

Culture and Identity: 100 years and beyond

NICCY Youth Panel's Child Rights perspective to Culture and Identity



Introduction

Northern Ireland is marking 100 years since its creation. For some this is a cause for celebration as a new region of the United Kingdom was born. For others it is 100 years of the division of Ireland. Children and young people have the right to a national identity and to participate in the cultural life of their community – in Northern Ireland this is in a contested context. As the NICCY Youth Panel we have discussed this issue. We also sought the views of adults working in the fields of education, children's rights, history, and social psychology to help us form an understanding of how to address this issue when we explored it as part of the Human Rights Festival in December 2020.

Reflection on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

Article 3: Act in the Best Interests of Children and Young People

When considering how to continue to mark the creation of Northern Ireland, Government needs to consider the rights and best interests of all children and young people in this jurisdiction as they have promised to do in Article 3 of the UNCRC. We look to political representatives to model respect for others and support children and young people to explore their own and others' identities, including their cultural identity, in a way that upholds the rights of all children and young people.

Article 12: Seek out our views – listen to us and take us seriously

Children and young people are often talked about as 'the future' of Northern Ireland and a hope for something better to come. However, we are active citizens now and we need to be, and should be, involved in decisions that affect us. We have views and creative ideas to help tackle legacy issues.

Article 13: We want to share our thoughts freely

We should be able to exercise our right to share our thoughts and feelings in a way that doesn't harm others. We should be supported to have our voices heard on how we feel about the Centenary of Northern Ireland, our culture and our identity.

Article 14: We are entitled to choose our own thoughts, opinions and religion

Freedom of thought, religion and political opinion is an essential right for every child and young person. While we can receive guidance from parents or guardians in forming our opinions, we must be able to develop our own understanding that is not subject to coercion or indoctrination. **Article 2** of the Convention also says that we should not be

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discriminated against based on any part of our identity or beliefs.

Article 17: We need to have access to reliable information from a range of sources

We know that Northern Ireland does not have a shared narrative about the past, so it is difficult to find reliable sources of information. Government should support us to have access to this information from a range of sources including through our education process.

Articles 28 and 29: We need a high quality education system that develops all of our skills, talents and abilities

We welcome the upcoming review of the education system in Northern Ireland. The current system could be seen as contributing to ongoing division here and does not adequately celebrate the diversity of identities in our society. Recent studies indicate that a majority of young people do not want to be segregated in education, we want to learn together and from each other¹.

Article 31: We should be facilitated to take part in cultural activities

Part of our development includes taking part in cultural activities which enable us to express our identity. In their General Comment No. 17, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child outline how Government should facilitate this in a way that protects all our other rights, including freedom from stress, social exclusion, prejudice or discrimination and in an environment secure from social harm or violence.

Calls to Government

In December 2020 we were supported to hold an event as part of the Human Rights Festival called 'Celebrating Rights - Right to Celebrate' with speakers Eamon Phoenix, Laura Lundy, Brandon Hamber and Community Relations in Schools (CRIS). From this we drew out key issues on how children and young people in Northern Ireland can celebrate their identity and culture while respecting the rights and identity of their peers. We have developed a series of calls to decision makers about how they can support children and young people in celebrating their culture and identity in this centenary year and beyond.

¹<https://www.nicie.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Young-Peoples-Voices-report.pdf> ;
<https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/27363/1/8615.pdf>

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Protect us from the legacy of the past

Government should make sure children are properly protected from trauma, violence or mistreatment in their communities, including from all forms of violence by State and non-State forces (paramilitaries/criminal gangs). We should also be protected from being subject to paramilitaries' / gangs' criminal exploitation, coercion or recruitment.

Government also needs to tackle the ongoing legacy impacts of the Conflict (e.g., mental ill health, family breakdown, child poverty and educational under attainment) and make sure children and young people get suitable services in their communities.

Help us to understand the past: Access to credible information

We know that young people are likely to see information on the centenary through social media. We feel that it is extremely important to make sure we can access reliable sources of information and that we also have the opportunity to hear different opinions, and about different experiences, as we don't have a shared narrative on the past. For many young people the only way they hear about what has happened in the past is informally through family or friends who are likely to have the same background. We should have access to a variety of perspectives, presented in a way that is accessible to children and young people with a view to achieving a shared understanding of different perspectives.

Engage with us: Participation

Please don't just pay lip service to participation. Children and young people want to be part of solutions but there have been very little opportunities for us to engage publicly on how to mark the centenary. Support children and young people to play a central role in building a peaceful future. Government should recognise that children and young people have been Human Rights Defenders for many years. We want government to make sure children and young people are supported to explore and celebrate their culture, and to recognise the right of others to celebrate theirs.

Give advice and support to schools and youth services in contested spaces

We need safe spaces to explore controversial issues, but we understand that our teachers and youth workers are not always equipped to provide this as they grew up in the same system we did and may not have had the opportunity to think things through themselves. Schools and youth groups need to be properly resourced with either training for staff or experienced facilitators to help us discuss these issues. Government should make sure the school curriculum promotes understanding and integration between communities from an early age and regularly throughout school.

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Need for support for community organisations that reflect the various cultural backgrounds (plurality) of Northern Ireland today

We want to have opportunities to learn about, and from, other cultures and identities; not just the traditional two main communities in Northern Ireland but also those from different cultures and faiths, including those with no faiths, who share Northern Ireland. Sharing culture, food and sport is a first step to learning about others. This then opens the door for further discussion and exploration of other areas where opinions might vary more greatly.

Conclusion

Young people develop their knowledge and understanding of the past from many distinct, and sometimes overlapping and contradictory sources. For example, family, community, peers, schools, social media, television and murals - all influence experiences, beliefs and understanding. Whatever the source, in most instances, young people's views are reflective of their own communities' sense of history.

For many the conflict has not ended, for all of us the legacy of the past is still with us through ongoing segregation, sectarianism, inequalities, rights breaches and the influence of paramilitary/criminal gangs. For many young people the influence of (ex)paramilitaries/gangs is ongoing evidence of the legacy of the conflict living in particular parts of Northern Ireland and in particular communities.

There has been very little focus in the Northern Ireland peace process on the impact of the conflict on children and young people. Even in the Good Friday Agreement, young people are mentioned only once where it states:

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

In the words of one young person:

*"We're haunted by the legacy of the conflict"*²

² <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/11ec25d7/files/uploaded/6644%20YouthAction%20I%20haven't%20been%20affected%20by%20the%20troubles.pdf>

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While young people have a vital role to play in moving towards a more peaceful and stable future, it is adults and the Government who must ensure that they are included and facilitated to play their part in it.

We as NICCY's Youth Panel will work with the Commissioner and her team to progress the calls in this 'Statement'

September 2021