

Voices behind the Statistics

Young People's Views of Sectarianism in Northern Ireland

Shirley Ewart and Dirk Schubotz

with Francis Abbs, Damian Harris, Laura Montgomery, Ciaran Moynagh,
Gavin Maguire and Scott Livingstone

September 2004



Research Report



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NCB promotes the voices, interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives.

NCB aims to:

- challenge disadvantage in childhood
- work with children and young people to ensure they are involved in all matters that affect their lives
- promote multidisciplinary cross-agency partnerships and good practice
- influence government through policy development and advocacy
- undertake high quality research and work from an evidence-based perspective
- disseminate information to all those working with children and young people, and to children and young people themselves

The Young Life and Times Survey (YLT 2003) aims to provide an independent source of information on what young people think about the social issues of the day. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and is based at ARK. ARK (the Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive) was established in 2000. ARK has a single goal: to make social science information on Northern Ireland available to the widest possible audience. For further information see www.ark.ac.uk/ylt

Published by the National Children's Bureau. Registered Charity Number 258825.
8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE. Tel: 020 7843 6000

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ISBN 1 904787 36 3

Contents

Contents	3
Acknowledgements	4
Executive Summary	5
1. Introduction	10
2. Researching sectarianism and community relations in Northern Ireland	12
Introduction.....	12
The impact of the Troubles on children and young people	12
The policy context	13
Formation of children's and young people's attitudes to sectarianism and community relations	14
3. The methodology	21
Background of the research design.....	21
Designing the fieldwork tools.....	21
4. Views and experiences of young people	26
National and religious identity.....	26
Factors contributing to young people's attitudes and viewpoints.....	30
Impact of culture and heritage on young people's attitudes	35
Community Relations	43
Community relations and politics in Northern Ireland.....	43
Differences in community relations between urban and rural areas	47
5. The way forward: Improving cross-community relations.....	49
Existing cross-community contact	50
Community relation in the future.....	51
Learning to compromise: results of the Compromise exercise	54
Perceived means of improving community relations	58
6. Impact of <i>Voices behind the Statistics</i> on the participants.....	61
7. Conclusion	64
8.Appendix.....	70

Acknowledgements

The success of the *Voices behind the Statistics* project depended largely on the kind and generous support of the schools involved. Teachers in the 11 participating schools were instrumental in making the necessary arrangements for us, despite a very demanding timetable and curriculum. The research team was made welcome and was supported wholeheartedly. However, without the pupils who took part in the Talkshops and were willing to share their experiences, the project could not have come to a successful conclusion. Those who went on to support the project in its second and third phases deserve particular appreciation.

We are grateful to Ruth Sinclair, the Research Director at the National Children's Bureau, who supported and advised us throughout the project.

Thanks also to both the Nuffield Foundation and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland, who kindly funded the project.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings from the *Voices behind the Statistics* project, which was undertaken by the National Children's Bureau (NCB), in conjunction with ARK (The Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive), from September 2003 to May 2004. Around two hundred 16 and 17-year-olds from 11 post-primary schools in four areas in Northern Ireland participated in the project. The overall aim of the project was:

to consult with young people on their experiences of sectarianism in Northern Ireland and to explore their ideas on how community relations in Northern Ireland can be improved in general, and in relation to young people in particular.

The research was designed to complement the largely quantitative results from the 2003 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey, undertaken by ARK. Hence the title, *Voices behind the Statistics*. The project built on the experience and findings of two similar projects previously undertaken by NCB in Omagh and Derry/Londonderry (Kelly 2002; McCole et al. 2003; Sinclair et al. 2004).

Researching sectarianism and community relations in Northern Ireland

The report starts with a comprehensive overview of research that has been conducted on the impact of the Northern Ireland conflict, in particular with regard to attitude formation in children and young people. Existing research suggests that over a third of children and young people in Northern Ireland have experienced threats and verbal abuse due to their community background. Those under 24 years of age were found to account for 40% of conflict-related deaths in Northern Ireland. Engaging with young people was therefore seen as one way of improving community relations and creating a 'culture of tolerance' for the future. For example, Gallagher (2001) concludes that a key challenge for the education system in Northern Ireland will be to facilitate an environment for young people to openly discuss the impact of the past and their visions for the future. The *Voices behind the Statistics* project tried to do just this.

The methodology

Talkshops were used in this project as the most appropriate research design for achieving the project aims. The Talkshop approach had been successfully used by NCB in previous research projects. Talkshops are a participatory form of focus groups, in which participants are actively engaged in discussion and completing exercises. These Talkshops are designed to create a safe environment for young people to share their views on potentially sensitive topics as well as to stimulate debate on these issues. For the *Voices behind the Statistics* project, exercises were designed using the results of the 2003 Young

Life and Times survey. Thus, the material discussed in the Talkshops was based on viewpoints and attitudes that 16-year-olds had expressed themselves.

The project had three distinct phases. In the first phase, three schools from each of four areas of Northern Ireland were invited to take part in the research project (12 schools altogether). In the second phase, representatives from all three schools in two out of the four areas met in 'Combined Talkshops'. Here, students from the different school sectors met to discuss their views and experiences. In the third phase, six students who had taken part in the first two phases (the co-authors of this report), met with the researchers to help analyse the data from the Talkshops and identify the main findings. The messages from the project were presented jointly by the researchers and the young people at a conference in May 2004.

In total, 194 young people took part in *Voices behind the Statistics*.

Views and experiences of young people

Although the Talkshops were partially structured around a set of exercises designed to generate written data, this research was largely qualitative in character. It was not the aim of the project to quantify majority and minority views on particular issues. Rather, it was important to highlight to what extent young people's views and attitudes towards community relations and sectarianism differ depending on their different backgrounds; and to explore to what extent common ground could be found between socio-religious groups. Participants were therefore free to raise and discuss any topic area they felt was important with regard to community relations and sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Consequently, the findings in the present report are organised around the issues that arose from the young people's discussions.

1. **National and religious identities.** The majority of respondents felt that it was important to know one's identity. This might be why national and religious identities were the most controversial issues discussed. The question of whether or not there will, or should be, a united Ireland caused intense discussion both between and within groups of young people with the same socio-religious backgrounds. Only a minority of participants felt that being Northern Irish (rather than being British or Irish) would solve the divide in national identity.

With regard to religious identity, one of the key questions discussed was whether or not religious affiliation was really core to the Northern Ireland conflict. The majority of respondents felt that religious beliefs and religious denominations did have some impact on the segregation of society in Northern Ireland; but most felt that the conflict related more to differences in national rather than religious identity.

Attitude formation. Family, peer groups, school and the media were acknowledged as the key agents of socialisation, and as having the biggest impact on the formation of attitudes towards others. There was awareness that this impact can be quite subconscious. Many participants were critical about the negative impact that parents and other significant

adults had on their formation of attitudes towards other groups. However, the participants acknowledged that as young adults they were also able to form their own opinions.

Schools also had an influence, but this was thought to be exerted through friendships and peer groups rather than through the curriculum. The great majority of participants said that schools should be integrated to give young people the chance to mix with others from different socio-religious backgrounds from an early age – but that integration should be by choice rather than forced.

2. **Symbols of culture and heritage.** Participants in the research projects felt strongly that culture and heritage had a strong impact on young people's attitudes to community relations and sectarianism. Events such as the 12th July or St Patrick's Day were of symbolic importance for the majority of participants when they defined their national or religious identity. Closely related to these events was a sense of territorialism, boundaries and **markers of identity** (murals, flags, school uniforms, football stripes). There were diverse opinions expressed about where and when such celebrations of culture and heritage should or should not take place. This discussion revealed the strong sense of 'us and them' or 'our area – their area' that continues to exist among young people.

Murals, flags and kerb-painting. While young people saw these as representing the culture of people in certain areas, the great majority agreed that these territorial identifiers were intimidating. They believed that banning them would contribute to better community relations.

Discussions about the flying of flags caused much debate, with young people from neither community background willing to concede to the others' argument on why the Union Jack/Tricolour should or should not be flown. However the greatest majority of participants felt that the symbolic gesture of the creation of a Northern Ireland flag would not help resolve the conflict.

3. **Sport.** This was seen as both a way of segregating and integrating young people. Whilst some sports clubs existed along sectarian lines, some young people reported that other types of sport – such as swimming or tennis, which were not associated with sectarianism and do not maintain religiously segregated clubs – could contribute to a better understanding among young people from different backgrounds.
4. **Politics.** The role that politicians and political parties play in Northern Ireland was strongly criticised. This was the second most frequently cited factor given by participants for wanting to leave the country. Some participants said that they would find it hard to vote for existing sectarian parties and felt that a non-sectarian alternative to the existing parties was not available.
5. **The police and community relations.** The reform of the institutions in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement, in particular the reform of the Police Force (the RUC to the PSNI), was also passionately

discussed. Participants who identified themselves as Catholics were more likely to say that the reform of the Police Force had not gone far enough, whereas young people identifying themselves as Protestants were more likely to argue that the reforms went too far and discriminated against Protestants. However, it is fair to say that the differences of views among young people with the same socio-religious upbringing was almost as big as that between those coming from different community backgrounds.

6. **Paramilitaries.** For a great many of the participants, paramilitaries were the first thing that came to their mind when thinking about community relations in Northern Ireland. 'The influence and say of paramilitaries' was the reason most often cited by young people for wanting to leave Northern Ireland. The great majority of participants agreed that paramilitaries were too influential and that this was generally detrimental for the peace process in Northern Ireland. A very small minority of participants who identified themselves as Catholics felt that, in the past the IRA had played an important role in community policing (for example, dealing with anti-social behaviour) in deprived areas where the RUC were not trusted.
7. **Urban–rural divide.** Very little evidence was found in the Talkshops for any significant urban–rural divide with regard to sectarianism and community relations. Interestingly, participants from schools located in rural settings were most likely to disagree that the countryside was quieter in terms of conflict and sectarianism than inner-city areas.

The way forward: Improving cross-community relations

The Talkshops addressed ways in which community relations in Northern Ireland could be improved. Some young people were pessimistic as to how the conflict could be resolved, with some feeling that there was no obvious solution to the problem. In general terms, Catholics were more optimistic than Protestants about how community relations would be in the future, with those who defined their identity as 'Northern Irish' (as opposed to Irish or British) holding the most optimistic view of future community relations.

However, most Talkshop participants reported that they already had regular informal contact with young people from community backgrounds different their own. Two-thirds of participants agreed that, overall, there was a lot of cooperation going on between Catholics and Protestants. At the same time, most also agreed that even if the differences between Catholics and Protestants disappeared, there would always be reason to 'stir up trouble'.

The ability to compromise was also highlighted as an essential element in improving community relations. However the *Compromise exercise*, especially designed for the Talkshops, suggests that most young people would find it hard to take the first step towards a compromise on issues important to them and their identity.

Cultural heritage was seen as important by the great majority of the young people. For Catholics, this was mainly Irish music and dancing, Gaelic sports, the Irish language and St Patrick's day. For Protestants, the music and celebrations around the 12th July were core. Apart from a very small minority, participants did not mind the other group celebrating these events, although Catholics were more apprehensive about the 12th July than Protestants were about Irish culture.

Suggestions for change

Through the Talkshops, the young people came up with their ideas on the changes that were needed if community relations in Northern Ireland were to improve. The six most important changes the young people wanted to see were:

- more formally integrated schools and more informal mixing between schools
- more cross-community contact schemes, both through schools and across neighbourhoods, so that young people can get to know the 'other' community
- better facilities and activities for young people to mix in a non-sectarian atmosphere
- the banning of territorial markers such as murals, flags and kerb-painting
- acknowledgement of the need to assist people to accept compromise and recognise the things they have in common
- the involvement of young people in interactive and participatory Talkshops, such as those used in this study, to enable them to come together from different communities and to discuss sensitive and controversial issues in a safe and constructive environment.

Impact of Voices behind the Statistics on the participants

The feedback received from participants would suggest that *Voices behind the Statistics* has been a positive learning experience for the majority of young people who took part in the project. However, it would be inappropriate to argue that any one-off discussion on sectarianism and community relations could easily reverse the attitudes and views acquired over a 16-year socialisation process in a fundamentally divided society. Nonetheless, this project suggests that Talkshops, especially the Combined Talkshops that bring young people from different community backgrounds together, have the potential to at least start to generate change and new thinking on community relations. Actively engaging with young people and openly discussing sensitive and controversial issues, rather than avoiding them, has to be seen as a way forward in addressing sectarianism and community relations in Northern Ireland.

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings from the *Voices behind the Statistics* project, which was undertaken by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) in conjunction with ARK from September 2003 to May 2004. Around 200 16 and 17-year-olds from 11 post-primary schools in four areas in Northern Ireland participated in the project. The overall aim of *Voices behind the Statistics* was:

to consult with young people on their experiences of sectarianism in Northern Ireland and to explore their ideas on how community relations in Northern Ireland can be improved in general, and in relation to young people in particular.

The research, which was largely qualitative in nature, was designed to complement the mainly evaluative remarks of the 2003 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey undertaken by ARK.

NCB promotes the voices, interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives. The organisation aims to:

- challenge disadvantage in childhood
- work with children and young people to ensure they are involved in all matters that affect their lives
- promote multidisciplinary cross-agency partnerships and good practice
- influence government through policy development and advocacy
- undertake high quality research and work from an evidence-based perspective
- disseminate information to all those working with children and young people, and to children and young people themselves.

An important objective for NCB is to ensure that the views of children and young people are heard and taken into account.

One of the ways in which NCB meets its objectives is through the organisation of Talkshops – structured activities with children and young people that enable them to express their views and for these to be noted. This Talkshop methodology had been used successfully before to address issues of sectarianism and community relations in Northern Ireland (Kelly 2002; McCole et al. 2003; Sinclair et al 2004).

ARK is a joint resource between the two Northern Ireland universities. ARK was established in 2000 and has as its single goal: to make social science information on Northern Ireland available to the widest possible audience. One key part of ARK's activities is the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey, which has recorded attitudes of the public of Northern Ireland to a wide range of social policy issues since 1998. Until 2000, the Young Life and Times survey ran alongside NILT and sought the views of all 12–17-year-olds living in the same household as NILT respondents. From 2003 onwards, however, YLT began focusing solely on the attitudes of 16-year-olds in a separate survey

based on a representative sample taken from the Child Benefit Register. A large number of questions in the 2003 YLT survey dealt with community relations and sectarianism in Northern Ireland. The results of the survey formed an ideal background source for a more in-depth investigation of young people's attitudes to, and experiences of, sectarianism and community relations. Hence the Talkshops in the *Voices behind the Statistics* project.

This report presents the main findings from these Talkshops. They are embedded within a brief literature review of recent research with young people on sectarianism and community relations in Northern Ireland. In the third chapter (page 21), the methodology used during the project is explained in more detail. The Appendices (page 69) contain copies of exercises and worksheets used during the project. In the fourth chapter (page 26), the findings of the project are presented. Because this project was largely evaluative and had in many ways an explorative character, it was decided to organise the findings along the lines of over-reaching thematic topics that emerged during the Talkshops, rather than quantifying young people's responses to specific Talkshop exercises.

2. Researching sectarianism and community relations in Northern Ireland

Introduction

Ireland has been particularly fraught with political and sectarian conflict for the past 30 or more years, during which time its people have suffered extensively. Northern Ireland is still a highly segregated society, with deeply entrenched divisions between the two main socio-religious communities of Protestants and Catholics. Religious and cultural identity is inextricably associated with this community segregation (Connolly and Maginn 1999). Cultural identity is inherent in many facets of the lived experiences of people in Northern Ireland, including shared experiences and attitudes, national and religious identity, and family attitudes and class. In the Northern Irish context, religious identity acts as a strong marker for community or political affiliation in this divided society (Kelly and Sinclair 2003). Identity is often expressed through specific cultural activities, for example St Patrick's Day is primarily associated with Catholicism, and the 12th July Commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne is part of the Protestant heritage.

A history of conflict within Northern Ireland has diversified the cultural, political and religious identities of Catholics and Protestants. It has created the climate within which sectarianism and segregation permeates every facet of Northern Irish society, on personal, social, political and economic levels (Connolly and Maginn 1999). There is widespread residential, educational and social segregation, reflected in the fact that 95% of children attend schools segregated by religion, and 80% of social housing is also segregated (Kelly and Sinclair 2003). The 2003 YLT survey also found that many of its respondents likewise experienced residential and educational segregation. Less than a third (29%) lived in mixed-religion neighbourhoods, and only 6% of respondents attended planned integrated schools (Devine & Schubotz 2004). Issues of segregation continue to sustain sectarianism and, although there is a desire for peace, research has indicated that there has been an increase in the support for demarcation (Hughes & Donnelly 2002).

The impact of the Troubles on children and young people

Although Northern Ireland is making attempts to move into a post-conflict era, children and young people are still affected by the legacy of the 'Troubles' (the periods of unrest prior to 1921 and since 1969 in Northern Ireland). Since the 1970s, there has been a growing recognition of the impact of the conflict on children and young people, and issues of community relations and sectarianism have received considerable attention from researchers. Much of the early work on children and young people's understanding of the Troubles was carried out by social psychologists focusing on the formation of ethnic/religious identities, and the short and long-term effects of living in a divided society (Cairns 1987; Trew 1992; Connolly and Maginn 1999). Research approaches to explore children and young people's understanding of the conflict have included both

qualitative and quantitative methodologies. These have included surveys (Smyth and Scott 2000) and psychological measurements and indirect observations (Jahoda and Harrison 1975; Cairns and Duriez 1976). More recently, research has attempted to document and measure the impact of over 30 years of armed conflict on children and young people's lives (Smyth et al. 2004).

Research has considered the human impact of the Troubles on Northern Irish communities, and the impact on children and young people has been significant. Those under the age of 24 accounted for 40% of conflict-related deaths (Faye Smyth 1998 et al. 1999). It was estimated that between 1969 and 1998, 257 young people under the age of 18 died as a direct result of the conflict, a figure that had risen to 324 by 2003 and the impact on young people living in the areas worst affected by the conflict was most acute (Smyth et al 2004).

In addition to death and injury, the impact of the Northern Ireland conflict on children and young people has also manifested itself in psychological and emotional trauma. Many children and young people have experienced trauma in a variety of ways: for example, the loss of family members; witnessing violence and murders; experiences of rioting and bombs. This has resulted in increasing emotional problems and related concerns regarding their welfare. As a result, services have been constructed to deal with the needs of children and young people affected by the conflict, and there is a growing body of literature exploring the therapeutic interventions employed to address conflict-related trauma experienced by children and young people (Burrows and Keanan 2004; Murphy 2004). However, on a more universal level it could be argued that most, if not all, children and young people in Northern Ireland have been influenced by the Troubles, in the formation of their attitudes and constructions of religious and societal divides, oppression and discrimination. Nearly a third (27%) of all young people aged 12–17 in one study reported having been threatened or verbally abused because of their religion (Connolly 2002).

Although previous research has been central in highlighting the issues affecting children and young people living in Northern Ireland, and has promoted our understanding of their experiences of the Troubles, it has not adequately explored young people's perspectives or aspirations for the future of Northern Ireland. However in recent years, researchers have engaged with children and young people to present their views on sectarianism (Connolly and Maginn 1999; Connolly et al. 2002; McCole et al. 2003).

The policy context

In addition to the growing research focus, there have been policy developments that take account of the needs of children and young people in relation to sectarianism and community relations. A commitment by all parties to promote a 'culture of tolerance' amongst people, including children, was a central facet of the Belfast Agreement (1998). This development was subsequently endorsed through the establishment of the Community Relations Unit within the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and a review of community relations policies in 2002. One outcome of this review was the publication of a

consultation document in January 2003, entitled *A Shared Future*, which proposed a policy to develop a more integrated and pluralist society in Northern Ireland (OFMDFM 2003). The strategies proposed include:

- promoting the integration and sharing of communities
- eliminating sectarianism and racism
- encouraging communication, tolerance and respect between segregated communities
- promoting the celebration of diverse cultures and heritages
- shaping policy and practice at an institutional and structural level to promote good community relations.

In order to operationalise these aims, *A Shared Future* proposed that the implementation focus on: areas suffering from poor community relations; sustaining communities with good relations; and include action focused on children and young people.

The consultation period on the document, *A Shared Future*, ended in September 2003. In January 2004, the key findings of the consultation were submitted by Darby and Knox (2004) and published by OFMDFM (and is also available online). A number of results from the consultation process were directly related to children and young people. According to Darby and Knox, 'young people were presented as both trouble-makers and potential peace-makers' (2004: 6). Children and young people were seen as the custodians of the future. This has direct relevance to the *Voices behind the Statistics* project.

Much concern has been expressed about the earlier lack of involvement of young people in taking forward the 'peace process'. More generally, there have been positive moves to increase the involvement of children and young people in policy development. Current legislation in Northern Ireland, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Children (NI) Order (1995), and the Northern Ireland Act (1998), all place an increasing emphasis on directly consulting children and young people. The establishment of the Children and Young People's Unit within the OFMDFM, the development of a Children's Strategy, and the recent appointment of a Children's Commissioner, have given great impetus to the involvement of children and young people in these wider policy agendas (including consideration of community relations and sectarianism).

Formation of children's and young people's attitudes to sectarianism and community relations

Research has considered the social contexts in which the attitudes of children and young people are formed, and the age at which they first develop an awareness of sectarianism. Research indicates that children can recognise diversity and hold sectarian prejudices from the age of three; by the age of five or six, a considerable number of children display an awareness of sectarian and paramilitary violence; and by the age of ten or eleven, many have developed deeply entrenched sectarian opinions (Connolly et al. 2002; Connolly and Healy 2003). One study highlighted children's and young people's first recollections of

the Troubles, and this ranged from those who had experience of violence and death within their family or community to others who associated certain events and symbols with a particular religious affiliation (Smyth et al. 2004). Notably it was respondents who lived in interfaces between single-identity communities who reported the highest level of exposure to inter-community violence. These findings are significant in that they indicate that children, at a young age, are already beginning to assimilate and distinguish key cultural symbols to differentiate between Catholics and Protestants.

Young people are able to identify a range of mediums through which religion can be defined and sectarian attitudes exhibited. These include: name, the areas in which you live, school uniform and family (Sinclair et al. 2004; Smyth et al. 2004). However, the respondents in one study noted that stereotyping is a natural process and only becomes problematic if attitudes are manifested into sectarian behaviour. Interestingly, two-thirds of young people reported that they had been victims of sectarianism – ranging from name calling to the murder of a family member – and this contributed to the development of more sectarian attitudes and animosity towards the other community (McCole et al. 2003).

In addition to considering the development of sectarian attitudes, research has also examined the various factors that influence young people's attitudes towards the situation in Northern Ireland. Factors identified by young people as contributing to sectarian attitudes include family background, school, media, politics, social lives and personal experiences (Sinclair et al. 2004; Devine and Schubotz 2004). Young people have commented in interviews that, despite a close affiliation with their communities and religious and political identities and the influence of their families and communities, they are keen to exert some control over the development of their own attitudes.

Family

The attitudes of family members are perhaps the most influential factor in shaping children and young people's attitudes to sectarianism. Nearly half (47%) of the YLT respondents highlighted that their families were the most important influence on their views about the other religious community (Devine and Schubotz 2004). Smyth et al. (2004) found that parents told stories and introduced young people to the Troubles, in a way that was coloured by their interpretations of events. Nearly 60% of young people agreed that members of their family had taught them negative things about people from the opposite religious background. Sectarian attitudes prevail in Northern Ireland mainly because of the influence of parents who encouraged young people to develop sectarian attitudes (McCole et al. 2003). Some young people recalled personal examples of where their parents encouraged them to join in local riots and make petrol bombs (Kelly 2002).

Findings from the 2003 YLT survey indicated that 27% of respondents reported that they would not be supportive of a family member marrying someone of a different religion (Devine and Schubotz 2004), and this is further reflected in the NCB project where almost a quarter would not consider cross-community marriage, due to the negative perceptions of other family members (Sinclair et al. 2004). Similarly the YouthQuest study found that, while just over two-thirds

of young people wouldn't object to a relative marrying outside their religion, about a quarter did object to some degree to cross-community relationships within the family (Smyth and Scott 2000).

Cairns (1996) comments that children's lack of optimism regarding future peace may be attributed to discontinuity between children and their parents and even grandparents. Children may not have role models who are instrumental in fostering attitudes that would promote good community relations. However, Smyth et al. (2004) commented that the influence of the family could diminish as children grow older and as other powerful influences, such as the wider community and the socio-political and economic environment, begin to impact on young people's behaviour.

Friends

Young people have also reported how sectarianism has been constructed through their social lives, with this leading to 'restricted social spaces' in choice of venues for meeting friends and undertaking social activities such as sport (Sinclair et al. 2004; Smyth et al. 2004). Most young people have reported that, due to community and educational segregation they have had limited opportunities to develop cross-community friendships (Kelly 2002; Smyth et al. 2004). Almost 70% of respondents reported that they only had friends within their own communities, and almost half preferred segregated residency (Sinclair et al. 2004). Notably, the Northern Ireland conflict has been a defining feature in determining the extent to which some young people can develop and sustain cross-community friendships, in terms of geographical location and the prevalence of opportunities for mixing.

Participation in sectarian behaviour and same-religion friendships has also been influenced by peer pressure. Some young people, however, are able to establish cross-community friendships without any problems (Smyth et al. 2004) and in various ways: through music and drama clubs, employment, as acquaintances of other friends and family members, and through mixed communities and integrated schooling, as well as specific cross-community events (McCole et al. 2003). Over three-quarters of YLT respondents have had cross-community contact with pupils from another religious community, mainly through inter-school projects, although over half (52%) reported having cross-community contact through other avenues (Devine and Schubotz 2004). Of respondents in the YouthQuest study, 43% had participated in cross-community events (Smyth and Scott 2000).

School

Schooling experiences have also influenced attitudes towards community relations and sectarianism. Research has indicated that young people are influenced by their peers and may wish to conform with friends who display sectarian attitudes. Schools are easily identified as either State-controlled (Protestant) or Catholic maintained and therefore the uniform is an identifying marker of religion for young people attending segregated schools – indeed, school uniform has often been highlighted by young people as exposing them to sectarian attacks when travelling to and from school (Smyth et al. 2004; Sinclair

et al. 2004). These divisions are further perpetuated where schools are located within segregated communities, with some schools encircled by symbols of a political and sectarian nature. Only 6% of the YLT respondents attended an integrated school, and it was reported that division was maintained by segregated education (Devine and Schubotz 2004). Despite endorsement by the Department of Education (DENI), integrated provision is available for less than 5% of the school population (NICIE 2002). Approximately half of the young people in the NCB study and half in the YLT survey supported the need for integrated education in promoting community relations amongst young people.

In recognition of the difficulties faced by young people, there have been policy developments within the education sector to tackle segregation and sectarianism. As part of education reform, but specifically to foster cross-community contacts amongst schools, statutory provision for Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) was established in 1992. EMU was designed to address political division in the education curriculum and to promote community relations amongst young people. Research by Smith and Robinson (1996) in the early years of the implementation of the EMU programme found that it was fraught with contentious debates and practical ambiguities regarding its implementation. It was also received with some reluctance because it aired sensitive and controversial issues (Bennison 2000).

Following the Belfast Agreement, a working party was established to examine how schools could contribute to the 'culture of tolerance' (DENI 1998; DENI 1999). Prior to the Agreement there was a community relations programme operating within schools, with the purpose of bringing together children from different communities in structured on-going cross-community activities. However, a recent review of the community relations programme in schools has identified several weaknesses (Department of Education 2002). While this programme represented a very significant resource allocation from DENI, in 2000/2001 only 21% of primary school children and 3% of secondary school children participated in the activities. Moreover, programmes were felt to lack strategic direction and failed to address the really difficult but pertinent issues in community relations. This review suggested some major changes, which are subject to consultation. As Smyth and colleagues (2004) comment:

In common with other institutions in Northern Ireland, schools seem to maintain a form of silence about issues of division, conflict and sectarianism.

Gallagher (2001) comments that a key challenge for the education system will be to facilitate an environment in which young people can openly discuss the impact of the past and their visions for the future.

Other experiences of sectarianism

Segregation and sectarianism has also been constructed in many other dimensions, and permeated the lives of many children and young people living in Northern Ireland today. The media portrayal of the Troubles is a factor that has contributed to the development of sectarian attitudes. Young people have reported that the media puts too much emphasis on the Troubles and has

contributed to the stereotyping of Protestants and Catholics, with the potential to incite sectarian attitudes and attacks (Sinclair et al. 2004).

In terms of their ability to promote community relations, politicians have not been viewed positively by young people. In fact, research has indicated that young people think most politicians are sectarian, negative role models, and hence are restricted in their willingness and ability to resolve the Northern Ireland conflict. Furthermore, they do not take account of the needs of young people (McCole et al. 2003; Smyth et al. 2004). The YouthQuest study (Smyth and Scott 2000) highlighted that 79% of young people were not interested in Northern Irish politics, and that this was possibly compounded by a failure to consult young people on matters that affect them. Almost three-quarters of the young people (73%) reported that they would have voted on the Good Friday Agreement had they had the opportunity. Of those who said they would have voted, a majority (62%) said they would have supported it.

The paramilitaries are a prominent and defining feature of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. Most young people from both communities highlighted their awareness of a paramilitary presence in their communities, with direct contact with paramilitaries being more frequently reported in areas of higher conflict-related violence (Smyth et al. 2004). Young people's attitudes towards paramilitaries are also not favourable: young people were critical of their punishment attacks, harassment of children and young people, and the violent means in which they control communities. However, some young people admired the paramilitaries in terms of the protection they offered within their communities (McCole et al. 2003).

Emblems, murals, flags and painted kerbstones are symbols that have also been identified by young people as contributing to sectarian attitudes. Research has shown that half (51%) of three-year-olds were able to identify at least one symbol; and 90% of six-year-olds were able to identify the significance of three events or symbols associated with sectarianism (Connolly and Healey 2003). In the 2003 YLT survey, 35% of respondents felt that these symbols were intimidating and they would therefore, if they were of the other religious background, not feel comfortable being in that area (Devine and Schubotz 2004). This is confirmed by other research findings (Sinclair et al. 2004; Smyth et al. 2004). Symbols have been instrumental in perpetuating sectarian attitudes, are indicative of a particular communities' affiliation to political and religious beliefs, and reduce neutral or shared spaces. Depending on their perspective, these were either deemed to be reassuring (if prevalent in one's own community) or intimidating (if prevalent within the 'other' community). Symbols, primarily located within segregated housing, were associated with defining young people's social spaces to the extent of having 'no go' areas for residing, socialising or accessing services (Kelly 2002).

Cross-community events

There have been mixed findings regarding the importance of cross-community contact in Northern Ireland. Benefits have been expressed by young people in terms of learning about the culture and beliefs of the 'other' religion, and dispelling negative stereotypes. There have also been concerns expressed that

there is not enough cross-community provision, as indicated by 14% of respondents in the YouthQuest study. However, the limitations of cross-community activities were also reported in previous research. Young people who have engaged in cross-community events have commented on the difficulty of sustaining cross-community friendships subsequent to the event, when they return to segregated communities and education systems. Concerns were also expressed regarding the safety of the young people on their return home to their respective communities. Added to this were the implications of exposing their religious and political beliefs at such initiatives – particularly where they may subsequently encounter ‘opposing’ individuals – and thereby exposing themselves to the possibility of sectarian attacks (Kelly 2002; Smyth et al. 2004).

Anti-sectarian strategies

Young people in previous studies have identified strategies to address sectarianism and promote community relations in Northern Ireland. These include the promotion of community integration, encouraging people to be more tolerant and accepting of the ‘other’ community’s religious and cultural beliefs. Also, whilst respecting difference, young people wanted to see a greater emphasis on cross-community events that enabled a culture to develop which focused on the similarities between Catholics and Protestants. Findings from the 2003 YLT survey revealed that, overall, respondents were strongly in favour of mixed religion workplaces (71%), although support was less strong for mixed religion neighbourhoods (53%) and schools (48%) (Devine and Schubotz 2004). Young people also believe that politicians should be responsible for promoting community relations; and that they need to address their own sectarian attitudes and work together for peace.

Young people’s perspectives on the prospects for peace have also been explored. The YouthQuest study found that there was a high degree of negativity expressed by young people regarding the ability to resolve the conflict within Northern Ireland and establish lasting peace, due to the prolonged period over which the Troubles have existed and the failure of previous attempts to promote acceptance and integration (Smyth and Scott 2000). Many young people are also cynical about the decommissioning of weapons and feel that the commitments to the ceasefires are hypocritical due to the continued paramilitary violence. Although young people have not expressed optimism regarding a political resolution, they do have more aspirations regarding the possibility of diminishing sectarianism.

Anti-sectarian strategies have been identified by young people in previous research, and these include the promotion of integrated communities in the form of integrated schools, housing areas and cross-community events; the removal of flags and kerb-paintings; encouraging political and community leaders to sort out their differences; and working with young children to promote cultural diversity and tolerance.

Young people have stated that cross-community relations should be improved. They felt that this would reduce the prejudice that people have about each other and would increase the understanding and tolerance for the ‘other’ community.

(Kelly 2002). It was found that the great majority (79%) of young people agreed that they have a part to play in reducing sectarianism (McCole et al. 2003).

Furthermore, the need for the representation of young people in policy making has received support. Over three-quarters (79%) of respondents in the Omagh NCB study supported the involvement of young people in political developments (Sinclair et al. 2004). However, a third of participants in the Derry/Londonderry study were not optimistic that eradicating sectarianism in Northern Ireland was possible (Kelly 2002).

When expressing their visions for the future of Northern Ireland, the young people did indicate how participation in Talkshops was a useful vehicle for addressing sectarianism and promoting community relations amongst themselves. Talkshops opened up the debates and provided a forum for clearing up misconceptions and addressing stereotypes about both communities. Interestingly, Talkshop participants in both previous NCB studies stressed that they should be afforded more opportunities to express their opinions about issues affecting their lives and should be consulted as active citizens in their communities (Kelly 2002; Sinclair et al. 2004). Despite policy initiatives, many young people have commented that they feel relatively powerless and are denied consultation within their communities and schools. The sense of exclusion experienced by many young people is further compounded by the implicit apathy exhibited by many adults concerning the state of politics in Northern Ireland (Smyth et al. 2004).

3. The methodology

The design of *Voices behind the Statistics* was based on previous research projects undertaken by NCB (McCole et al. 2003). It consisted of three key elements:

- a literature review
- Talkshops with a purposive sample of 16 and 17-year-olds in four areas across Northern Ireland
- data analysis and consideration of the findings with young people.

Background of the research design

An up-to-date literature review of recent research with young people on sectarianism and community relations in Northern Ireland was undertaken prior to the fieldwork to inform the researchers about latest findings and issues in relation to the socio-religious conflict in Northern Ireland. A synopsis of this review was presented in the previous section of the report. However, *Voices behind the Statistics* is essentially a qualitative study, which attempted to elicit young people's experiences of and views on community relations and sectarianism. The 2003 YLT survey provided such views on a large-scale statistical level. The present research project attempted to look 'behind' the statistics of the 2003 YLT survey and provide a more in-depth exploration of the views of young people.

The 2003 YLT survey was based on a representative sample of 2,000 16-year-olds drawn from the Child Benefit Register in Northern Ireland. Of the 2,000 16-year-olds that were invited to take part in the survey, 902 responded. The questionnaire was developed in consultation with young people and asked a series of questions on young people's experiences of community relations within school and community settings. It explored contact and friendship patterns, and examined young people's attitudes and experiences to cross-community programmes. The YLT questionnaire also included 'free response' questions in order to give young people the opportunity to comment on their experiences of community relations in Northern Ireland. Over 280 respondents used this opportunity to voice their opinions, which were often very lengthy and comprehensive. Together with the statistical evidence, these open-ended answers from the YLT survey were an ideal resource for developing the fieldwork exercises for the *Voices behind the Statistics* project.

Designing the fieldwork tools

The Talkshop approach

As described in the introduction to this report, one of the core principles of NCB as an organisation is to advocate the participation of children and young people in all matters affecting them. Hence a method of data collection was chosen for the present project which complied with this aim. Talkshops, a participatory method of data collection, has been used by NCB for gathering young people's

views on a range of issues and, more specifically, in a similar research project undertaken in Northern Ireland (McCole et al. 2003). Talkshops combine the method of focus group discussions (see for example, Krueger 1994) with a young-people centred participatory approach that is based on principles of youth and community work.

Because the society in Northern Ireland is deeply divided along socio-religious lines, community relations can be a sensitive subject area. Although young people in Northern Ireland today are less likely to have been victims of bomb attacks and paramilitary shootings, the vast majority of teenagers still live in segregated housing areas and attend segregated schools. Of the respondents to the 2003 YLT survey, only 29% lived in mixed religious neighbourhoods and 89% attended schools that they described as consisting 'most', 'nearly all' or 'fully' of students that were of the same socio-religious background as themselves. Of those living in single religious neighbourhoods, 47% of Catholics and 34% of Protestants had no friend at all from the other main religious community. Similarly, 32% of Protestants and 39% of Catholics who attended segregated schools had no friend at all from the other main religious community. (Devine and Schubotz 2004). Furthermore, due to the close social and extended family networks in Northern Ireland, young people are likely to have relatives or acquaintances that were directly affected by the Northern Ireland conflict.

It was therefore essential to provide an environment in which participants in the Talkshops felt comfortable to talk. Since the Talkshops were only one-off events for young people, except for a small number of participants who progressed to the second or third phase of the project, it was important for the researchers to develop a good level of rapport with the participants in a very short period of time. This would be essential to encourage participants to openly voice their opinions, particularly on sensitive subject areas. This level of rapport was developed in two ways:

- by agreeing a contract with ground rules with the participants
- by using light-hearted ice-breaking exercises at the start of each Talkshop.

It was hoped that a research environment could be established in which participants felt free to talk, yet would not feel pressurised to share opinions against their will or to reveal experiences that they were uncomfortable with.

Fieldwork phases

The data collection and analysis took place in three distinct phases:

- Talkshops in individual schools
- Combined Talkshops in two areas
- data analysis and consultation on 'Data analysis day' with young people.

Two researchers facilitated the individual and combined Talkshops as well as the data analysis on findings day.

Phase one: Talkshops in individual schools

During the first phase of the research, 12 Talkshops were planned with up to 20 participants in each. The Talkshops were to cover four different geographical areas in Northern Ireland and, within each area, three different types of school. The areas were carefully selected to represent young people from inner-city areas as well as small towns and rural areas. In each area, one planned integrated school, one state-controlled (Protestant) school and one Catholic-maintained school were invited to take part in the project. Of those three schools in each area, only one was a grammar school, ensuring that a wide range of young people were included, and allowing for all differences between comprehensive secondary and grammar schools to emerge.

In three of the geographical areas, the participation of a cross-section of schools was secured in line with the selection criteria. However, in one geographic area it was not possible to find a school with a mainly Protestant intake to agree to take part in the project. Whilst some schools declined to participate because of heavy workloads, or because they were already involved in too many other research projects, one school declined to take part because the subject of community relations and sectarianism was seen as too sensitive to be discussed in school. According to the principal of this school, a number of students in the target age group had been affected directly by the Northern Ireland conflict and bereaved as a result of it, and the school felt that this subject would therefore be best not mentioned. This highlights the importance and aptness of this research project in what is now often seen as a post-conflict era. However, it also stresses the need to create a suitable environment for participants to discuss community relations openly and safely.

In all, 194 students, aged 16 and 17, participated in the Talkshops in the first phase. The Talkshops lasted, on average, for three hours. The sampling matrix is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Sampling matrix for Phase 1: Individual school Talkshops and number of participants

School type	Geographical Area			
	Enniskillen	Coleraine	Belfast	Banbridge
Catholic (Maintained)	St Michael's Grammar School (15)	Dominican College Portstewart (18)	St Joseph's College (22)	St Patrick's College (18)
Protestant (Controlled)	Enniskillen High School (15)	Coleraine College (19)	Grosvenor Voluntary Grammar School (13)	None
Planned Integrated	Erne Integrated College (19)	North Coast Integrated College (17)	Hazelwood Integrated College (21)	Newbridge Integrated College (17)
Total	49	54	56	35

Phase two: Combined Talkshops

In the second phase of the fieldwork, two Combined Talkshops were held: one in Enniskillen and one in Belfast. The Combined Talkshops lasted for five hours. In each of these Talkshops, three representatives from each of the three local schools met and discussed issues of community relations and sectarianism together. The participants either self-selected or were voted to represent their school during the Talkshops in phase one of the project.

Data were collected through field notes taken by the researchers, worksheets completed by the participants themselves, and feedback and suggestion cards handed out at each Talkshop. During the Combined Talkshops, group discussions were also partly tape-recorded with the permission of the young people.

Phase three: Data analysis and consultation

In the third phase of the research project, one representative from each of the six schools involved in the Combined Talkshops met with the researchers to contribute to the analysis of the collected data and to prepare a conference presentation. This data analysis day took place in Enniskillen and lasted for four hours. Participants were again self-selected or nominated by their peers. NCB's previous experience had suggested that the young people involved in this phase of the project would find this very rewarding, both in terms of confidence-building and skills development. We found this confirmed in *Voices behind the Statistics*. Findings were presented, largely by the young people themselves, during a major conference on the theme *Towards a Post-conflict Society*. This

was organised by *Childcare in Practice*, a peer-reviewed scientific journal from Northern Ireland and held in Belfast in May 2004.

Content of the Talkshops

The focus of the Talkshops was community relations and sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Throughout its three phases, the project followed principles of interactive small-group discussions. Some of the exercises in the project had previously been used successfully in NCB projects (Kelly 2002; McCole et al. 2003; Sinclair 2004). However, the specific content of all the exercises used in the *Voices behind the Statistics* project was based on the quantitative data collected in the 2003 YLT survey.

In the 2003 YLT survey, a number of respondents had suggested that young people should be asked whether or not they wanted to stay in Northern Ireland or leave the country because of existing poor community relations. This issue provided the background for the design for the *Staying or Leaving?* Exercise (see page 70), which was used as an icebreaker in the first phase of the *Voices behind the Statistics* project. Talkshop participants were given a list of items – some of them were related to sectarianism and community relations, others not – and were asked to put these in order (adding other items if they wished) according to how they would impact on their decision to stay in Northern Ireland or to leave the country. The list of items can be found in the *Appendix: Schedules for the Talkshops* (page 69).

Another exercise, which had previously been used successfully in NCB projects, was called *Walking decisions* (see page 71). During this exercise, statements relating to community relations and sectarianism were read out one at a time by a Talkshop facilitator. Participants were then asked to walk to a point of reference in the room that represented their feelings about the statement: that is, whether they agreed, disagreed or were undecided about it. For the present project, statements for this exercise were exclusively selected from the wealth of open-ended responses given by respondents to the 2003 YLT survey. The *Walking decisions* exercise was also adapted for the second phase of the project. Again, statements were taken from the YLT survey responses for this.

Findings from the 2003 YLT survey were also used ad hoc during the Talkshops to encourage further discourse in selected controversial areas, such as national and religious identity. Some exercises, such as the *Walking Decisions* exercise, the *Graffiti wall* and the *10 years on* exercise were adapted from previous NCB research projects. The *Compromise exercise* evolved from the particular needs in the present project. More details of all these exercises can be found in the *Appendix: Schedules for the Talkshops* (page 69).

4. Views and experiences of young people

In this chapter we report on the experiences and the views of the young people who participated in the Talkshops in respect of community relations and sectarianism. These are presented in five broad headings, each with further sub-headings. The broad themes to emerge were:

- national and Religious identity
- factors contributing to young people's attitudes and view points
- impact of cultural and heritage on young people's attitudes
- territorial identifiers and symbols of social religious belonging
- the impact of community relations of politics, the police service and the paramilitary

National and religious identity

The 2003 Young Life and Times survey found that national and religious identity were important to around two-thirds of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland (Devine and Schubotz 2004). Bearing in mind that an identification of being Irish/British or being Catholic/Protestant are at the core of the socio-religious conflict in Northern Ireland, it was a fair assumption to make that issues around religious and national identity would be discussed controversially during the Talkshops.

On a general note, the majority of participants in the *Voices behind the Statistics* project (64%) agreed with one of the statements discussed in the *Walking decisions* exercise, which was:

Knowing one's identity is very important.

Participants understood that identity is a multi-faceted, and often situational, phenomenon. Religious belonging, personality, gender and sexual orientation, family roots and ethnicity were identified as facets of identity. Family, peer groups, school and the media were named as playing key roles in the formation of attitudes during adolescence, although it was acknowledged that young adults were also able to form their own opinions independently. This influence of agents of socialisation on young people's attitude formation will be discussed later.

In terms of the project's focus on community relations and sectarianism, national and religious identity were key concepts, as it is mainly along these markers of identity that tensions in community relations in Northern Ireland emerge and sectarianism develops. It became clear during the project that there was a considerable overlap between the religious and national identity of the participants, although this overlap was not complete.

One question specifically discussed during the *Walking decisions* exercise dealt with a statement by a respondent to the 2003 YLT survey, which exemplifies this overlap between religious and national identity. This statement was:

In five years time or less there will be a united Ireland. It would be a lot better for all religions to mix.

The main difficulty that arose with regard to this statement was that some young people agreed with the prediction of a united Ireland but disagreed that people would mix better or vice versa. The association of nationhood – a united Ireland – with religious background in this statement was not seen as problematic. For most Talkshop participants the Northern Ireland conflict appeared to be mainly about nationality and national identity rather than religious identity. The following comment of one of the participants, made at the end of a Talkshop, shows this clearly.

'I feel personally that there will never be a united Ireland although I have no problems with religion – Protestant and Roman Catholic. Both sides should try and make peace. But this will never happen and I feel that it should never happen. There is only one Ulster and this should not change.'

National identity

Most participants who identified themselves as British also said they were Protestant; and most participants who identified themselves as Irish said they were Catholics. However, for most young people who took part in the project, national identity had a situational and opportunistic element. For example some young people, who clearly identified themselves as British during the Talkshops, said that they would identify themselves as Irish on holidays abroad. One participant said, for example:

'To be honest, I'd much rather be Irish than British because the world hates Britain. And no one hates Ireland because they didn't do anything to anyone.'

On two occasions, two young Protestants spoke of their frustration that some people abroad are not even aware of the difference between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; and the others did not understand that Northern Ireland is not legally a part of a single Irish state. Some Catholics, on the other hand, who strongly identified themselves as Irish during the Talkshops and said they also held Irish passports, reported that they had little trouble stating they were 'British' in order to obtain entry to a university course in Britain through the UCAS system. It was also interesting to note that Catholic participants who held a strong Irish national identity did not fail to raise the issue of discrimination against Catholics in the Royal Family, that is, that a Catholic cannot become King or Queen of England. Other participants who identified themselves as Irish also held British passports because of the inconvenience of obtaining Irish documents in Dublin.

The three main questions that the participants discussed in relation to national identity highlight some of the paradoxes and controversies.

- How can one be 'British' if one lives on the island of Ireland?
- How can one claim to be Irish if one holds a British passport?

- How can one be 'Irish' if one lives in a part of the United Kingdom? (Clearly the weakest of the three debating points.)

In the 2003 YLT, a sizeable minority (25%) identified themselves as Northern Irish. This was true for a similar proportion of Talkshop participants. It was frequently suggested that classing Northern Ireland as one nation could be a possible solution to finding a single identity that everyone could identify with. However, it was recognised that this would take time.

'If it [Northern Ireland] was a different community as opposed to a Catholic community or a Protestant community; there's the Northern Irish community who accepts that people have different religious beliefs. If every generation cares a little bit less then eventually no one will care. But it's gonna take a long time. Ages and ages.'

As in 2003 YLT, Protestant/Unionist participants in the Talkshops were more prepared to accept a Northern Irish national identity than Catholics/Nationalists were. One Protestant participant said:

'I would consider myself British. If people asked me what I was I would say I am British but if somebody said to me you're Northern Irish, then I wouldn't have a problem with that. I can understand this.'

Some Catholic/Nationalist participants were, however, also willing to compromise on the issue of national identity. One young person said:

'We are one big community, we have to try at least to get on together.'

Another student, who identified themselves strongly as Irish, felt that:

'Right now, being Irish or being British is completely irrelevant. Right now what you have to do is try to get a stable government in Stormont. You have to try to get the parliament working, get the issues dealt with, and that's what the challenge is.'

Clearly, however, for the majority of participants – both Catholic and Protestant – being Northern Irish was not an identity they related to. As one respondent said, because of 'the history and things like that, it's not going to happen. Anyway, a lot of people wouldn't want it to happen'. In the same discussion another young person added:

'You cannot be Northern Irish, for the simple reasons, that you are Irish or you are British. That is it. You cannot be Northern Irish. Northern Irish is a weak group. It's a weak excuse to try and get people to go along with each other. I just don't believe in it. I think you're Irish or you're British – that's what I believe. My main problem about saying I'm Northern Irish is that it just doesn't sound right, does it? There's no real value to it.'

Religious identity

Religious identity was not discussed quite as controversially as national identity, although we found that Talkshop participants also varied considerably across all

school sectors in their opinions about religious identity. One of the main tasks in the Talkshops was to establish to what degree actual religiosity impacted on religious identity. One way of addressing this was through the *Walking decisions* exercise. Two comments from the 2003 YLT respondents, which were directly related to this issue, were read out and participants were asked to position themselves in relation to these comments. One respondent in the 2003 YLT survey had suggested:

The only difference between Catholics and Protestants is their beliefs in God.

Only a very small minority (14%) agreed that the difference between Catholics and Protestants lies entirely in their beliefs in God. Nearly two thirds of participants disagreed with this statement (60%), whilst 26% were undecided.

Another YLT respondent had commented:

There is too much emphasis on religious differences. This is just stupid because the whole God and Christ thing might not even be true.

This statement was also included in the *Walking decisions* exercise. Only a very small minority disagreed with this. However, opinions were more divided on what was the actual religious basis for these perceived 'religious differences'.

Some participants commented that religious beliefs 'should be' the only difference. They argued that the religious difference, which is in reality actually quite small, is being abused in the Northern Ireland conflict. Some participants, who agreed that the difference between Catholics and Protestants lay entirely in their beliefs in God, spoke of the similarities between Protestants and Catholics in relation to their white ethnicity, their common Christian faith and their cultural norms. One young person who identified themselves as Protestant asked:

'If I said I was a Catholic would I be a different person?'

However, the strong overall disagreement with the statement that Catholics and Protestants differ only in their beliefs in God is another clear indication that young people's understanding of the Troubles in Northern Ireland are that it is a multi-faceted conflict in which religious identity plays a key role in the construction of the socio-religious, us-and-them divide, but in which actual religiosity has little impact on everyday life. One quote from a participant illustrates this.

'Seriously, it's just a religion. That's all it is. It doesn't affect every single bit of your life. It's just what you believe in and sometimes it's not even what you believe in'

However, it was acknowledged overall that the belief in God, or religiosity, does play a small part in the Northern Ireland conflict and in the development of sectarianism. We found that this connection is more likely to arise from a failure to prevent the proliferation of existing stereotypes and pigeonholing, rather than an active furthering of sectarian attitudes in churches and church services. Evidence for this was found in the widespread lack of understanding of the

actual religious differences between Catholicism and the different branches of Protestantism among Talkshop participants. On the one hand, many Protestant participants were unaware of the traditional religious interiors (such as holy water, eternal flame, way of cross) and current religious rituals in Catholic churches. On the other hand, most Catholic participants were unaware of the more participatory structures found in Protestant churches and the religious practices there. A small number of participants, however, were very well informed about aspects such as: the history of reformation; the religious background of the Orange Order; examples in Irish history where Protestantism did not comply with Unionism and Catholicism did not comply with Nationalism (for example The United Irishmen, the early relationship between King William II and the Roman Catholic Church); and generally about the differences between the Catholic and Protestant denominations. These young people were likely to have gained their knowledge through mixed religious marriages of their parents, personal interest or – most likely – through cross-community activities rather than the formal curriculum taught in their schools. A quote from one participant exemplifies this.

‘We went to a project in America and we went to a church there. It was the Presbyterian Church. They would be more extreme than in Northern Ireland but they shared their church with the Catholic Church because the Catholic Church didn’t have their own and they receive no money and there was no problem. They had a Protestant service in the morning and a Catholic service in the evening and they said they had become a church of all and they all got on with each other and it wasn’t an issue. And both their congregations respected each other and they were all Christians.’

It was suggested by a number of participants that as both Catholicism and Protestantism were Christian religions, they were essentially very similar. So, according to the young people, there was very little ground for conflict.

In terms of church attendance, most participants said they went to church on a regular basis. For the majority of them this was due to their own religiosity, but a considerable minority also said they went to church because their parents expected this of them or because they wanted to show their dedication to their own political rather than religious community. One participant, who openly said in a Talkshop that he did not believe in God, stated for example:

‘Going to church is just something you have to do.’

In conclusion, it became clear during the Talkshops that national and religious identity mattered for young people. Religious and national identity overlapped, but whereas participants found it easy to identify themselves with either British or Irish nationality, there was more confusion about what role religion played or should play in the conflict.

Factors contributing to young people's attitudes and viewpoints

Parental and community background

The participants in *Voices behind the Statistics* gave evidence that families and friends, but also school were instrumental in the formation of their attitudes towards community relations and sectarianism in Northern Ireland. This again confirmed the finding from the 2003 YLT survey where 47% of respondents said that their parents had been the main influence on their feelings about the other main religious community, 21% said their friends were, and 9% said school was the main factor. Around 13% said that there was a mixture of factors, which usually included at least one of these agents – family, friends or school.

A number of participants were aware that this impact can often be subconscious rather than direct, and that friends and family ‘just kind of carry it on without even realising’. One participant said:

‘I think many children are still growing up with strong influences from their parents to encourage them to dislike Protestants or Catholics before they can make their own mind up.’

Some participants, however also maintained that they themselves had a certain independence in the formation of their attitudes.

‘I discover my own view and I make them up and not my parents, but then a lot of children do learn experiences and thoughts from school friends and not their parents so much.’

Generally there was agreement that attitudes and views can also be passed on unconsciously and that messages received from parents can be quite confusing.

‘My dad would always say: ‘I’m not a Unionist, I’m not a Loyalist, I’m just neutral.’ But anytime Catholics or Sinn Féin MPs get on the news, he sits there going: ‘They’re nothing but Taigs.’ So he’s raised me believing that our family isn’t at all Protestant or anything, yet he holds very Protestant and Unionist views despite what he says. It’s quite a conflicting message.’

The same participant added:

‘I’ve learned most of anything I know about any sectarianism through school.’

Friends and peer groups

When participants talked about learning sectarianism through school, they most often referred to the schoolyard and peer groups in school rather than the formal curriculum. Another participant with very similar experiences at home confirmed this view.

‘My dad was in the Orange Lodge. He wouldn’t be a sectarian, I mean he would be a Unionist, be a Loyalist, but he wouldn’t be Sectarian. If that makes sense. He wouldn’t go and see somebody wearing Celtic shirt and want to go punch them or whatever. So I’ve learned perhaps my Unionist views from him and mostly from other people and specifically a certain

amount from my parents but you learn more from your friends and from people you hang around with and stuff like that.'

In the *Walking decisions* exercise, participants were asked to agree or disagree to a statement which came from a YLT respondent and which dealt with the role of parents in the formation of attitudes. This statement read:

People only learn to be prejudiced and bigoted through their parents.

The statement received very little approval from Talkshop participants. There was a clear understanding that parents do play a role in the formation of prejudice and bigotry towards others, but that this responsibility does not lie with parents alone. The participants were aware of a mixture of influences that they were exposed to during their growing up. The following quote from one of the participants shows this.

'Did you notice when you're really young like, when you're about eight, you don't really care about this, you're rolling about in the muck getting dirty just having a laugh. It doesn't matter who you are. But see, when you get older; it's the influence of other people on you and sometimes education can turn you against other people. If you are educated, that these are Catholics, these are Protestants, here's the two sides, here's what's different, then immediately you're thinking [in this way]. But if people would just learn that people are people...'

There was also an understanding that attitudes and prejudices are often formed and proliferated unconsciously as the following quote shows.

'I think it's spread by a lot of people. The hatred and all is a lack of understanding of each other's religious beliefs. If you are at home and watching TV, maybe one of your parents is saying something bad about Protestant or Catholic religious beliefs, then you pick it up and say it to your friends.'

School

Two controversial statements from YLT respondents were included in the *Walking decisions* exercise to encourage students to reflect on the role of school and education in general on the formation of sectarian and stereotypical attitudes. The first statement dealt with the socio-religious segregation itself. It read:

If pupils don't learn to mix in school levels, they won't mix in adulthood.

Three times as many participants agreed with this statement as disagreed with it. Interestingly, comparing the three school sectors, students who attended planned integrated schools were least likely to agree with this statement. This could either be seen as evidence for a normalisation of integration in these schools or as for these students' awareness that school is only one sector of the society where mixing takes place. Students from Catholic-maintained schools and state-controlled Protestant schools were much more likely to agree that mixing in schools would make mixing in adulthood easier. The data from the

2003 YLT survey confirms this. It was found that students who attended schools with classmates that had exclusively or predominantly the same socio-religious background as themselves, were over ten times more likely to say that they had 'no friend' from the other main religious community (Devine and Schubotz 2004). This may partly explain why students from Catholic-maintained schools and state Protestant schools in the *Voices behind the Statistics* project were so much more adamant that mixing in schools provides the basis for mixing in adulthood. One participant from a state-controlled Protestant school said, for example:

'I think the integrated schools are good in preparing yourself for your life and so on. In workplaces you are with every religion and integrated schools have you prepared for that. You know, you make friends from different religions.'

A respondent who attended a Catholic school also agreed that mixing at an early age increased the likelihood of young people learning to socialise with people from a background other than their own.

'If it [integration] was introduced from a young age it would be a lot better. If you don't grow up with it and you are not used to it then it's going to be something novel like. There should be more people starting in integrated schools. You know if you go in from a Catholic school, both into first year or into sixth year, it's a big change. If it was introduced from a young age, you know, primary school level – there is only one integrated primary school here – and if there was a couple more then it would be encouraged a bit more. Then it wouldn't be such: 'Oh, you go to an integrated school' sort of thing.'

However, despite the very strong support in each Talkshop for integrated education, there was a strong feeling among participants that integration could only be organised on the basis of free choice. The next quote exemplifies this.

'There should be more integrated schools. But it should be the choice of pupils or children whether they want to go to an integrated school or whether they want to go to an all-Catholic school or whether they want to go to a mixed girls-boys school or Protestant school or whatever. I mean it should be their own choice. But I think it would bring more people together, you know. More religions, because you grow up a bit more and you make friends on both sides and you understand their point of view and their cultures and stuff.'

The second statement, focussing on the impact of education on attitude formation, dealt more with the impact of the standard of education provided in schools. The statement read:

Community relations and attitudes towards other cultures and beliefs are linked to the level of education.

Opinions on this statement were much more diverse than they were on 'mixing' and integration. A small majority of students dismissed the statement and argued that academic achievements were not necessarily linked to a more

liberal and less sectarian attitude. Students argued that some politicians from Northern Ireland who had obtained very high academic qualifications still held some of the most sectarian attitudes. However, in each Talkshop there were also a number of participants who argued that a high level in education would bring about a less sectarian attitude and would increase the ability of the community to deal with differences and conflict in a more civilised way. More and better education was seen as a measure for creating more tolerance and more insight on what the Northern Ireland conflict was about. Some students went as far as to argue that 'smarter people' were less likely to cause physical fights.

The question of a possible link between academic ability and the ability to deal with conflicts and differences in opinion was one of the most controversially discussed issues in the whole project. Despite all factors influencing the formation of attitudes – parents, school, the media, friends and peer groups – there was an understanding that people themselves have a definite degree of responsibility in relation to their own attitudes and have to make sense of the information they receive and consume. One participant put this in his own words when he said:

'It's the same with most things. You make up your own mind on things.'

The media

The media was seen as having a very definite and often detrimental impact on attitude formation. Participants felt that there was too much media coverage focusing on violence and incidences relating to the so-called 'Troubles'. This contributed to a misunderstanding of the severity of the Northern Ireland conflict. During the *Walking decisions* exercise, most young people agreed that:

The media place too much emphasis on the differences between Catholics and Protestants.

There was agreement that the media sensationalise the Troubles. One male said:

'You'll never hear the news reporting about cross-community programmes, they wouldn't be interested in this sort of thing.'

It was also argued that:

'The media has a very negative influence on community relations. Many papers and broadcasts are biased and hold one side.'

It was also critically mentioned that the media would frequently pigeonhole victims of crime in Northern Ireland in terms of socio-religious belonging, even though the crime may not have any sectarian background. It was acknowledged that the media itself is also partially biased and embedded in one particular community (for example, *The Newsletter* vs *The Irish News*).

'The papers are full of it like. A lot of people don't take heed of it anymore. It doesn't have such an impact as it might have done. A lot of people just,

they won't truly believe what the papers say, they'll take what they want to believe and make their own judgements.'

It was interesting that during the project the BBC screened a dramatisation of the Holy Cross dispute. This dispute had broken out in the summer of 2001 over the route to school that children attending a Catholic-maintained primary school had to take in North Belfast. Residents in a predominantly Loyalist area surrounding the school had felt that they had been intimidated and terrorised by Nationalists, and in turn tried to stop children attending Holy Cross primary school. The BBC's screening of the dramatisation, which in the meantime has won major film awards, caused considerable discussion and debate itself. This was a good opportunity to discuss with Talkshop participants whether the media could potentially have a positive impact on the promotion of a better understanding through films based on historic events, such as *Holy Cross*, *Bloody Sunday* or *In the Name of the Father*.

Opinions were divided in this debate. On the one hand, a considerable number of young people felt that such screenings would not make a difference to people's attitudes and stereotypes. Attempts to 'please both sides' of the community would ultimately fail. On the other hand, some participants felt that dramatisations like *Holy Cross* or *Bloody Sunday* would encourage discussions about these events and could therefore potentially contribute to a better understanding of each other's points of view.

Impact of culture and heritage on young people's attitudes

The participants discussed features of Protestant-Unionist and Catholic-Nationalist cultures and how they influenced their attitudes towards community relations. Discussions centred on the relevance of traditions to defining their Catholic-Nationalist or Protestant-Unionist identity, and how cultural celebrations affected this. The key events discussed in relation to this were the annual Bonfire Night on 11 July and the marching season around the 12th July to mark the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne on the one hand, and St Patrick's Day on the other.

Participants were prompted early during the Talkshops to think about the importance of cultural heritage for them. In the *Staying or Leaving?* exercise participants had the opportunity to rank 'Gaelic sports & Irish dance/music' as well as 'Bonfire Night and the Marching Season' as reasons to stay in Northern Ireland or to leave the country. Most groups prioritised reasons unrelated to community relations in this exercise, however 'Gaelic sports & Irish dance/music' (twice) and 'Bonfire Night and the Marching Season' (four times) were the only community-related reasons that any participants selected in the top two reasons for staying in Northern Ireland. This emphasises the affirmative and reassuring significance that these cultural celebrations have for some young people's identities. At the same time, both items were also selected, and more often, in the *Staying or Leaving?* exercise as the top two reasons for *leaving* Northern Ireland (Marching Season = nine times, Irish culture = twice), which gives evidence that symbolic cultural celebrations can also be perceived as threats.

This was confirmed in the *Circle exercise*. Here, 26 young people recorded aspects of Irish culture – such as *Fleadhs* (festivals of Irish culture), Gaelic sports, traditions and language – in the red area of the personal circle, and 20 young people recorded the 12th July in the red area. This indicated that these were of the highest relevance for them in terms of their feelings on community relations (see *Appendix: Schedule for the Talkshops*, page 69, for more details on these exercises). Overall, it would be fair to say that the 12th July and the Marching Season were the most controversially discussed events in the Talkshop.

In terms of the 12th July celebrations, a number of Protestant participants made the point that not too long ago Catholics and Protestants were able to enjoy the 12th July celebrations together. They argued that it was only in the very recent past (said to be since the first open dispute about the Orange Order parade in Drumcree in 1995) that the disputes about the 12th July parades had led to a more sectarian and polarised dispute during the Marching Season. A number of Catholic participants confirmed this in giving anecdotal evidence that they themselves or their parents used to watch parades and joined in the celebrations, but had stopped this recently. Opinion was divided on whether the poor handling of the situation in Drumcree in 1995 by the police or an increasingly confident (Catholic) opposition against the parades had led to the tensions about Orange marches.

A few Protestant Talkshop participants gave evidence that a non-sectarian community spirit still existed locally in some places during the Marching Season. They reported that they viewed the 12th July very much as a social event where they enjoyed playing in bands. The fact that people wearing band uniforms were not allowed to enter some pubs, was seen as a positive precautionary way of ‘preventing rows and ensuring public safety’.

Whilst a small number of Catholics said they would indeed still take part in the 12th July celebrations, and an equally small number of Protestants felt that contentious parades should be either re-routed or banned altogether, these were not the majority of the viewpoints expressed. The majority of participants identifying themselves as Protestants supported the viewpoint that there was a general civil and democratic right for anyone to demonstrate and voice their opinions on whatever issue they chose, and that this right should not be limited to a particular location (or route). The majority of participants identifying themselves as Catholics, on the other hand, argued that there is no such thing as a historic and eternal right to march on certain routes (the so called ‘Queen’s Highway’). They felt that this was particularly the case if historic events were being celebrated during these parades (such as the victory of Protestant William of Orange over the Catholic James in the Battle of the Boyne) that flaunt a particular culture or tradition in the face of another, which had been repressed for centuries following the celebrated event.

In one Talkshop in a predominantly Protestant school, participants talked about their concerns about the impact of the Marching Season on the tourist industry in Northern Ireland. They felt that tourists were more likely to visit the Republic of Ireland anyway. However, periods of potential trouble and unrest, such as the Marching Season, had an additional adverse effect on the tourist industry – as

many residents from Northern Ireland left and tourists from abroad would be apprehensive of visiting Northern Ireland during this time. Participants in a Catholic-maintained school from the same area added that flags that were erected during the Marching Season and then not taken down by the end of the summer might also have an additional adverse effect on the tourist industry.

In other schools, strong controversy also arose around the issue of the decoration of streets in perceived mixed areas. Some participants felt that marching was '*in your face with the flags up*' and that Protestants should not impose this on Catholics. Protestants, on the other hand, highlighted that the 12th July celebrations only go on for two weeks a year – compared to the Catholic-Irish culture, which is celebrated all year round – and thus it would not be too much to expect to accept this. Catholics felt that this argument was unacceptable. One participant said in one discussion:

'We don't play Gaelic [football] in their areas.'

Another participant complained:

'They [Protestants] are sticking up UVF flags. Kerb paintings are allowed, and not taken down.'

Other negative attitudes towards the 12th July arose from the violence and rioting associated with the Marching Season. Comparisons were often made with aspects of the Catholic-Irish culture (music and dancing), which was viewed as inoffensive to the Protestant community. This is reflected in the following comments.

'It's just an excuse to burn the streets. Catholics have the *Fleadh* and stay in their own areas.'

'Protestants burn symbols of Catholicism; Catholics don't do that sort of thing.'

The latter comment highlights the perceived connections between Orange Parades and the paramilitaries. TV reports of paramilitaries burning the Irish Tricolour during a Bonfire Night were given as evidence.

Overall, there was agreement among most participants that the 12th July is not the day of celebration it once was. But as we have seen, the interpretation of this celebration of cultural identity was dependent on the national and religious identity that young people held.

Territorial identifiers and symbols of socio-religious belonging

Murals and flags

Murals, flags and kerb stone paintings in residential areas have been one of the most distinctive features of the Northern Ireland conflict for decades. Whilst disregarded and detested by some people as mere expressions of sectarianism and intolerance of otherness – murals, in particular, have also been seen as legitimate ways of expressing community feelings (Rolston 2003). Since the

Peace Process, in large cities such as Belfast and Derry, murals have increasingly become tourist attractions. There can be no doubt, however, that they are first and foremost territorial images that mark otherwise largely invisible 'borders' between the two main socio-religious groups.

During the Talkshops we attempted to find out from participants how they felt about these territorial images and identifiers. Two statements in the *Walking decisions* exercise were designed to address these issues directly. As with all the previous statements discussed in this report, these were taken from 16-year-old respondents to the 2003 YLT survey. The first quote dealt with the use of territorial images.

People from all religions live and work together much better in areas which are not decorated with public murals, flags and kerb paintings.

A large majority of Talkshop participants agreed that murals, flags and kerbstone paintings were intimidating. In the comment cards given out after each Talkshop, frequent reference was made to flags and murals. In their suggestions students recommended that flags and murals should be '*scrapped*', '*got rid of*' or '*banned*'. This, in their opinion, would contribute to better community relations.

However, some participants also made the point that one cannot draw conclusions about people who live in areas decorated with kerbstone paintings and murals and assume that these people were generally more sectarian than people living elsewhere. The existence of murals did not mean that there was no cooperation between people. Murals themselves were not seen as problematic as the flags or sectarian graffiti that glorified paramilitary organisations. Participants living in interface areas or areas where graffiti, murals and kerbstone paintings occurred were generally more vocal about this issue, but not necessarily more disapproving of murals or flags.

In all the Talkshops, participants agreed that it was a minority who put up murals and flags. Often a link was shown between the occurrence of territorial identifiers and paramilitary activity in residential areas. When asked whether other residents could remove the flags or oppose the painting of kerbstones or murals, it was made clear that this was usually not seen as a safe option.

Whilst acknowledging that murals have an intimidating effect on people not living in the area, some young people also said murals may represent the culture and identity and feelings of people living in the neighbourhood. One participant commented that:

'Paint can be washed off, feelings cannot.'

This indicated that participants had an understanding that the removal of flags, kerbstone paintings and murals would do little to improve community relations as such, as long as the feelings and identities the murals represented were not tackled.

Throughout the project, the strongest opinions were expressed about the flying of flags, especially paramilitary flags. In a Combined Talkshop, one participant asked:

‘Is there a need for the ‘Simply the best’ flags and UVF [flags]? Is that necessary? Is that part of the Marching Season? There is no IRA flag. There is the Tricolour – plain and simple.’

The statement in the Walking decisions: ‘The Union Jack should be up all year round but the Tricolour should stay in the South,’ caused some of the most controversial debates throughout the research project. Although superficially a statement about the flying of the British and the Irish national flags, this statement was most directly connected to the question of territory and national identity. Predictably, the majority of Protestant/Unionist participants agreed that the Union Jack should be flown, whereas the majority of Catholic/Nationalist participants strongly disagreed.

Some Catholic respondents stated that they found the Union Jack offensive as it represented Unionist and Loyalist sectarianism, and reinforced what they saw as ‘the British occupancy of Ireland’. One participant argued that, given that it is possible to have Irish citizenship in Northern Ireland, the Irish national flag should also be accepted.

‘Northern Ireland is unique because you can have two passports under the two jurisdictions, therefore, those who choose Irish should have the Irish flag accepted in North of Ireland.’

However, there was a sizeable minority of young people who discussed the question of flags from the points of view of the actual political status of Northern Ireland. Since it is currently to be part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, one participant commented, for example:

‘We’re part of Britain [*The participant means: part of the UK*]. The South of Ireland has the Tricolour, would they let us fly it down there? It would be like French men flying the French flag in Ireland.’

It was interesting that some knowledgeable participants from both the Nationalist and Unionist point of view argued that their respective flags included both sides of the socio-religious divide. From the Protestant/Unionist point of view, the argument was made that the cross saltire of St Patrick is part of the Union Jack, which originally represented the Kingdom of Ireland with the United Kingdom since the Act of Union in 1801, and Northern Ireland since partition in 1921. Therefore there would be no need to fly the Irish flag. Unsurprisingly, this argument was unacceptable for the majority of Nationalist/Catholic participants in the Talkshops. In turn it was argued that the Irish Tricolour was also a symbol representing both communities. One participant said:

‘The Tricolour is not only for Catholics because the orange in the Tricolour represents the Protestants. So what the Tricolour represents is the peaceful coming together of Protestants and Catholics. What’s wrong with that?’

Neither argument – well made as they were – could possibly convince the ‘other side’. Quite simply, this was because the different flags referred to different ‘Unions’: the Union Jack to the union of Northern Ireland with Great Britain, and the Irish Tricolour to the national union of Ireland. For some participants therefore, the flying of flags represented not only an identification with national identity but also with history, as the following quote demonstrates.

‘Flying the flag [The Union Jack] from the beginning of July to the end of August is something that has always been done and it will never end.’

Only a minority was as vocal about this tradition as this participant; and this view was also only openly challenged by a small number of other participants, who questioned the whole idea of flying flags.

‘But is it natural to fly your flag? Is it natural to paint the kerbstones? Is it natural to paint murals on the wall? Is it a necessary part of heritage?’

There was a general understanding that the flying of flags was one of the peculiarities of the Northern Ireland conflict. Anecdotal evidence was given that neither residents in the Republic of Ireland nor residents in Great Britain were as eager to fly their national flags as Unionists or Nationalists were in Northern Ireland. One young person stated in relation to this:

‘The Red Hand of Ulster should be flown; we shouldn’t have to fly the Union Jack when we have our own flag. The parliament in Scotland fly the Scottish flag and the parliament in Wales fly the Welsh flag, and although part of the UK, they don’t fly the Union Jack.’

Other participants suggested that a new Northern Ireland flag should be created to accommodate everyone. It was proposed that there should be a Northern Ireland flag which both Catholics and Protestants would find acceptable. As one participant said:

‘A flag with the Union Jack in Irish colours would be great!’

However, the great majority of participants thought that this symbolic gesture would not resolve the Northern Ireland conflict.

Other markers of identity

Apart from murals, kerbstone paintings and flags, other markers of identity were discussed. In two Talkshops individual participants gave evidence of how they gave themselves other, or false, first names when entering areas or circumstances they perceived as hostile. One Catholic participant, for example, reported that he changed his name from Sean to John while working part-time on a building site in a predominantly Protestant housing estate.

The school uniform

Another issue that was identified as a defining statement of community background by many participants was the school uniform. Students from all areas reported that they had been exposed to sectarian attacks and

intimidations because they wore their school uniform. One participant commented:

'I hate the way judgements are passed on people just because of what church they belong to or which uniform they wear.'

In some cases young people reported incidences in which their school buses were stoned or attacked, in other cases they recorded that they had been intimidated on their way to or from school either using public transport or walking. In one case, a participant reported that the primary school he had attended had changed the school hours in order to avoid contact with pupils from a nearby school, which had an intake almost exclusively from the other main socio-religious group. The *Circle exercise* used in the Talkshops showed that being a victim of a sectarian attack as a result of wearing a particular school uniform can be a significant life event that has a long-lasting influence on young people's attitudes to the other socio-religious group.

Students from Catholic-maintained schools explained how tensions grew during the summer months ('the marching season') and how they avoided going into areas that are decorated with flags and paintings. Similarly, students from state-controlled (Protestant) schools reported that they felt uneasy walking around with their school uniform in areas where St Patrick's day celebrations take place on 17 March. Students from planned integrated schools were generally less concerned about wearing their school uniform and reported that they were only rarely intimidated because of their uniform. Yet, when asked if they preferred not having to wear a school uniform, most participants stated that they were happy enough wearing a school uniform regardless of the fact that this might identify them.

Sports

The sporting landscape was also found to have a considerable role in the fostering of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, as well as in some young people's identity; more so for young men than women. The 2003 YLT survey found that one in every three male respondents (34%) and one in every four female respondents (24%) had felt intimidated or threatened in the last year when others wore Glasgow Celtic or Glasgow Rangers football strips. Catholics were more likely to have felt intimidated than Protestants (32% and 24% respectively). We could anticipate that the issue of the Rangers and Celtic rivalry would come up during the Talkshops, as well as the issue of Gaelic sports that are almost exclusively followed and played by people identifying themselves as Catholics.

Although there is a general interest in football, among young males in particular in Northern Ireland, it would be fair to say that the Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers football clubs have become vehicles through which a sizeable minority of young people in Northern Ireland direct their sectarianism. The history of this football club rivalry was discussed in more detail in one of the Combined Talkshops. The fact that the Glasgow Celtic Football Club was founded by a Brother who belonged to a Catholic religious order was given as a reason why Celtic has historically had mainly Catholic supporters. According to some participants in this Talkshop, there was, however, no religious reason why the

Glasgow Rangers Football Club attracts mainly Protestant fans. In reality, there is very little evidence of a connection between the religious denomination of the founders of the football clubs in the late 19th century and the religious denomination of their supporters in the 20th and 21st centuries. However, *Voices behind the Statistics* confirmed that the support of either of the Football Clubs in Northern Ireland has become another marker of socio-religious identity. In all the schools, the *Graffiti wall* exercise and the *Personal map* exercises (see page 71) resulted in the issue of Celtic vs Rangers being mentioned as significant for community relations, especially among males. In discussions in a number of Talkshops, participants reported that they could not wear their football shirts in particular areas.

It was also testified, in one Combined Talkshop, that rugby and football school competitions between teams from different school sectors would usually take place in a much more heated and aggressive atmosphere than games between teams from the same school sectors. One participant said that he was just happy if he 'survives these matches uninjured'.

In two Talkshops, the attitude to the Northern Ireland football team, which is mainly supported by people identifying themselves as Protestants, was discussed. One boy believed that he was not picked for the Northern Ireland Junior Team because he was a Protestant and his place went to a Catholic, in order to maintain the religious balance in the team. In another Talkshop in a Catholic-maintained school, participants confirmed that a student from their school had been selected for the Northern Ireland Junior National Team and that this did not cause any sectarian tensions in the school.

The Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA) was another issue discussed in relation to sectarianism in sports. In contrast to football, which is played by young people on both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland and depending on the participants' own national and religious identity, Gaelic sports were either seen as an integral part of the Nationalist-Irish culture or as a sectarian activity that largely excludes Protestants. Particular emphasis was given to the fact that members of the army and police force were excluded from the GAA. It was therefore not surprising that in two Talkshops the GAA was also compared to the Orange Order. Some participants strongly denied any similarities between these two organisations. They argued that the GAA is not as sectarian as the Orange Order, since Protestants are not excluded on religious grounds per se. However, there was disagreement, even among Catholic participants, whether there was an element of sectarianism in the GAA.

Although we found evidence for a connection between sectarianism and sports, we also collected evidence in three Talkshops that other types of sport, where clubs do not normally have a membership along socio-religious lines, can be a means of developing positive community relations and cross-community friendships. For example, two young men in two different schools explained how their membership in non-sectarian swimming clubs gave them the opportunity to mix with people from different backgrounds.

Community Relations

Community relations and politics in Northern Ireland

The elections for a Northern Ireland Parliament, held in November 2003, coincided with the *Voices behind the Statistics* project. This provided ample opportunity to address young people's attitudes to Northern Ireland politics. Although a majority of participants did not express great interest in politics, this was not the case for some participants. A group of young people in one planned integrated school in particular expressed the view that politics in Northern Ireland, the type of government in power, and its subsequent decisions **did** have an impact on young people's lives. Twenty young people also stated, in the comment cards they completed after the Talkshops, that Northern Ireland politics had influenced their views on community relations. Additionally, 38 participants reported during the *Circle exercise* that aspects of the political system in Northern Ireland had been important to the formation of their own political attitudes in the past, even though they might be less important now. Among the political issues mentioned were:

- the civil rights marches
- the set-up and collapse of stormont
- the peace process
- the Good Friday Agreement
- Political parties in general
- politicians such as Gerry Adams, Jeffrey Donaldson, Martin McGuinness, Ian Paisley, Peter Robinson, Margaret Thatcher and David Trimble
- the role of Sinn Féin in the Northern Ireland Assembly and the party's connection to the IRA.

During Talkshops that took place after the elections, most participants reported that they had little hope that a functioning assembly would come into existence in Northern Ireland in the near future. However, similar feelings had also been expressed before it was clear that the DUP's and Sinn Féin's victory in the elections would lead to a further polarisation in Northern Ireland politics. When Talkshop participants were asked if they could imagine that the Ulster Unionist Party and SDLP would eventually consider joining forces to create a large moderate party in Northern Ireland, all participants expressed doubts and argued that Nationalist and Unionist feelings would be too strong for this option. In one Talkshop in a planned integrated school, the appeal that political parties from Northern Ireland had for young people was discussed in more detail. Participants expressed that they would find it difficult to vote for any of the political parties in Northern Ireland. Choices are limited, and a non-sectarian party, which was attractive to young people, was not available.

The discussions about the political parties of Northern Ireland were generally concerned with their failure to work together and resolve existing issues and conflicts. Particularly, participants commented on the DUP's and Sinn Féin's inability to compromise. With one notable exception, when a very vocal participant during a Talkshop argued strongly that the polarisation of the political landscape in Northern Ireland might actually result in political progress, the vast

majority of participants felt that the outcome of the assembly elections would be detrimental for a political compromise. The following quote from a Talkshop participant exemplifies this view.

'N.I. politicians are bigoted and in no position to move the peace agreement forward.'

In the *Staying or Leaving?* exercise 'The politics of Northern Ireland' was the second most likely factor to be chosen by participants as a reason to leave the country (chosen by at least one group in all but one school). Participants from Catholic-maintained schools were mainly critical of the attitude of the DUP. Young people in one Talkshop felt particularly strongly that the DUP's approach was hypocritical and that representatives of this party were unable to listen to other opinions. At the same time, members of Sinn Féin were just called 'terrorists'.

In contrast, comments from participants at Protestant schools were not so much concerned with particular party policies as with the implications of the Good Friday Agreement on Protestants and Unionists in Northern Ireland. One participant stated that the increasing number of young (Protestant) people leaving Northern Ireland would reduce the Unionist mandate. However, as long as Unionists were (partially) in power, there would never be a united Ireland. Protestants were also more likely than Catholics to view endeavours such as the *Bloody Sunday Tribunal* or the Pat Finucane inquest as a farce, and a waste of time and money which could be spent much more usefully on social issues such as the health or education system. A small minority of Protestant participants felt that equal-opportunities legislation as well as the Good Friday Agreement were only put in place to protect Catholics.

Participants in Catholic-maintained schools were much more likely to approve of the outcomes of the Good Friday Agreement. Whilst the great majority of Catholic participants agreed that positive changes had taken place since the Agreement, and that it will just take more time to work; a small number of very vocal participants said that it had failed, had not improved the situation for Catholics at all, and had not brought along equality.

Two issues that have been high on the agenda of Northern Ireland politics in recent years, were also lively and controversially discussed in the Talkshops, those of:

- the ongoing reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) into the Police Force of Northern Ireland (PSNI)
- the role of the paramilitaries since the ceasefire.

Community Relations and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)

In the *Staying or Leaving?* exercise, eight groups across all school sectors (two groups each from Catholic-maintained and planned integrated schools, four groups from two state-controlled [Protestant] schools) cited 'The state of the police force' as one of their top two reasons to leave Northern Ireland. Interestingly, no group in any of the schools located in the Coleraine area made reference to this issue during this exercise.

As could be expected, the comments made about the PSNI varied greatly. Although there was an overall acceptance that efforts had been made to create a police force (including a symbol) that represented both communities, a considerable number of Talkshop participants from both sides of the socio-religious divide felt that the police force was still not organised fairly. Young people who identified themselves as Catholics or Nationalists were more likely to comment on the PSNI, with 15 participants saying that the police had influenced their views and feelings about community relations in Northern Ireland. Catholics held more negative views about the PSNI and often felt that the victimisation of Catholics had been perpetuated by the Police Force. Anecdotal evidence was given for this on a number of occasions. One participant reported second-hand experiences from his area.

'The PSNI and the RUC has in the past done nothing for the Catholic people. Even now in my own area, there was a Sinn Féin councillor. His house has been raided every three months by the RUC... They were woken up at three o'clock in the morning. They just have a newborn baby. They were taken down to the barracks. All his mobile phones, his house phone, his car phone, everything had been taken by the PSNI to the barracks, he had been arrested, he was kept in prison in the barracks, he wasn't charged, he was led out three days later and this is happening all over the place. And the reason why this happened was that there was apparently weapons found and because he had affiliations to Sinn Féin and one of the extreme Republican political groups, his house has been raided by PSNI. They do have a 50:50 entry, but it is not working. It's just not appealing to Catholics.'

Participants who identified themselves as Protestants or Unionists were more likely to say that they felt that the PSNI was '**caught in the middle**' between both sections of the community, which now both opposed the PSNI. These comments were in particular made with regard to the involvement of the Police Force at contentious parades and in riots in interface areas. One participant argued from this point of view that the police reform was not working:

'The Catholics are taking over. The 50:50 is not working because the Protestants are not getting in. And we are getting battered off the f***** road.'

Doubts about the fairness of the recruitment procedure were voiced by a small number of participants across all school sectors, although the majority of young people agreed that the recruitment process had now become fairer. Nevertheless, young people maintained doubts about the outcome of the police reform. One participant stated, in relation to the recruitment of Protestants, that:

'I've got a friend who wants to join the police force, but she is moving away to do it. Patten is trying to work. But it's not working the way it is supposed to be.'

On the other hand, many Catholics would still not feel that it was acceptable to join the PSNI. In one Talkshop in a Catholic-maintained school, students raised the issue that Catholics would be threatened by their own community if they

attempted to join the PSNI. It was argued that the 50:50 ratio just applied to the recruitment process; and that the PSNI would therefore still be mainly made up of Protestants. A minority of participants felt sympathetic towards the PSNI and argued that it was unfair to the PSNI to blame them for the reluctance of Catholics to join. On the other hand, some Protestant respondents felt that Protestant applicants would be discriminated against due to the 50:50 recruitment policy since it does not reflect the population ratio of Northern Ireland, where Protestants are in the majority. Participants in one Talkshop went as far as to say that the RUC should not have been changed at all. New measures that had been implemented to create a fairer police force had not convinced the majority of Catholics that it was okay to join the PSNI. Again, anecdotal evidence was presented to show how the PSNI had failed to protect a 'Unionist' home being attacked by 'Nationalists'. On this occasion, another participant noted that paramilitaries 'would have acted' had they been called.

Community relations and paramilitaries

The issue of paramilitaries in Northern Ireland was discussed primarily in relation to their power and influence on communities. The *Graffiti wall* exercise showed that paramilitaries, such as the IRA, UFF, UDA and UVF, were what many participants first or most associated with community relations in Northern Ireland. In the *Staying or Leaving?* exercise 'The influence and say of paramilitaries' was the most cited reason for young people to leave Northern Ireland. Seventeen groups – that is all except for two Catholic-maintained schools – selected this factor. Only one group from a Catholic-maintained school noted that the existence of the IRA was a good reason to stay. Young people in this particular Talkshop felt that the IRA keeps drugs off the streets, whereas the UVF was associated with drug selling. This, however, did not represent the majority's view. One participant, for example, gave evidence that she lost a friend through paramilitary's pressure.

'One of my friends had so much stick from it [pressure from Republican paramilitaries] and because of all that bother he hung himself there last year, because he couldn't handle anymore. The paramilitaries are a bad thing in general but they're here now and they are a problem, well they are a thing that has to be dealt with. They're a bad thing overall, I think for society.'

In the *Personal circle* exercise, 19 participants indicated that paramilitary organisations were still instrumental in their feelings on community relations, and a further 23 participants said that they were important in the past. Some young people commented that they had been influenced by paramilitary violence, by having had friends beaten or family members shot by the IRA.

The great majority of participants agreed that paramilitaries were too influential and that this was generally detrimental for the peace process in Northern Ireland. Paramilitary organisations were associated with violence, punishment beatings, control over vulnerable people and drug dealing. It was discussed how, in the past, some paramilitary organisations were formed to protect their communities. Such positive associations with paramilitaries were almost exclusively made in relation to the Catholic/Nationalist community.

Occasionally, paramilitaries were also viewed favourably in relation to dealing with anti-social behaviour in their communities when the police were unable or unwilling to deal with these issues. The young people felt that this was the only positive aspect of their influence on the communities in which they existed.

The great majority of Talkshop participants, however, expressed the view that the paramilitaries' 'legitimacy' had ceased to exist with their involvement in drug activities. According to the young people, community relations in Northern Ireland would be improved if there were no paramilitaries or if there was a ceasefire and they all disarmed. The fact that they were fighting amongst each other (especially the Loyalist paramilitaries) and 'robbing from their own communities' was seen as evidence that they had no political mandate in their communities.

In relation to the decommissioning issue, some participants felt that it was unfair that this demand was made vocally of the IRA but not the Loyalist paramilitaries. In one Talkshop, participants made a comparison between the IRA and the SAS. It was argued that the SAS was not accountable to the public for its actions, and therefore the IRA could not be expected to be either. The ambiguous involvement of British armed forces in the murder of lawyer Pat Finucane was used as an example to support this argument. Earlier, other participants had expressed the view that the IRA should be made accountable for their activities in the past, such as for bomb attacks and shootings. Young people had doubts about the idea that tribunals, enquiries and commissions would find a truth that would satisfy both sides of the Northern Ireland conflict.

In a Protestant school, a male participant reported that Loyalist groups were easy to join, and talked about the paramilitaries targeting young males.

'You're sworn-in in a pub whereas Nationalists are given training. It's more difficult to leave because you'll get shot.'

Overall, although most participants were against all paramilitaries, some young people suggested in writing on the comment cards at the end of the Talkshops that they supported paramilitaries. The fact that these comments were rarely made openly in the Talkshops would suggest that young people were aware that this support was socially unacceptable. However, it also suggests that it may yet be some time before paramilitaries go away.

Differences in community relations between urban and rural areas

Segregated housing is very much a fact of life for young people in Northern Ireland. Among the YLT respondents, 60% of Catholics and 63% of Protestants said they lived in areas in which most neighbours were of the same religion as they were themselves. However, attention is often drawn to inner-city interface areas – most prominently the Shankill Road and Falls Road interface in West Belfast – and it is assumed that there is more sectarianism within urban areas than in rural areas. The research sought to ascertain what participants' experiences and feelings were on this issue. Therefore, in the *Walking*

decisions exercise, participants of the Talkshops were asked to respond to the following statement from one of the 2003 YLT respondents.

Within the countryside there are no barriers or tensions between Catholics and Protestants, that only exists in towns and cities.

We found very little evidence in the Talkshops that the urban–rural divide was seen as a significant factor for the development of sectarianism. Almost two out of three Talkshop participants (64%) disagreed and felt that sectarianism permeated both rural and urban settings in Northern Ireland; while 14% of the participants felt that sectarianism was indeed more evident in towns and cities; and 22% were undecided. Some participants said that although there is fighting everywhere, living in a village is more peaceful. In the words of one participant:

‘They are not throwing bricks at each other.’

Interestingly, participants from schools located in rural settings were most likely to disagree that the countryside is quieter. We heard anecdotal evidence from participants living in rural areas who reported that the only reason that there was little overt tension in the countryside was the fact that rural areas were less densely populated and neighbours simply did not mix with or speak to each other. Some participants suggested that people in the countryside, in some instances, were even more narrow-minded than their urban counterparts. However, there was also a small minority of participants who believed that the community relations in rural areas were indeed good. For example, two female participants in one Talkshop said that they lived in a rural area which was (religiously) mixed and in which the neighbours got on well.

‘We just go to chapel on Saturday night and they go to church on Sundays. Neighbours help themselves out and not bother each other.’

Another participant who also lived in a rural area said:

‘Protestants and Catholics get on well. The real ‘hassle’ is created by the army, which is very present with helicopters.’

Young people living in urban areas or in segregated housing estates, however, also reported that they had experienced generally good community relations. One female stated that living in a Protestant housing estate did not make her a bigot per se. Nevertheless, the majority of participants saw Belfast as a largely segregated city with a high degree of sectarian violence.

The issue of how difficult it was to enter a predominantly Catholic or Protestant area where a young person was not of the same socio-religious background or was a stranger to the area did arise independently from the rural–urban divide. Most Catholic participants highlighted the fact that they would feel unsafe walking through a predominantly Protestant housing estate and vice versa. Only a very small minority did not share this view.

5. The way forward: Improving cross-community relations

Respondents to the 2003 YLT survey had extensively used the opportunity provided to them to comment on community relations in Northern Ireland. A lot of the respondents had suggested that more cross-community contacts would promote better relations between the two main socio-religious groups in Northern Ireland. Of the respondents, 41% felt that community relations were better than five years ago, with 37% said they were worse and 17% said they were just the same. There was a marked difference between Protestants and Catholics, with Catholics being much more likely than Protestants to say that relations were better (48% and 34%). At the same time, 22% of Protestants compared to just 13% of Catholics felt that community relations were worse than five years ago.

In relation to the future, the 2003 YLT survey found that the largest proportion of respondents (42%) felt that community relations would be the same in five years time. Thirty-six per cent felt they would be better, and 15% felt they would be worse. Whilst Catholics were again significantly more optimistic about future community relations than Protestants, it was interesting to see that in terms of national identity those who said they were Northern Irish – rather than Irish or British – held the most optimistic view about the future of community relations in Northern Ireland. Altogether 91% of Protestants, 84% of Catholics and 79% of YLT respondents who said they were ‘neither religion’ thought that religion would always make a difference in how people related to each other in Northern Ireland (Devine and Schubotz 2004).

Two statements in the *Walking decisions* exercise, taken from the 2003 YLT respondents, were directly related to these findings in the survey and were used to discuss community relations with participants in the *Voices behind the Statistics* project. The first statement took a more negative approach with regard to community relations in the future.

Even if the two sides were somehow magically reunited, people would find something else to stir up trouble about.

The source of the second statement assessed community relations more positively and argued that the existing contacts in everyday life are evidence that generally quite good relations between Catholics and Protestants already exist in Northern Ireland at present.

(...) On the whole there's a lot of contact taking place between different groups and they get on quite well.

Both statements caused considerable debate during the Talkshops.

Existing cross-community contact

On a positive note, most Talkshop participants reported that they had regular contact with young people from the other main socio-religious community. Unsurprisingly then, two-thirds of participants (66%) agreed that overall there is a lot of cooperation going on between Catholics and Protestants; while 10% disagreed and felt that there was too much sectarianism and Catholics and Protestants generally don't mix well. Despite the existing degree of sectarianism and conflict, the majority of Talkshop participants felt that there were good community relations in their local communities. Some young people gave evidence that they had boyfriends or girlfriends who were of a different religion to them. Some young people also talked about coming from a mixed-marriage home. They therefore had both Protestant and Catholic relatives and found that this had largely been a positive experience with little conflict.

Although it was stated that it was only those with more extreme views who would *not* want to mix with people from other sections of the community, there was also an agreement with the first *Walking decisions* statement, that is, that there will always be reason to 'stir up trouble'.

Participants noted that the fact that young people mainly socialised within their own segregated communities restricts their opportunities to meet others who come from a different background. Consequently, there were a number of Talkshop participants who said they did not have any friends with a different socio-religious background. Others, whilst stating that they did meet friends from a different background through sport and work, commented on the difficulties they had in sustaining these friendships due to the area in which their friends lived. For example, two participants from a state-controlled (Protestant) school said that 'Catholic areas' were 'no-go areas' for them and they would be afraid to visit friends there. However these problems were not reported from young people who attended planned integrated schools. These young people often felt that the existence of their school in itself was evidence of possible cross-community integration.

Other examples of good cross-community schemes were reported during the Talkshops, such as the Ulster Project, in which students experience cross-community contacts organised through their schools. Some participants commented on 'mixed bars and clubs' where they could attend and socialise informally with people from all sections of the community.

The young people also discussed the role of their part-time jobs in relation to cross-community integration. Many Talkshop participants stated that they worked with both Catholics and Protestants and got on well with their colleagues regardless of their religion. For example in one Talkshop, two participants from a Protestant school reported on their experiences of working in bars. One female said she was the only Protestant working in a bar that would be perceived as a 'Catholic' bar. Although all customers and other staff would be Catholics, she said she got on well with them. However, a male participant, who had a part-time job in a different bar, said he would not feel comfortable working in such an environment. In another Talkshop, two Catholic participants also noted that they had to deal with colleagues and customers regardless of

their religious and community backgrounds in their part-time work. They found this to be a positive experience, which had contributed to their personal views on community relations.

We found, however, evidence for sectarian behaviour in everyday life. Some participants reported that they would select shops according to who owned them. A particular chain of local supermarkets was identified as 'Catholic' and we found evidence that some participants, who identified themselves as Protestants, avoided these shops simply because of this.

Community relation in the future

In order to prompt participants to think about what community relations in Northern Ireland would be like in the future, we had prepared the *10 years on* exercise for the Combined Talkshops. Young people were given four areas to think about:

- the community
- schools
- the government
- young people.

The comments from the exercise reflected the mixed findings of the 2003 YLT survey respondents. In relation to Northern Ireland's schools, the results were also in line with the findings of the first phase of the Talkshops in the *Voices behind the Statistics* project. Most young people anticipated or expressed a hope that there would be more integrated schools and more cooperation between schools. Some participants were anxious to express a belief that, whilst there should be more mixing, there should also still be single-religion schools. The following comments exemplify this.

'Hope that there will be more mixed schools in better suited areas, in which people wouldn't feel intimidated, by the other.'

'I would like to hope and think that there will be a lot more cross-community projects available within schools and I also hope that there will be a lot more integrated schools opened to give young people a chance to mix.'

'There will be more mixed schools and more cross-community activity between Catholic schools and state schools, like through sports.'

'I think that schools (i.e. Catholic and Protestant) will eventually join together to bring children together so that they can be equal and grow up together and get along. But there will still be separate schools for different religions.'

Participants also foresaw that more cross-community projects would take place within the communities and between young people.

'I hope the community in ten years' time will come together and help each other, instead of fighting against each other.'

'Less fighting and more agreements. People should go to different community events like the 12th, so all can enjoy it.'

'Communities more peaceful. More cross-community interaction.'

'I hope young people will understand both sides and will be able to mix within the community more. Some more of what is being done already.'

'There will hopefully be more cross-community activity between young people. Less divided pubs and night clubs.'

The most controversial and pessimistic views were expressed in relation to how Northern Ireland would be governed in 10 years' time. Some participants expressed the expectation that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland would be united and therefore there would be an all-Ireland government. Others said that there would be a functioning power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. Some young people, however, were pessimistic about any progress whatsoever, as the following quotes show.

'I hope in 10 years time the government will come to some reasonable agreement that the community agree with.'

'A Stormont power sharing government for everyone in Northern Ireland.'

'A cross-community government which works, with differences put aside.'

'Will never get along and will sit on their arses until someone sorts out the problems for them.'

'They will still be fighting among themselves. The DUP and Sinn Féin will have more votes than the UUP and SDLP.'

'Still sitting around the table arguing.'

'Hopefully an All-Ireland government.'

Similar to 2003 YLT survey findings, Talkshop participants who identified themselves as Protestants were more likely to take a pessimistic stance. Regardless of whether they favoured a united Ireland or a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, Catholics seemed to be more upbeat about the future prospects of community relations in Northern Ireland. However, during the Talkshops we explored in more detail what expectations the young people had with regard to community relations, should there be a united Ireland.

Community relations in a (hypothetical) united Ireland

During the *Walking decisions* exercise participants were asked whether they felt that people with different backgrounds would be able mix better in a united Ireland. Overall, young people were almost evenly divided on this issue, with 38% agreeing that relations would be better in a united Ireland, 42%

disagreeing and 20% being undecided. Contrary to what could have been expected, participants agreeing that all religions would be able to mix better in a united Ireland were not exclusively Catholic, and participants dismissing this statement were not all Protestants. The following quote from a young Protestant, who felt that a united Ireland was the only solution to the Northern Ireland conflict, even though he was not really in favour of it himself, exemplifies this. This young man represented very much the views of other young people who felt that the removal of the stigma from Northern Ireland of being a conflict society would be an advantage of a united Ireland.

‘As much as this is going to be an unpopular thing to say, I think in the future, a long time away maybe, the only thing Ireland can have is a united Ireland. It’s the only thing I think could happen because we are not going to stay in confrontation between Britain and Ireland forever. And I think the only aim of it is a united Ireland. But people aren’t ready for it, the economy is not ready for it, it’s just not ready at all now. So I think the idea of a united Ireland in the future, hand in hand, is a total waste of time. But you got to sort of think real ahead and move towards something.’

Some participants had noticed, however, that not all Catholics would vote for a united Ireland because of the economic, social, educational and monetary consequences that this would have on the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Disadvantages regarding the standard of living were highlighted.

‘You would have to pay for medical, dental, and there would be more unemployment and homelessness. The Irish government wouldn’t keep you and there will be more people on the poverty line, as the standard of living is higher for us now.’

Due to these economic and financial implications, some young people expressed doubts about the Republic of Ireland's willingness to unite with the six counties that currently form Northern Ireland. At the same time, there was widespread agreement that, with similar motives, Britain would be 'keen to get rid of Northern Ireland'.

In terms of community relations, a minority of Talkshop participants said that religions would mix better in a united Ireland. They thought that no-one would care about religion anymore. Some participants even argued that Ireland had recently developed into a multi-cultural society where everyone got on well, therefore Protestants would not need to be afraid of a united Ireland. Directed towards the Protestant doubters they argued that marches of the Orange Order (for example in Donegal) would be peaceful every year. However, the majority of participants felt that since Protestants and Catholics were unable to live together harmoniously at present, this would be unlikely to change in a united Ireland. In fact, a united Ireland would be prone to alienate at least a substantial minority of Protestants from Northern Ireland. Therefore, the conflict over Northern Ireland would not just ‘go away’ with a united Ireland. Some participants even felt that the UFF would develop into a more pro-active organisation and the terrorist attacks would take place aiming at Irish institutions and buildings. As one participant said:

‘The whole thing would just swing round.’

Even if Ireland would get a new constitution and flag in the event of Northern Ireland becoming part of Ireland, Unionists, especially followers of the DUP, would be unlikely to consent. Some Protestants expressed their view on the political status of Northern Ireland quite strongly during the discussions.

‘In the end of the day, we don’t want to change things. It’s the Roman Catholics and it’s Sinn Féin who want to change things; having Northern Ireland and the South of Ireland as a whole. We don’t want that. As long as 100 Protestants remain, there will never be a united Ireland.’

Learning to compromise: results of the Compromise exercise

One of the most challenging exercises for young people and most revealing for the research project was used at the end of the two Combined Talks. Throughout the project, young people had repeatedly discussed how the conflict in Northern Ireland could be resolved. Some were very pessimistic about this, as the following comment shows.

‘Certain differences will never be solved and there’s no point in trying.’

Others felt that people generally would be prepared to compromise, but would be reluctant to make the first step.

‘Nothing can be done. Both sides need to take the first step as they feel they’ll be vulnerable if they make the first move.’

However, a considerable proportion of participants argued that people in Northern Ireland should just compromise and try to get on better.

‘I think that Catholics and Protestants should try to come to an agreement and they should learn to live together.’

At the second phase of the research project, we then asked young people directly in what way they were prepared themselves to compromise in relation to their cultural background to find out how realistic this target was. In the *Compromise exercise*, participants had to consider what aspects of their own cultural heritage they liked and wanted to maintain, what aspects of cultural heritage they found acceptable and what they disliked. Then they were asked what aspects they liked, found acceptable and disliked of the other main socio-religious group.

A summary of results of the exercise is presented in Tables 2 and 3. The tables show that the in-group perceptions were almost as diverse as the between-group views. It was common to all participants that they wanted to maintain their cultural heritage. For Catholics this mainly involved Irish music and dancing, Gaelic sports, the Irish language and St Patrick’s Day. For Protestants the music and celebrations around the 12th July were core. Apart from a very small minority, participants did not mind the other group celebrating these events, although it would be fair to say that Catholics were more apprehensive about

the 12th July than Protestants were about Irish culture. A very small minority of Protestants saw the 12th July parades as also offensive and said they disliked them. Interestingly, Catholics felt that to them the Ulster-Scots heritage was the most acceptable part of the Protestant culture, whereas none of the Protestant participants mentioned this part of their heritage at all.

The greatest in-group differences occurred in relation to markers of identity, such as flags and murals, and paramilitary organisations with regard to Protestants. Whilst markers of identities were still generally accepted as a way of expressing a certain culture or political opinion by both Protestants and Catholics, some young people were very sensitive towards these markers of identity as they felt they flaunted a certain political opinion in the face of others (that is, preferring flags to be flown only at certain times or in certain areas, and no aggressive murals). Protestants' views of paramilitaries were as fractured as the organisations themselves. The only mention of paramilitaries among Catholic participants occurred in the category of the redundant aspects of their heritage.

Participants accepted different beliefs and (national) identities as legitimate, but most young people made clear that they were not ready to compromise in what they believed the political status of Northern Ireland should be.

Table 2: The Compromise exercise: Young people identifying themselves as Catholics

I like in my culture and want to keep	I find acceptable/I respect in my culture	I dislike in my culture/I'm prepared to give up
St Patrick's Day Gaelic sports Irish music Irish heritage & flag Some murals Closely knit communities John Hume Desire for peace Sinn Féin Love the fact that we have our own language Respect how much our parents and grandparents coped with things in their days	That people are offended by the marching system Democratic views Desire for a united Ireland <i>Some</i> flags that have a proper meaning That people in the community stand up for what they believe in My history and what it makes me	Strong republican views Paramilitary activity Bigotry Constant fixation on history and republican paramilitary activities Flags, murals to mark territory The judgement of other people because of mistakes their families have made
I like about the other culture	I find acceptable about the other culture	I dislike about the other culture
Strong heritage Ulster-Scots etc Some murals They have the right to have their culture and community	People's own opinions of their nationality, their desire to remain part of Britain Flags during Marching Season, but not during rest of year Some Orange marches Union Jack Police service recruitment Their level of togetherness and loyalty	Being governed from England Political groups refusing to go towards peace in NI, DUP Marching Season and sectarian incitement at Orange parades Bigotry Paramilitary activity Strong loyalist views Murals of hate Union Jack

Table 3: The Compromise exercise: Young people identifying themselves as Protestants

I like in my culture and want to keep	I find acceptable/I respect in my culture	I dislike about my culture/I'm prepared to give up
<p>The 12th July, Bonfire Night</p> <p>Music, flute bands</p> <p>The tradition, culture, traditional sports</p> <p>Religious beliefs</p> <p>Union Jacks up all year round</p> <p>Getting together with other people in the community</p> <p>UVF, YVC</p> <p>The way we stick together in times of trouble</p>	<p>That people have religious differences</p> <p>YVF, UVF</p> <p>Catholics' views, but there will never be a United Ireland</p> <p>Flags with proper meaning</p> <p>The marches</p>	<p>People bringing their political thoughts out in pubs and when we're out.</p> <p>UFF, UVF, UDA murals</p> <p>Marching season</p> <p>The whole way the PSNI is at the moment</p> <p>Political areas in housing estates</p> <p>Weapons</p> <p>Punishment beatings, drug dealing</p>
I like about the other culture	I find acceptable about the other culture	I dislike about the other culture
<p>Sports, like Gaelic</p> <p>Those willing to meet halfway</p> <p>St Patrick's Day</p> <p>Guinness</p> <p>They also stick together in trouble</p>	<p>Traditions, such as Gaelic football and other sports</p> <p>Their beliefs</p> <p>Desire for a united Ireland (but it will never happen)</p> <p>Having Catholic friends</p> <p>Some flags, if we can have our flag</p>	<p>Paramilitaries</p> <p>Martin McGuinness as head of education</p> <p>The Irish tricolour</p> <p>A united Ireland</p> <p>That Protestants can't go to certain places</p> <p>Stereotyping</p>

Perceived means of improving community relations

The last part of this report focuses on young people's opinions on how community relations could be improved in Northern Ireland. Again, the 2003 YLT survey had reported comprehensive results, indicating that young people perceived steps towards both more formal integration and more informal integration ('mixing') as complementary ways of improving community relations. A large proportion of YLT respondents said that they preferred to live in mixed religion neighbourhoods (53%) (35% said they preferred single-religion neighbourhoods), to work in mixed religion workplaces (71%) (17% did not) and to send their own children to mixed religion schools (48%) (42% did not).

At the end of each Talkshop at the first phase of the project, participants received cards on which they were asked to briefly comment on:

- how they thought community relations could be improved
- what they thought about taking part in the research project itself.

A small minority of people were very pessimistic and felt that little could be done or that a change would take a lot of time.

'I don't think that Ireland will ever be a better place and nothing will change it. It has been a part of Ireland for so long and it is in everyone's head too much.'

'Things aren't going to change over night or even in each of our lifetimes. Perhaps in a few hundred years things may change for the better, but then perhaps not.'

However most participants had a more positive view and, it became clear from the comments that the survey results from the YLT would be confirmed. A large number of participants believed that schools should be integrated. The selection of quotes that follows is ample evidence for this.

'All schools should be integrated, with no segregation.'

'If people were educated together at a young age, then N Ireland would be more peaceful with less conflict.'

'More integrated schools, help people to learn to live together. Work to change the opinions of the young society of today and hopefully change the opinions for future generations. Learn to respect each other.'

'Integrated education is the way forward.'

'Integrating Northern Ireland's schools would be a great improvement in relations for the next generation.'

Other participants stated that the character of education itself also needed to change and that the cooperation between different schools could be improved:

'Children are the future. Children need to be educated on different cultures when they are young so that they are willing to understand and listen to what is happening. They need to learn to look to the future and learn that you won't get anywhere in life by being biased and sectarianism.'

'Things could be improved if they organise more days together. If Protestant and Catholic schools were brought together and made to interact and get on together, and discuss issues together and talk of way things should be improved.'

A large number of young people who took part in *Voices behind the Statistics* felt that cross-community events should be organised for people in the neighbourhoods.

'Personally I think the only way to stop sectarianism is to put everyone together in their towns and make them shake hands and try to make everyone show what can happen if people just talk and communicate.'

'Set up work shops within each town. Have social events involving both religions.'

'I think it would be a good idea for community workers to get a large group of young people and invite over people from other areas, maybe to talk of similar things, like what we did today. Maybe activities and days out could be organised.'

'More groups like Corrymeela. Stop the separation between religions and sit Catholics and Protestants down to talk.'

'I feel if there were more cross-community projects within our community we would bond much better. I would like things to improve.'

'The way forward I think is to get people involved with each other in different communities.'

Some comments from participants referred to markers of identity and symbols of identity discussed earlier in this report.

'I wish there was no religion because it causes more hurt and war in the world.'

'All flags in nationalist and unionist communities should be taken down. This would decrease the young people's thoughts about sectarianism.'

'Scrap flags. Ban paintings on walls.'

Finally, some participants also felt that better facilities for young people were generally needed to improve community relations. The following quotes are an example of these comments.

'I think politicians should build or create better facilities or leisure centres to keep teenagers occupied and off street corners.'

'Young people should have more options to mix with the other side, cross-community clubs etc.'

6. Impact of *Voices behind the Statistics* on the participants

One way of bringing together and actively addressing issues with regard to community relations is a participatory research project like the one reported here. As outlined in *The Methodology* (Chapter 3), NCB strongly believes in these participatory elements in their research projects. Young people were involved in each phase of the research, including the data analysis and the drawing out of research findings. Young people were also supported in presenting the results from the research to policy-makers and practitioners. One way of disseminating the results of the research project was a presentation of the findings during a conference on the theme Towards a Post-conflict Society. This was organised by *Childcare in Practice*, a local peer-reviewed scientific journal, in Belfast, in May 2004.

From the start, participants were informed of the aims and objectives of the research. For those interested in getting involved further in policy-making for young people, information was made available on Young NCB (see *Introduction*). The great majority of participants gave very positive comments on the Talkshops. Many young people argued that participatory research projects like this could, especially by bringing young people from different backgrounds together, contribute to a better understanding among young people in Northern Ireland. Those young people involved in the second and third phases of the project were enthusiastic and commented that the Talkshops helped them to better understand the positions of others who had a different socio-religious background. Given the positive feedback received from the participants, it is envisaged that the Talkshop method could be deemed to be an appropriate forum for addressing issues of sectarianism and community relations amongst young people.

‘I think that if Talkshops like this could continue to happen it would be half the battle won, because it would help our generation of people and teach them to live together.’

It is not possible at this point to say whether or not the Talkshops have made an enduring impact on the participants. From the researchers' point of view it would be inappropriate to argue that one or two discussions on sectarianism and community relations have the potential to reverse the attitudes and views acquired over a period of a 16-year socialisation process in a fundamentally divided society. The literature review in Chapter 2 (page 12) of this report includes a brief evaluation of EMU, which concluded that in its very concept EMU, which was based on creating short-term opportunities for young people to mix, was flawed. However, it is also possible that for some individuals the opportunity to take part in *Voices behind the Statistics* may have indeed provided a significant opportunity to reconsider attitudes previously held. This is especially so for those who went on to the second and third phases of the project. However, it is important to stress that this could be as much due to the personal prepositions of young people, as to the design of the research project. The research on attitude formation discussed earlier has clearly shown that in

order to fundamentally shape young people's opinions and attitudes towards others, a continuous effort is required at all levels of socialisation.

Nonetheless, from the researchers' observations of the participants and feedback provided on the evaluation cards, there are some points worth noting. Discussions that took place in the first phase of the project took place in an atmosphere where the pupils were familiar with each other and, furthermore, in segregated schools (that is, Catholic and Protestant schools). The inclination to express strong attitudes may have been facilitated by the fact that the participants in each of these schools came from relatively similar backgrounds in terms of religious identity. But it was also interesting to observe the differing viewpoints of the participants. More extreme views may have been more readily accepted because there was no risk to participants of offending others. However, during the Talkshops at the integrated schools, there appeared to be a more cautious or thought-through approach adopted by most of the young people, due to concerns not to offend others. This may have been further exacerbated by unequal Protestant/Catholic representation at the integrated colleges. For example at one integrated school the ratio of participants was 75% Catholic and 25% Protestant, although this did not detract from detailed debates concerning the issues of sectarianism.

At the second phase of the study, the researchers observed that the contributions of participants were influenced by two factors. First, the groups of respondents from different schools would be unfamiliar with each other, and the integrated nature of the Talkshops imposed on the students the need to speak in a respectful and sensitive manner, whilst simultaneously aiming to express their particular views. Second, the individual personalities of individual students played a part, with some students being confident in articulating their beliefs, while others expressed their opinions in a more tentative manner. The totally different atmosphere in which the two combined Talkshops took place appears to confirm this. Whereas in one combined Talkshop discussions took place in a very serious, often even tense atmosphere, participants in the other combined Talkshop approached the exercises in a much more light-hearted and humorous way throughout the day. The Compromise exercise, however showed that it was difficult for most participants to make concessions and review key areas of their value system. It is also important to consider the unspoken words of pupils; there may have been particular views that were not expressed or participants may have been economical in how much they revealed in an attempt to conceal attitudes which would not promote their image amongst their peers.

During the data analysis day, when six participants came together with the two researchers to review the findings of the project and prepare a conference presentation, it became clear that young people are able to accept and acknowledge that different attitudes and values exist in terms of community relations in Northern Ireland. This acknowledgement of difference is a base on which further community relations work can be built, but it would be inappropriate to claim that it is more than this.

The Talkshop methodology does have its merits. This project, as in previous Talkshop projects in Northern Ireland, provided participants with the opportunity

to articulate their opinions with sensitivity and enabled them to hear the voices of the 'other' community, which may, in turn, promote a culture of understanding and tolerance. Certainly, there were instances where participants asked questions about the Troubles and the culture of the 'other' community, or provided an opinion that was misrepresented by incorrect factual knowledge, and this provided an opportunity to promote understanding between the two communities.

Finally, the selected comments below, which were given after Talkshops in the first phase of the project, suggest that participants felt they benefited from taking part in *Voices behind the Statistics*, even if they just met for a one-off focus group within the group of their class and schoolmates. From that point of view, it can be concluded that an ongoing engagement of young people in open discussions about community relations and sectarianism in a participatory manner could have great potential in improving community relations in the future. Further, it can be said that NCB and YLT have done more than consult with young people on their experiences of sectarianism in Northern Ireland and explore their ideas on how community relations in Northern Ireland can be improved. *Voices behind the Statistics* has also been a learning experience for the majority of young people themselves who took part in the project.

'Northern Ireland has a long way to go, but with Talkshops like this, trying to solve the problem, the process will hopefully be shorter.'

'Talkshops should be available to many schools, so students would learn more.'

'I found today really interesting. I found out the different thoughts and opinions that people in my school have, which I had never noticed until this conversation was brought up. Good craic [laugh]! Thanks.'

'Today was quite informative. I think that debates should be put into the day and it should last longer. We all got to see how people's opinion can really overflow. We need more integrated education.'

'I learnt that some people don't know what they are talking about but most people do get along. But the different religions have different views.'

7. Conclusion

The overall aim of the *Voices behind the Statistics* project was ‘to consult with young people on their experiences of sectarianism in Northern Ireland and to explore their ideas on how community relations in Northern Ireland can be improved in general, and in relation to young people in particular’. The Talkshop methodology employed in the project was instrumental in promoting an atmosphere that enabled the participants to respond to each of the tasks and engage in constructive discussion around a number of key themes. In conclusion, a wide range of issues, many of a controversial or sensitive nature, was discussed in both the individual and Combined Talkshops at phases 1 and 2 of the project. In addition, phase 3 of the project, working with a small group from six different schools, ensured that the young people’s perspective continued to be brought to bear on the analysis of the data and the identification of the main findings.

The experiences of the young participants of sectarianism and their views on many issues associated with community relations in Northern Ireland have been presented throughout this report. The young people have provided some strong messages. In this concluding section we can only summarise these briefly.

Issues of identity – knowing who one is and where one comes from – were very important to the young people. This was more strongly and more diversely expressed through national identity – being Irish or British – than through religious identity. Few saw Northern Irish as a positive or useful identity.

In relation to the formation of attitudes amongst young people, the participants reported that their families and friends were instrumental in shaping their attitudes towards community relations in Northern Ireland. However, it was also acknowledged that respondents, as young adults, were able to form their own opinions. Respondents also commented on other factors that shape their opinions, such as the media, and opportunities to integrate with people from the other community usually through sporting events or part-time jobs.

The impact of the education system on community relations was also acknowledged since the majority of schooling in Northern Ireland is segregated in terms of religion. Integrated and segregated schools were discussed in relation to how they facilitate community relations. It was acknowledged that attending a segregated school does encourage people to mix only within their own community, notwithstanding the possibility of having friends from the ‘other community’ through other avenues. It was felt by a large majority that integrated schools were important in reducing sectarianism. Pupils also spoke of other ways in which this could be addressed, such as schools working together without moving to formal integration.

The issue of school uniforms as a defining statement of religion or community background was highlighted, although this was not an issue for pupils attending integrated schools. Some pupils reported incidents of sectarian attacks related to their schools, for example stoning school buses and being intimidated whilst walking home from school.

There were mixed opinions expressed by participants as to whether the level of education of an individual influenced sectarian attitudes and participation in promoting positive community relations.

The participants were pessimistic about the state of local politics, and particularly the sectarian stance of most politicians and political parties. They did not rate highly the ability of politicians to resolve issues within Northern Ireland. Notably comments centred on the issue of the DUP and Sinn Féin and their inability to work together.

Symbols such as murals, flags and kerb paintings were discussed as a defining feature of communities. A large majority expressed the clear view that these symbols detract from the development of positive community relations.

Bombs, riots and the atrocities of the Troubles were highlighted as historical facets which deter people from building an integrated community in Northern Ireland in the future, and it was evident that the emotional impact and legacy of these atrocities still prevail. There was a range of knowledge and attitudes concerning the paramilitaries. They were viewed negatively by respondents, and were associated with violence, punishment beatings, control and drug dealing. Only a very small minority saw any positive attributes of paramilitaries, such as the protection of the nationalist community. Catholic participants responded more negatively about the PSNI, particularly in relation to the victimisation of Catholics, while some Protestant respondents saw the PSNI as being 'caught in the middle', with both sections of the community opposing them.

The capacity for sectarianism to permeate other facets of Northern Irish culture was discussed primarily in relation to sports and the territorial marking of different geographical locations. Most prominently reported were the Rangers and Celtic football teams as a defining feature of community relations within sports. Young people who owned a Rangers or Celtic top were cautious about where they could publicly wear these jerseys, due to fear of being attacked by youths from the other community.

There was large agreement that the media places too much emphasis on the issues of sectarianism and that stories relating to the Troubles, or community conflict more generally, is the primary feature of Northern Ireland which is highlighted by the media. The young people felt that positive stories about cross-community events were very unlikely to get reported.

The culture and heritage of the two traditions were discussed during the Talkshops, with some young people reporting that these were important facets of their culture. Protestant marches and parades was a topic that received considerable attention, with both from negative and positive viewpoints expressed. While some Protestant participants reported that the 12th July was an important feature of their culture, others were neither in favour of or opposed to the 12th July celebrations. Contrarily, most Catholic respondents reported negative aspects associated with the Marching Season, primarily that of marching through Catholic areas and the associated violence and disruption

caused across Northern Ireland. Most young people saw no problem in sharing activities which expressed their cultural background with the other community.

The participants also discussed the opportunities they had for mixing with people from other religions or community backgrounds, for example through employment, school, special schemes and friends within the community. Cross-community events were highlighted as a way of promoting community relations in Northern Ireland. The majority of participants were of the opinion that sectarianism in Northern Ireland should be addressed, with further opportunities for integration being provided.

The Talkshops were identified by participants as an opportunity to express their opinions and explore their perceptions of relations between the two communities, and they were deemed to be a beneficial experience. Furthermore, it was suggested that other young people would benefit from partaking in the Talkshops. Some pupils, who only took part in phase 1, that of Talkshops in individual schools, reported that they would have found it more beneficial to meet with pupils from other schools (as in phase 2) to discuss the issues of sectarianism further.

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8. Appendix

Schedules for the Talkshops

Voices behind the Statistics: Young People's Views of Sectarianism in Northern Ireland

Focus Group (Talkshop) Schedule (Level 1: Schools)

Time frame: 2–3 hr discussion + 30 minute interval

Introduction (10–15 minutes)

Introduce facilitators.

Explain briefly aim and objectives of research + time schedule.

Explain the Talkshop process.

Agree on principles of confidentiality - possibly 'contract' drawn up.

Important questions to ask participants:

Do you know why you are here? What information did you receive?

Has anyone of you ever taken part in a research project like this?

Have you ever discussed community relations before either in or outside school?

Index cards/Graffiti wall (3–5 minutes)

Hand out one index card to each young person. Ask them to write on the card the first thing that comes to their mind when they think about 'Community Relations' in Northern Ireland. This can be anything: an event, a person, an organisation, a feeling, a slogan...

Collect the cards after three minutes and explain that they will be collated and discussed after the break.

While they are writing, explain the function of the Graffiti Wall: They can use the wall at any time during the Talkshop to write something on it that comes to mind. The graffiti items will also be discussed at the end of the session (see *Exercise 4: Graffiti wall/Index cards*).

Remember:

Mention that we do not need/want names on either the index cards or Graffiti wall!

Exercise 1: Staying or Leaving Northern Ireland (15–20 minutes)

Divide everyone into three or four smaller groups. Give each group a set of 20 cards (see wording below) and the following two statements.

This makes me want to stay in Northern Ireland.

This makes me want to leave Northern Ireland.

Explain that the two statements form a continuum. Ask them to place each card within the continuum according to how important it would be in their own decision to leave or stay in Northern Ireland.

Wording of cards:

Being Close to My Family	The Ethnic and Racial Diversity of Society
Opportunities to Work and Study	Bonfire Night and the Marching Season
Being Able to Make More Money	Being Able to Make Friends With Anyone
The Weather	The Politics in Northern Ireland
The Leisure Facilities and Places to Socialise	The State of the Police Force
The Friends I Have	The Influence and Say of Paramilitaries
The Beauty of the Countryside	Gaelic Sports and Irish Music and Dancing
The State of the Environment	The Attitudes to Sex and Abortion
Being More Independent	The Depth of Religious Feelings
People's Open-mindedness	Closely Knit Communities

Ask the groups to discuss this card placement among themselves for ten minutes before they give feedback to the whole group in the form of responses to the questions:

What are the two/three most important issues that makes people stay in NI?

What are the two/three most important factors that might make young people leave?

Explain: People can differ in their opinions.

For example: Whereas for some strong family bonds maybe a reason to stay, for others this maybe a reason to leave. The same applies to issues related to 'the Troubles'.

Exercise 2: Personal map Circle exercise (15–20 minutes)

Divide participants into pairs and give each of them a personal map with 'themselves' (their name) in the middle. Ask the young people to indicate on their maps which people, events and organisations have influenced their views on community relations in Northern Ireland, and to place those with the most powerful influence closest to them on the map. Then ask the pairs to give their responses as feedback to the whole group.

Note:

We do not record any information about the respondents. For data collection it might be a good idea to hand out differently coloured worksheets to males and females to see to what extent differences are gender-related.

Break (30 minutes)

Talkshop facilitators should use the break to collate information from the index cards and Graffiti wall and to briefly discuss the remainder of the Talkshop schedule.

Exercise 3: Walking Decisions (approx. 20 minutes)

For this activity, explain to the young people that each end of the room will represent polar opposites of a continuum ranging from 'agree' to 'disagree', with a mid-point representing 'not sure'. While the Talkshop facilitator reads out the first statement (from the list below), ask the young people to walk to the appropriate point in the room (according to their response to the statement, that is whether they 'agree', 'disagree', or are 'not sure'). The statements themselves are taken from young people's responses in the Northern Ireland 2003 Young Life and Times Survey.

Statements

'If pupils don't learn to mix in school levels, they won't mix in adulthood.'

'Even if the two sides were somehow magically reunited, people would find something else to stir up trouble about.'

'The only difference between Catholics and Protestants is their beliefs in God.'

'People only learn to be prejudiced and bigoted through their parents.'

'Knowing your own identity is very important.'

'Community relations and attitudes towards other cultures and beliefs are linked to the level of education.'

‘Within the countryside there are no barriers or tensions between Catholics and Protestants, that only exists in towns and cities.’

‘People from all religions live and work together much better in areas which are not decorated with public murals, flags and kerb paintings.’

‘There is too much emphasis on religious differences.’

‘The whole God and Christ thing might not even be true.’

‘The Union Jack should be up all year round but the Tricolour should stay in the South.’

‘In a united Ireland it would be a lot easier for all religions to mix.’

‘The differences between religions is only skin deep and the media place too much emphasis on the differences. On the whole there's a lot of contact taking place between different groups and they get on quite well.’

Exercise 4: Graffiti wall/Index cards (10–15 minutes)

If the room allows, arrange all the young people in a circle ready for a discussion. Present the collated views of the young people as expressed on the index cards to the group. Ask participants whether or not the issues have been discussed sufficiently during the Talkshop or whether they want to discuss, clarify or comment on them now.

Election of Representative(s) for Combined Talkshop(s) (5–10 minutes)

Explain the purpose of the Combined Talkshop and the research feedback principles of NCB. Ask the group to choose the person(s) whom they want to represent their school and their views in the Combined Talkshop.

Note: Teachers and the schools involved need to know about this Combined Talkshop in advance. A school might want to choose their representative themselves. In this case, we would ask the groups to indicate the subjects/issues that they want the selected representative to address in the Combined Talkshop.

Feedback (5–10 minutes)

End the session with a ten-minute feedback round, where every participant is invited to express their feelings about the Talkshop.

Focus Group (Talkshop) Schedule (Level 2: Combined Talkshop)

Location: to be confirmed (Enniskillen and Belfast)

Time frame: approx. 10.00–5.00

Two Combined Talkshops are being held. The Combined Talkshops bring together the (s)elected participants of the three schools in two areas – Enniskillen and Belfast. Each school will send up to four students to the Combined Talkshops.

Young people are encouraged to turn up without their school uniform.

Introduction and Contract (20–40 minutes)

Students attend different schools in the areas. It can be anticipated that issues will arise during the workshop in relation to which participants may have fundamentally different opinions. Special attention is therefore needed in order to create a non-threatening environment for all participants in which they are not afraid to voice their opinions openly and frankly. Although some students may know each other, others may not. The introduction therefore plays a crucial role in the Talkshop.

Introduction

Invite participants to sit in a circle. Explain the way in which participants will be asked to introduce themselves (below) then begin by introducing yourself in the same way.

- The participants will introduce each other with:
- their name
- their age
- three characteristics of their choice, which they feel best describe them to the group.

As facilitator, you start the introductions to break the ice, with:

‘My name is...’

‘I’m ... years old.’

‘The three things about myself that I want the group to know at this point are:

1.....

2.....

3.....’

Drawing up Ground Rules

Once participants have introduced each other, they need to draw up ground rules which will be displayed during the Talkshop on a flipchart.

Encourage participants to set their own rules. However, you need to prompt them to discuss rules in relation to:

- the (non)use of information outside the Talkshop
- confidentiality rules
- rules in relation to the communicative atmosphere.

The exercises before the lunch break focus on the current situation in Northern Ireland and establishing existing viewpoints.

Same or Different Exercise (30–40 minutes)

This exercise has two parts.

First, ask participants to rejoin their original school groups. Given them a (written) summary of recorded responses from the Phase 1 Talkshops held in their schools. Ask them to briefly discuss the responses among themselves and to clarify, amend or add anything.

Second, invite the school representatives to give a summary of the Phase 1 responses as feedback to the whole group. Note the differences and similarities at this stage in order to identify key areas for further discussion.

Break (10 minutes)

Statements (30–45 minutes)

After the success of the *Walking decisions* exercise in the Phase 1 Talkshops, it has been amended for this exercise. Again, participants are presented with statements from respondents to the 2003 Young Life and Times Survey. This time, however, they are requested to respond vocally.

Produce 12 statement cards by recording the statements (below) on card and cutting it up to form small cards. Lay the cards out face down. Then ask each participant to draw a statement card, read it out and, if they wish, comment on it. Once they have completed their turn, invite the other participants to discuss the statement.

Record the exercise on tape (provided the participants and schools have given their consent).

Statements

'If everywhere became areas of mixed religion people would come to realise how alike we all are and perhaps some hatred would be dismissed.'

‘People who hold the grudges are holding them because their parents or older siblings told them to. Peace would happen if they would just forgive and forget.’

‘We should all class ourselves as one big community and then we would all be happy without fighting and trying to cope in N. Ireland.’

‘There should be more integrated schools and parks. This would mean a more friendly environment for our children and also less fighting’.

‘The problem used to lie within sectarianism however more and more groups fight within themselves showing a destructive element to their personalities rather than hatred for the other side.’

‘We don’t have a proper police service in the north, and so people cannot trust each other, as Protestants want to keep their police force that protects them and Catholics want a police force that will serve the whole community, not just one side.’

‘Community relations will be better in NI when we find that the labelling doesn’t matter and that we are comfortable with each other no matter whether the person is Protestant or Catholic.’

‘I think many children are still growing up with strong influences from their parents who encourage them to dislike Protestants or Catholics before they can make their own mind up.’

‘The media has a very definite influence on community relations, many papers and broadcasts are biased towards one side.’

‘Just keep in mind that it is not only religion that starts trouble. Religion is just used as an excuse to earn money and to punish people.’

‘Politically people are polarising, the DUP and Sinn Fein will soon be the target parties, this can only lead to a deterioration in community relations.’

‘The whole division between the communities is based on very trivial issues as I think Catholic and Protestant people basically believe in the same things.’

‘The only way we can understand each other is to talk about things and spend time with people from different cultures.’

Lunch break (45 minutes)

The exercises after the lunch break focus on the future of Northern Ireland and opportunities for improving community relations.

Northern Ireland – 10 Years On (20–30 minutes)

Give each young person a handout with the map of Northern Ireland in the background and four textboxes:

- community
- schools
- young people
- government

Ask the young people, as individuals, to use the sheet to record their thoughts on how Northern Ireland might look in relation to these 4 areas in ten years time. After they have completed the sheets, invite the young people to give feedback to the group by airing their ideas.

The Compromise Exercise (20–30 minutes)

By this stage of the workshop young people have exchanged their viewpoints and have also shared their visions of the future in Northern Ireland. You will now ask them to take these points and opinions into consideration while they come up with a personal view as to what degree they would be willing to compromise personally.

Divide the young people into four small groups with one representative from each school in every group. Give each participant a worksheet containing the following statements.

This is what I like about my own community/culture.

This is what I find acceptable about my own community/culture.

This is what I don't like about my own community/culture.

This is what I like about the other communities/cultures.

This is what I find acceptable about the other communities/cultures.

This is what I don't like about the other communities/cultures.

At the end of this exercise, invite the sub-groups to give feedback to the whole group as to how they managed to make compromises within the group.

Evaluation and Election of conference participants (10–15 minutes)

End the day with a brief evaluation. Ask participants from each school to nominate one representative who will take part in the data analysis and conference (the third phase of the project).



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ISBN 1-904787-36-3



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