

Think Piece for Community Relations Council's Annual Policy and Practice Conference, *One Place – Many People*

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Our children and young people live in a world that was not of their making, yet many of them are experiencing the reduced life chances caused by a conflict which continues to 'rumble on' to varying degrees, in their communities.

There have been a range of peace-building initiatives since the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and like the Agreement, they make little or no reference to children and young people or the positive role that they may make to our society today as well as tomorrow. The Agreement mentions young people once (and children not at all!), this is where there is a commitment that:

"...young people from areas affected by the troubles face particular difficulties and [participants] will support the development of special community-based initiatives based on international best practice."

So, more than 17 years on, let's examine the lives of these young people. Undoubtedly children and young people living in families and communities most affected by the conflict continue to experience significant adversities.

In Belfast, 98% of public housing is segregated and across NI children are largely educated in separate schools with only 7% attending integrated schools. Children and young people living in interface areas are likely to have experienced sectarian abuse and been involved or witnessed violence and in many areas such violence has become

‘normalised’. Since 2009, PSNI has recorded 39 paramilitary style attacks against children and it can be safely assumed that there is significant under-reporting.

It is not a coincidence that the highest levels of disadvantage, deprivation and subsequent child poverty in NI are in those areas most affected by the conflict -West Belfast (32%), Foyle (32%) and North Belfast (29%) with the NI average at 26%.

Our children and young people experience unacceptably high levels of mental ill-health with 20% developing significant mental health problems before their 18th Birthday and in a more recent survey 28% of 10 – 17 year olds expressed concern about their mental health. More children in NI are dying through suicide than anywhere else on these islands.

I first came to NI in 1990 as a volunteer on a cross community holiday scheme which worked on the premise - recognisable by many - that by bringing children together for an intensive 10 days and then with a year of follow-up, we could tackle segregation. Without a doubt those children benefitted greatly from these activities however, it is disappointing the changes were not as sustained or embedded as they could have been. Whilst it is clear that young people have greater levels of cross community contact it remains concerning that in 2011 22% of our 16 year olds said that they had no friendships with people from the ‘other’ community.

It was extremely disappointing that in 2013 OFMDFM’s Together: Building a United Community strategy talks about the need to ‘improve attitudes’ among young people so that they can play a role in building good relations. The fact that no other group is singled out in this way would lead us to presume that the divisions in our society are caused by our children and young people. They are obviously not! Divisions are perpetuated by adults in a range of influential positions.

The paradox is that children and young people - all of whom were born after the 1994 ceasefires - are still affected by and suffering the consequences of a conflict that was not only not of their making but of which they have little knowledge. “Nobody is talking to us about it,” is a common theme in discussions with young people. Children generally get information about ‘the Troubles’ from their parents (52%), school (47%) and their peers (25%). It is important that young people are given the relevant information to make sense of our past.

My final thought is that whilst the discourse on a 'shared future' is generally understood to mean the two 'main traditions,' NI has become increasingly diverse with more newcomer children arriving in last decade. These children are 'invisible' in these conversations and this is not a tenable or acceptable position as we move forward.

In conclusion, I leave you with my over-riding thoughts which are that in 2015 many children in our communities continue to be deeply affected by the 'conflict'. Their voices and experiences must be integral to building a peaceful and democratic NI; we as adults have a responsibility to listen to them in shaping their future!