

Young People and Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

This brief focuses on young people and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland (NI). It draws on published research evidence and discussion at a Roundtable event organised by Youth Pact and ARK held in October 2019. Roundtable participants included officials from several government departments and representatives from a range of NGOs and academics. The dialogue was opened by two individuals experienced in the field of youth work and peacebuilding who contextualised the discussion. The event was conducted under the anonymity of reporting allowed under the Chatham House Rule to encourage open debate.

Context

Following decades of violence, the 1990s appeared to be a beacon of hope as intractable conflict gave way to ceasefires, decommissioning and the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Local government and civil society as well as international governments and philanthropic agencies worked to ensure NI had the best chances of success with its “historic opportunity for a new beginning” (British and Irish Governments, 1998: 2). Amid and since these efforts towards peace-making and reconciliation, numerous policies have been developed oriented towards building a positive and sustainable peace. This paper specifically examines the role of youth work in peacebuilding and poses questions about the compatibility of youth work methodologies with policies and strategies on reconciliation, revealing both opportunities and challenges.

Sectarianism: A live issue?

Nineteen reconciliation and peacebuilding policies and initiatives (listed at the end of this Brief) have guided practice seeking to enable young people to flourish in a transformed rather than contested society. While the post agreement generation of young people “have grown up with an expectation

of peace rather than conflict” (Schubotz, 2017: 1), the legacy of conflict fundamentally impacts their lives. Education, housing, and recreation are vastly segregated; identity, culture and politics are inherently polarized and personal and social welfare is impacted by intergenerational trauma and residual paramilitarism. Research attests that young people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods endure the greatest challenges stemming from conflict legacies (Gray et al., 2018).

Morrow (2019) argues that sectarianism is at the core of the divided nature of NI, that sectarianism is “built into normality” and that policy initiatives should tackle this directly. The cross-community contact scheme (Department of Education (DE), 1987) and the Education for Mutual Understanding policy (Northern Ireland Office, 1989) were among the first policies promoting anti-sectarianism with young people. They focused primarily on bringing young people from Protestant and Catholic community backgrounds together to challenge sectarianism through contact and promoting a sense of empathy with ‘the other’. In many respects these principles have dominated policy and feature currently in both Together Building a United Community (T:BUC) (The Executive Office (TEO), 2013) and the Shared Education policy ‘Sharing Works’ (DE, 2015; 2018). As policy has evolved the language of ‘good relations’ has tended to replace notions of ‘community relations’ and ‘cross-community’, with a wider perspective on fragmented relationships beyond traditional cross-community work and encouraging an emphasis on addressing all forms of xenophobia.

For some, sectarianism is no longer the core issue in NI and peacebuilding work involves a more focused engagement with issues of gender, class, well-being, social justice, security and citizenship.

The role of youth work in peacebuilding

In 2005 the Youth Service Policy Review for NI recognised “the crucial role of the youth service in

promoting peace-building and good community relations” (DE, 2005: 23). Youth work practitioners tend to embrace peacebuilding as integral to their work and many policies have strengthened this connection. The Curriculum Development Unit (2003) facilitated the adoption within the youth service of the principles of Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (EDI). These were first championed as a framework for community relations by Eyben et al. (1997) in *A Worthwhile Venture?*. Reflecting on peacebuilding within the youth sector several emergent themes surface as connected, and sometimes competing, ideas in policy and practice. Four are considered here.

Cultivating contact

Many community and good relations initiatives owe their origin to early pioneers who brought young people from different backgrounds together. Premised on Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, these initiatives bring antagonistic groups together under optimal conditions with the aim of reducing prejudice and building more positive intergroup relationships. Debates continue regarding the efficacy of contact work. There is an argument for single identity work to precede any contact between young people from different communities, and a rebuttle that the notion of ‘single identity’ is a myth; multiple identities should be embraced and single identity work increases a sense of ‘otherness’. The government’s good relations strategy, TBUC, places much emphasis on cross community contact – for example through bringing young people together in summer camp programmes. The Shared Education policy extends this same emphasis in both formal and informal education settings, affording young people from different community backgrounds the opportunity to learn together. While the rationale for cross community contact is based on well theorised and researched ideas, there has been relatively little focus on young people’s personal experiences of current contact programmes.

CRED

Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) emerged as the Department of Education’s community relations strategy in 2011. Formal and informal education providers in receipt of funding from the Department of Education were instructed

to “encourage understanding of particular groups in society and promote the equal treatment of different groups” (Schubotz, 2015: 14). The youth work policy, *Priorities for Youth* (DE, 2013) explicitly affiliated with CRED and both policies reflected a concerted effort to address issues of inequality, prejudice and discrimination through formal and non-formal education. However, the main emphasis of *Priorities for Youth* was on contribution to formal education outcomes. This contrasts with the more decisive tone and language of the previous youth work strategy that emphasised “the crucial role of the youth service in promoting peace-building and good community relations” (DE, 2005: 23) leading to criticism that *Priorities for Youth* understates the distinctive contribution of youth work in a contested society.

The employability paradigm

While much youth work in NI has employed methodologies that promote diversity, appreciation of difference and interdependence, other approaches more directly seek to combat conflict legacy issues. Research indicates that youth employability in societies emerging from conflict is essential to minimise disaffection and the allure of violence while concomitantly ensuring young people are equal beneficiaries of the peace dividend – increasing rates of employment (Nolan, 2012: 9; Gray et al. 2018: 28).

The T:BUC strategy is indicative of a shift in policy to the employability paradigm of peacebuilding with an aim to engage 10,000 young people not in education, employment or training into a volunteering programme (TEO, 2013). The *Fresh Start* (TEO, 2015) strategy also prioritises youth employability. Similarly the current European Union *Peace4Youth* programme, while not including employability as a stated outcome, specifically targets young people “who are disadvantaged, excluded or marginalised, have deep social and emotional needs and are at risk of becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, violence or dissident activity” (SEUPB, 2016). This targeting strategy has the intentions to primarily engage those categorised as not in employment, education or training.

Historic and emerging threats

More recently, policy has directed the youth

service into confronting paramilitarism and violent extremism. The Fresh Start document (TEO, 2015) sets out to tackle outstanding issues from the conflict. It addresses young people in two ways: firstly, in preventing them engaging in paramilitary activity; secondly, in supporting employment opportunities for young people. A panel report on the disbandment of paramilitary groups (Alderdice et al., 2016) emanating from A Fresh Start further elaborates on the themes of prevention and employability. It recognises that once inducted into a paramilitary organisation it can be very difficult for a young person to disassociate. Young people as victims of paramilitary style attacks is also highlighted. Linked to this, there is cross departmental support for the Stop Attacks and Ending the Harm campaigns which aim to address this threat to young people as part of peacebuilding (Department of Justice (DOJ), 2018). A key challenge is what Smyth (2017) refers to as the “societal shrug” whereby there is avoidance of actively intervening on the issue of paramilitary “justice”.

Where are young people in peacebuilding policy?

Research suggests many young people in NI consider themselves active agents of peacebuilding. In 2015 the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey, based on a random sample of 16-year olds, found that 84 percent

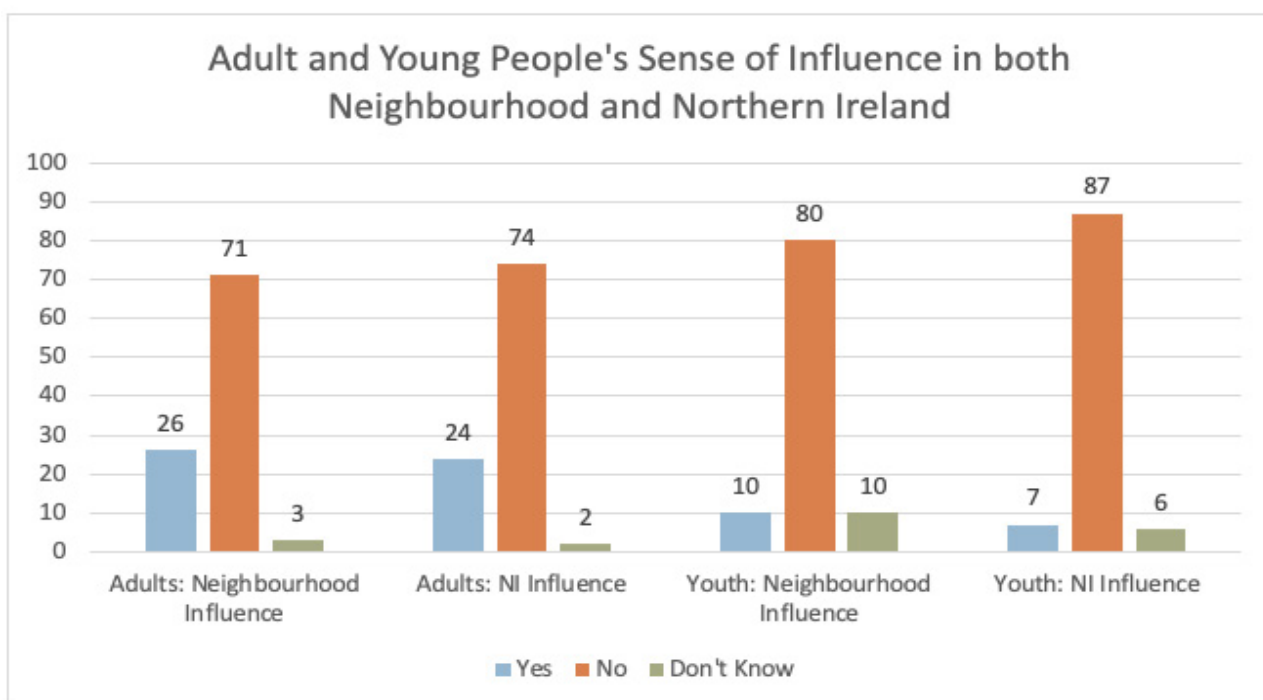
of respondents felt young people could contribute to peacebuilding. Over half of those surveyed indicated they already are contributing (Schubotz, 2015).

United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security takes the challenge of involving young people seriously. It calls for young people to be actively involved in shaping peacebuilding initiatives and contributing to decision making at all levels (UNSCR, 2015). The strength of UNSCR 2250 lies in its assets-based approach to young people and peacebuilding. It recognises the value of young people’s contributions in transitioning from sustained violence to durable peace. This contrasts with a deficit model that views young people as problematic and complicit in violence and disorder (Hart, 2015: 48). However, the assets-based approach outlined in UNSCR 2250 also demonstrates complexity pointing both to the potential of young people to contribute to transforming conflict as well as the realities of young people contributing to violence.

Belonging and Influence

Devine and Schubotz (2019) link the T:BUC goal of building a shared and united community with a measure of ‘belonging’ in the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) and Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys. Asking participants in both surveys if

Chart A, reproduced from Devine & Schubotz, 2019



they felt a sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood and/or NI they found young people feel lower levels of belonging than adults. Eighty nine percent of adults and 73% of young people reported a sense of belonging to their immediate community with a slightly lower number of each saying they felt a sense of belonging to NI (86% for adults and 70% for young people). One fifth of young people reported not feeling a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood and 19% felt they did not belong in NI.

Divergence emerges when asked about ability to influence decision making in their neighbourhood and in NI (Chart A). Only 10% of young people felt they could influence decision making in their local area and only 7% expressed ability to influence decision making in NI. This compares to approximately a quarter of adults who feel they have an influence on decision making at local level (26%) and in NI(24%).

These results present a challenge to the rhetoric of a united and shared society. The authors contend that such a society should be characterised by a youth population engaged in decision-making at local and national level. They conclude that the lack of influence felt by young people is a breach of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which gives children and young people the right to be heard in these decisions (Devine and Schubotz, 2019).

Gendered Peacebuilding

UNSCR 1325 (United Nations, 2000) urges member states to recognise the contribution of women and girls to peacekeeping and peacebuilding in conflict and post-conflict environments. It obligates signatory states to strengthen representation of women in decision making at all levels. There has been debate about some of the underpinning assumptions of the Resolution regarding gender roles in peace and conflict (see for example Pierson, 2018). However, the Resolution has provoked discussion and engagement in NI and has been used by civil society organisations to highlight the exclusion of women from the post conflict institutions and processes and the need for gender equality.

Greater focus on gender-perspectives in peacebuilding would arguably prioritise a focus on minority rights and place emphasis on developing young women as

peacebuilding activists.

Issues discussed at the Roundtable

Everything has changed, and nothing has changed

The event opened with a presentation from a senior youth worker who reflected on the dictum 'everything has changed, and nothing has changed'. Despite a plethora of initiatives and changing terminologies of cross-community, community relations, CRED, good relations and peacebuilding, young people continue to live separate lives and experience segregation as normative. The presenter recalled early community relations work in the 1980s where progression was made in stages towards dealing with contentious issues. Residential experiences were highlighted as particularly valuable with the potential of engaging parents and carers who want to be informed and involved. This developmental approach was commended, and an appeal made to consider what has worked in the past, with the intention to apply such learning to future policy initiatives.

Risk taking was emphasised with a call for practitioners to have the confidence to engage with complex and contentious issues. This confidence begins with a willingness to try something new. The speaker closed by noting momentum for peacebuilding work needs to be fuelled by policy and practice that is: attractive; that profiles success; that makes funding and partnership working more accessible; and is satisfying in that it is rewarding both financially and in a celebratory way.

The theme of risk taking was continued in a presentation by Dr. Martin McMullan, YouthAction NI drawing on findings from his PhD (McMullan, 2018). He argued that while young people frequently talk about being unaffected by the 'troubles' and sectarianism, when this is explored through questions such as 'would you ever consider buying a house in a predominantly Unionist / Nationalist area?' issues of separation and segregation come to the fore. He stressed that in such a deeply divided society youth workers need to have an appetite for community relations work and also identified the importance of returning to lessons of the past and ensuring peace work remains a priority for the youth service. This requires youth work training which builds practitioner competence and equips them to tackle

the challenges of acknowledging and dealing with the past and exploring and practicing citizenship and democracy.

These inputs sparked stimulating debate from roundtable participants. Anne McCready, United Youth Adviser on the Strategic Investment Board, summarised the main points emanating from the discussion and the final section of this brief covers the discussion under thematic headings.

Peacebuilding and young people: Issues for policy makers and practitioners

Structural issues hold this work back

The view was expressed that it is unrealistic to expect youth work to overcome and transform deep-rooted structural challenges. Young people are socialised into a society that remains acutely segregated in relation to housing, education and culture. There is growing research evidence on the continuing impact of the legacy of conflict and young people come to youth service activities with a legacy of segregation that has been formative in their early childhood development. It was argued that debates surrounding the formal schooling system and integrated and shared education policies and the contribution of non-formal education are wider issues worthy of a separate roundtable event and that assuming grandiose peace related outcomes will inevitably lead to frustration for youth work practitioners and funders when expectations are unmet.

The place of citizenship and political literacy

There was discussion of how an important aspect of the youth worker's role is to support young people navigate a sectarian landscape. This involves exploring a sense of self and the world in which they inhabit. This links with the concept of citizenship, however, the navigation metaphor contains limitations. Citizenship ought not to refer just to preparing young people to fit into society as it currently exists; rather it should promote authentic participation and collective action to challenge social and political hegemonies in the pursuit of increased equity and social justice. In order to engage in such transformative processes young people need to develop political literacy; practicing critical thinking, dialogue, civic engagement and democratic participation. Opportunities exist

within the non-formal youth sector to champion citizenship work as core both to young people's learning and to peacebuilding processes. Connected to this, the notion of radicalisation - often perceived in a negative sense - could be reclaimed and re-conceptualised as radicalising young people towards critical consciousness and social activism.

Deconstructing what works

There was discussion of how not all community relations work is good practice. It was argued that, at times, youth work has reinforced a tendency to merely navigate and ultimately avoid contentious issues. Policy and funding cycles as well as practice has tended to move expeditiously onto new initiatives without thoroughly excavating what works. There is a need to make the most of the rich intuitive knowledge that exists as well as research such as the Lurgan Town Project (see Bell et al., 2013), distilling the essence of peace4youth practice (McConville and McArdle, 2019). Across these analyses is a clear message that the short term nature of funding and therefore projects is detrimental to the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Understanding the young person's world

Youth work does not occur in a vacuum. Young people are embedded in an ecological system of institutions including family, education, employment, justice, health, politics, civic society, as well as friends and peers. When policy and practice operate in silos a holistic view of the young person is neglected. It is important to acknowledge the complex interaction of diverse spheres of a young person's life and particularly how peace coincides in all these arenas. Youth work is one element of a larger tapestry of services and provisions in which young people engage. Reflective practitioners draw on understanding of their own circumstances and environments and those of the young people they work with. This understanding allows workers to build networks with other significant adults in the young person's life including teachers, parents, carers and health professionals.

It was noted that some current peacebuilding policy with a strong focus on what was argued to be restrictive targets may limit scope for a holistic approach to the work and the processes involved.

Concurrently, practitioners ought not to adopt multi-disciplinary roles and take on responsibilities that belong to other professions. Striking this balance requires practitioners and policymakers to be clear about the unique contribution of youth work to peacebuilding and attention to purpose and process as well as intended outcomes and outputs.

Language: Working towards a common understanding of peacebuilding

The point was made that “peacebuilding” a contested concept. This is not simply because of the range of definitions and terms that are preferred by different individuals and groups. More fundamentally, each person adopts a different orientation to the notion of peacebuilding determined by how they make sense of related concepts including reconciliation, justice, freedom, wellbeing, democracy. This creates a challenge of clarity. It is essential that dialogue is fostered to curtail assumptions and work towards clearer articulation of practice. Debating meaning and changing language is important in guiding and symbolising a more accurate reflection of youth work policy and practice. Policymakers and practitioners should continue engaging critically with research and practice to further develop a peacebuilding praxis that highlights further opportunities and challenges for youth work.

Conclusion

The legacy of conflict continues to fundamentally impact on the lives of young people. Youth work and youth workers have an important role in addressing sectarianism and division and actively supporting peacebuilding. However, this requires risk taking and youth work training needs to ensure that workers feel confident and equipped to engage with complex and contentious issues. It is not realistic to expect youth work to overcome and transform deep-rooted structural challenges but there are important contributions to be made by youth work. These include: maximising opportunities through citizenship and political literacy to radicalise young people in a positive way and support participation and social activism; using research and knowledge about what works in youth work practice to build on good practice with regard to community relations work; acknowledging that youth has a unique contribution to make but it must also avoid siloed working and

instead use the opportunities created by youth work to build networks which benefit young people. Finally, there is an onus on youth work and youth workers to prioritise critical engagement and debate around research and practice on peacebuilding.

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Policy and Peacebuilding 1987-2016

Initiative	Publisher & Year	Description
Cross-community contact scheme	DE, 1987	Encouraged schools to arrange trips and visits with pupils from mainly Protestant and Catholic schools
Policy for the Youth Service in Northern Ireland	DE, 1987	The first published policy outlining a 'core curriculum' aimed at embedding a greater sense of common purpose within the youth service in Northern Ireland. A core objective was to promote 'strong cross-community involvement'
Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU)	DE, 1989	Cross-curricular theme aimed at increasing respect for difference, interdependence, sharing and understanding of cultures and commitment to non-violence
A Worthwhile Venture? Research report	UoU, 1997	Presented principles of equity, diversity and interdependence (EDI) as a framework for community relations work
Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice	DE, 1997	The initial launch of a youth work curriculum as devised by the Curriculum Review Group within Department for Education
Good Friday Agreement and Northern Ireland Act	1998	Foundational documents outlining commitment to reconciliation and equality as core to building peace. NI Act outlined Section 75 making statutory duty for all public authorities to ensure equality of opportunity across 9 equality categories of "religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; and persons with dependents and persons without"
A Youth Service for a New Millennium	DE, 1999	A more substantial youth service policy document that included a substantial section of community relations work as a high priority area and an emphasis on peacebuilding
Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice Update	CDU, 2003	A specific Curriculum Development Unit for youth work is formed within the Department for Education that relaunches the Model for Effective practice and disseminates more widely
Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (JEDI)	DE, 2003	Embedded EDI principles into youth work as contained in the youth work model for effective practice
A Shared Future	O F M D F M , 2005	Visionary good relations strategy that explicitly stated "separate but equal" is not an option
Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in Northern Ireland (2005-2008)	DE, 2005	A strategy developed in consultation with stakeholders in the youth service. The strategy identified "peacebuilding" as a core value explaining "Youth work should actively promote a peaceful and inclusive society based on equity, diversity and interdependence"
Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI)	O F M D F M , 2010	A much less ambitious good relations strategy that failed to progress beyond consultation phase
Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED)	DE, 2011	Emphasised community relations and equality not only between Protestant and Catholic but other ethnicities; gender; sexuality; ability/differently abled etc.
Priorities for Youth (Pfy)	DE, 2013	Strategy for youth service that aligned priorities with outcomes in formal education. Criticised for restricted view of youth work as individual educational achievement
Together Building a United Community (T:BUC)	TEO, 2013	The government's good relations strategy
A Fresh Start	TEO, 2015	Strategy emerging from the Stormont House Agreement that seeks to address issues "left over from the past"
Sharing Works – A Policy for Shared Education	DE, 2015	Policy to prioritise young people from different community backgrounds learning together from pre to post primary in both formal and non-formal settings
Shared Education Act	NI, 2016	Legislates a definition and minimum requirements of shared education for the Department of Education and Education Authority to adhere to. Some have seen this as moving focus and resources away from integrated education
A Fresh Start Panel Report	TEO, 2016	Outlines strategy for disbandment of paramilitary groups

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