested in getting involved as it was something you could actually do, most adults think that teenagers have nothing to do, they go round the streets and stuff but that's not what we want to do, that's what we have to do to get out of the house and having the Youth Council and the Voice Project gets us to do something for ourselves.'

For another young person, meeting others was the main motivation:

'I thought it was a great way to meet new people, I'm shy as well, I would never have talked to anyone! I think that it's been

really positive for myself generally.' (Voice Project)

The opportunity to meet other young people from different community backgrounds appealed especially to those who attended single-identity schools and lived in segregated neighbourhoods where opportunities to meet other young people from different backgrounds were limited. Perhaps this is one explanation why



From left: Ashleigh, Laura, Sinéad, Felicity

young Catholics appear to be more attracted to cross-community projects than young Protestants.

Overall, the length of membership in cross-community projects varied greatly, some focus group participants were attending meetings for the first time and others had been involved in their projects for three years or longer. The **Ulster Project** was again different in that actual start and end dates of the project were clearly defined.

Talking about their background and community relations formed part of the experience of participants but it was not considered an area which created difficulties. In fact, most young people in the focus groups described this element of their projects as

added value. For others however, the cross-community projects created a safe environment where these issues could be discussed. One young person stated:

'I've only ever talked about it at Crosslinks.'

Even though a majority of participants felt that community relations work was not the core activity or main

attraction of the projects, but rather a bonus, there was clear evidence that the participation in the projects impacted on young people's attitudes and views towards other socio-religious groups. One young person explained how **R.E.A.C.H. Across** had changed their perception of young Protestants:

'I always thought, no offence like, that Protestants were evil people cos I heard all these stories and I believed them. When I came here, I thought what's the difference? When I walked in, everyone was friends with me, there's no difference between Catholics and Protestants, there's so much conflict and I don't know why.'

For another young person the participation in **Culture Crosslinks** built their confidence in addressing community-relations issues:

'You see now I open my heart to other things, I can talk more about things now.'

Interestingly, some participants from the **Ulster Project** felt that perhaps the right people were not targeted to take part in the Project as the group believed they did not hold very deep set prejudices in the first instance. This was a recurrent view in discussions with people from this Project. Some participants admitted they had grown up in a religiously segregated neighbourhood and went to a single-religion school, and thus had never met a young person from a different background than themselves before they took part in the **Ulster Project**. Others who had grown up in a mixed middle class area expressed the view that the Project should be aimed at individuals who experience sectarianism or live in segregated areas.

Benefits and drawbacks of participation

Focus group participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of taking part in their cross-community projects. The benefits ranged from meeting new people and making new friends to enjoying the actual experiences to confidence building and contributions to personal development, as the following quote shows:

*'I wouldn't have gone for head girl and stuff because I know for a fact that I would never have had the confidence to talk in front of people and the Youth Council and the **Voice Project** it has built up my confidence. I would never have went to meetings, I was like real shy.'*

*'I wouldn't have done the big grand performance if I wasn't in **Crosslinks**, I never used to like doing that kind of thing. I've got a lot more confidence from it. My confidence here has gone sky high.'*

In particular the participants in the **Ulster Project** and the **Voice Project** reported opportunities to develop greater understanding of other cultures, which again confirmed 2007 YLT survey findings on friendship

patterns. One participant in the **Voice Project**, for example, spoke of a growing friendship with a girl from the Travelling community:

'To tell you the truth I wouldn't have paid any attention to them out in the street, not that I was horrible and stuff but I would have thought they're from there, I mustn't talk to them but like once you get to know them they're my friends now. [...] You get to find out how diverse cultures are. My culture's completely different to theirs. I know that if I wouldn't have talked to them, knocked their door or anything, [...] I wouldn't have felt as confident and like as knowingly to them but now I am.' (Voice Project)

Another benefit reported related to organisational skills and the ability to take on responsibility. One young person in the **Voice Project** steering group reported:

'We're learning to set things down and stick by it rather than never getting round to doing it because it needs to go as part of the final project and we are actually doing what we are say we are going to do, just go for it instead of sitting round and talking about it.'

The opportunity to make long-lasting friendships was raised by participants in each group, and there was evidence for positive relationships and good friendships that had been established through the projects. However, some participants also reported negative consequences that arose for them through their involvement in the projects.

Some of the **Culture Crosslinks** participants could recall a number of occasions when local youths threw missiles at transport or loitered maliciously outside the venue in which the cross-community group met. Others were teased or ridiculed for their involvement:

*'I wouldn't say that anyone has discouraged me from being involved, but when **R.E.A.C.H.** called up at my school last week, a boy in my class just laughed at them cos it's just about Protestants and all that there, so at school you feel a bit*

left out. There's people that think that Catholics shouldn't be getting on with Protestants and all that there.'

Similar to Culture Crosslinks, **R.E.A.C.H.** participants reported that the actual location of the project led to some drawbacks, in this case an imbalance in participation of young people from different backgrounds:

'Not really enough Protestants go to the actual club cos they're just afraid to walk through the town or go back to people's houses and Protestants from the Waterside are just afraid to come.'

Whilst the majority of young people reported how they made new friends, others talked in the focus groups about general hostility towards their cross-community project and even about losing friends.

'I've lost friends around [a local area], they don't want Catholics'. (Culture Crosslinks)

'I have sacrificed my reputation with my mates' (R.E.A.C.H.)

*'You see how many people knocked me out last year from that area who don't go to **Crosslinks**, calling us 'Fenians'. 'It's a compliment, a Fenian is an Irish warrior.' 'Aye, when it's used in context, it still hurts.'*

The levels of reported active involvement varied, which confirmed the findings of the YLT survey reported above. Those who had contributed most developed a sense of pride and ownership about the projects:

'I think that I am just really proud that we now have the knowledge that we can actually do something and give back to the community rather than just sitting down and talking about it and not being much use to anyone, but now I know that we have benefited from it, the whole group.' (Voice Project)

'You feel a part of it whenever you are in a show and stuff...I think you feel more a part of it when there are things to prepare.' (Culture Crosslinks)

Conclusions

In conclusion, the 2007 YLT survey found that young people taking part in cross-community projects outside the school context had more favourable views towards mixing and integration. They were also more likely to have friends from other backgrounds – interestingly not just other religious backgrounds, but also ethnic backgrounds and friends who had a disability. There can therefore be no doubt that participation in cross-community events contributes to community cohesion among young people. Whilst Catholics were a little more likely to take part in cross-community projects, they were also more likely than Protestants to express a need for such projects, and our evidence suggests that this is due to the all-encompassing Catholic upbringing that many Catholics experience, which gives them fewer opportunities to mix.

The responses to the 2007 YLT survey also suggest multifaceted attitudes to community relations projects. Whilst the vast majority of respondents regards cross-community schemes as beneficial for community cohesion in Northern Ireland, a large proportion of 16 year olds also view these projects as complex and demanding social events with potentially challenging situations and a limited capability to achieve long-lasting positive outcomes. There is evidence, however, that those involved in cross-community projects hold slightly more upbeat views on the prospects of cross-community relations as the results of the 2007 YLT survey show.

The focus group discussions strengthened the YLT survey findings. We also found that an active involvement in cross-community projects resulted in increased confidence, self-esteem and pride in the achievements among

young people. The means to deliver cross-community programmes differed vastly, but more often than not the cross-community focus of the project work was wrapped in fun activities through which people of different backgrounds were brought together. We found that these fun activities were mostly the key attraction to the projects and the hook to attract more young people into the projects. However, as the evidence from the focus groups shows, once involved in the projects, young people appreciated the opportunities to challenge their views and make friends with young people from other backgrounds who they otherwise would never have met. As one young person described cross-community contact:

'It's always going to be everywhere you go but integrated schools and cross-community projects do tackle the issue and don't just bandy about it'

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