Intercultural Youth Dialogue in Northern Ireland – too late to talk?

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> *"The young people speak up about different issues like climate change, older people stick to what they know, they're not willing to look at things and understand the different aspects that the youth can look into. So, young people are the future and young people should have their say" (Youth Engagement participant).*

The notion of intercultural dialogue among young people in Northern Ireland is complex and multifaceted. While various dialogue programmes - such as those facilitated through youth groups, sport, cultural activities, or collaborative educational initiatives - are relatively common, they are not termed intercultural in Northern Ireland. Most interactions occur between distinct communities, typically classified as predominantly Catholic and Protestant. In Northern Ireland, these interactions are often categorised as either single-identity (within the same identity group) or cross-community dialogue (between different groups) under the umbrella of what is termed 'community relations' or 'peacebuilding' work.

These classifications, however, increasingly pose challenges in post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland. Individuals now often embrace multiple identities from a political perspective; for example, a Protestant may support a united Ireland, or a Catholic might identify more as European than as an Irish nationalist. The demographic landscape is also rapidly evolving, with an influx of migrants from various global regions, and a growing inclusion of those from LGBTQI+ communities, contributing to a broader understanding of identity.

The oversimplification of identity into neat categories undermines the reality that individuals often hold multiple identities and perspectives. This complexity challenges the essence of what is meant by dialogue and who is considered 'the other' in such interactions. The contexts in which young people now live shape the issues deemed important for dialogue, many of which no longer conform to the political fissures of the past.

This article, therefore, seeks to explore how contemporary youth identities have evolved from the binary identities of the past and the impact this has on how peacebuilding is now understood. This fundamentally changes the nature of the dialogue needed amongst young people in Northern Ireland, yet this article questions how youth sector peacebuilding practices match this new reality.

The Context

> *"We were talking about people not feeling safe going places because of their backgrounds, but people should not be scared. They should be able to go anywhere without thinking something bad will happen because of their background" (Youth Engagement participant).*

While direct violence in Northern Ireland is perceived as relatively low compared to other global conflicts, the legacy of violence remains palpable. Over 3,700 conflict-related deaths and

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approximately 100,000 physical injuries have left long-lasting repercussions on a population of just under 2 million throughout 'the Troubles'. Certain areas have been disproportionately affected, underscoring the significant toll of the conflict and its ongoing legacy.

The peace process initiated in 1998 has led to a dramatic reduction in direct political violence; however, Northern Ireland remains deeply divided. Paramilitary groups continue to operate, particularly targeting and recruiting young men. Current assessments from MI5 categorise the threat from Northern Ireland-related political violence as 'substantial,' indicating that an attack is "likely". Paramilitary groups still exert coercive control over specific communities, often functioning as gangs with historical political ties (Independent Reporting Commission, 2023). Some still perpetrate what are known as paramilitary-style attacks (PSAs), which include beatings and shootings - again often targeting young men - to maintain control and 'police' local communities. PSAs have not significantly decreased since the Agreement. Other forms of coercive control, such as loansharking and drug dealing, also persist. In 2023, 194 family households were rendered homeless due to paramilitary intimidation (Independent Reporting Commission, 2023).

Despite some areas experiencing economic enhancement, the local economy's performance compared to other UK regions reflects minimal advancement (Gray et al., 2023). There is a common sentiment that there has been no "peace dividend" in poorer working-class communities (Brownlow et al., 2023).

The society remains divided. Twenty-five years after the signing of the Agreement, the majority of pupils continue to attend single-religion schools, with about 93% doing so. The 2011 census indicated that 90% of social housing estates in Northern Ireland are segregated. Recent census data has yet to be released, but the prevailing consensus suggests that housing remains deeply divided.

Physical barriers, such as large metal 'peace walls' - approximately 100 in total - continue to segregate unionist and nationalist communities, particularly in Belfast. Flags, emblems, and annual marches commemorating various conflict-related events frequently incite tensions and often lead to riots. This is the backdrop to the lives of many young people, especially in poorer areas.

Recent surveys indicate a growing pessimism regarding community relations, even as many individuals express a desire for mixed neighbourhoods and schools. The proportion of young people believing that inter-communal relations have improved has decreased from 52% in 2016 to 37% in 2022 (ARK, 2023). It may well be that 'inter-communal' is interpreted differently in 2016 and 2022, with more recent perspectives being the inter-communal refers to the integration of newcomer communities which was less prevalent in 2016. Nevertheless, this is a startling statistic over two decades after the Agreement.

The Peace Summit Partnership

> *"In 25 years, we want to see a functioning government for all, parties are still focused on religion rather than actual policies and a lot of communities have suffered because of this. As part of this we want to see unsegregated parts of towns and communities as there is a lot of socio-economic divide between them" (Youth Engagement participant).*

The Peace Summit Partnership was created as a collaborative effort involving various organisations to review the current state of the peace process 25 years since the Agreement. The

group undertook a consultation over eight months, engaging at least 800 individuals in 30 events, many of which directly involved young people (Hamber et al., 2023). A Youth Peace Summit was held on 25 April 2024, with 100 young people from different backgrounds participating to highlight issues of concern.

Views of Young People

> *"A lot of politicians now, those in power, they're only concerned with the old tribal politics of green and orange, but now there's so much more going on, especially the cost of living, more people are worried about that there than a border in the Irish Sea. People are worried about putting food on the table, they don't really care about stupid stuff like that" (Youth Engagement participant).*

The findings from the consultations, analysed by the authors, reflect a range of insights that are helpful in thinking about youth dialogue in Northern Ireland.

Young people respect the formal peace and recognise the effort it took to achieve it. They feel grateful for the reduction in political violence. However, they also sense they still live in the shadow of the conflict. While young people conveyed optimism and compassion towards individuals from different communities, their discussions often revealed frustration with the limitations of current dialogue initiatives, particularly in light of the structural issues - such as inequality, segregation and ongoing division - that shape their lives.

Young people frequently experience and perceive physical and psychological conflict-related threat creating high levels of anxiety. Many young people are compelled to adapt their social and personal lives to navigate the dangers they face, such as taking longer routes when out to avoid certain areas. The persistence of violence and paramilitary activity is perceived as a significant impediment to socio-economic development across Northern Ireland. For some young people, paramilitaries continue to exert control over their lives and pose a violent danger, impacting their psychological health and well-being.

Young people often feel constrained by historical legacies, a lack of agency, and older generations dictating the parameters of significant issues, essentially dragging them back into past divisions or "the older generation pushing it down on us" as one young person put it at an engagement event.

Many perceive the political system as dysfunctional and feel burdened by inherited conflicts that prevent them from addressing pressing issues such as climate change, LGBTQI+ rights, and economic challenges. Their keen interest in political matters is frequently met with indifference from a system that fails to adequately recognise their contributions or include them.

> *"People in power today are too old and don't understand the youth. They don't understand that it's our future and we should be able to decide how to shape it. They're not changing their own future, they're changing ours and they don't have the experiences that the youth have today so youths should have their say in what should be done about it" (Youth Engagement participant).*

To foster meaningful engagement, peacebuilding must transition into a new phase that adequately addresses contemporary issues faced by young people. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum (2023) has identified the most pressing concerns as climate change, mental health, education, and human rights, with fewer citing Brexit and the Troubles as primary issues. This shift necessitates a re-evaluation of how politics and community relations engage young people and the need to move beyond superficial 'conflict-only' cross-community dialogue.

Although young people want to talk about 'new issues' they still express a desire to learn about the past through intergenerational sharing, dialogue, and civic education that is accessible and relevant. They seek to break the silence surrounding the past - not necessarily to come to terms with it individually, but to facilitate the creation of a new future unencumbered by historical burdens.

The Way Forward

> *"Invest in radical peace education that's workshop and dialogue based, in power with relationships, part of a culture of justice and human rights. Then those engaged get a sense of the difference a peace-based education can imbibe and are opened to possibility of being that change, power-with: others, other species, and earth, in a power-over system that is ravaging community spirit and our earth" (Padlet comment, Peace Summit conference).*

Post-Agreement Northern Ireland presents intriguing challenges for the concept of intercultural dialogue. Our experience of listening to young people suggests that the space for what we might call intercultural dialogue is best suited to the pre- and early post-conflict stage. When fear and anxiety are high, knowledge about the 'other' is minimal, and understanding and empathy are low, there is a clear opportunity for dialogue. This type of dialogue has been and continues to be a staple feature of NI youth sector peacebuilding, however, the appetite for mutual understanding and dialogue is not as voracious as in previous stages. The question for practitioners is whether the moment has passed for mutual understanding work or if this work need to be reframed within a contemporary local and global context to redefine its relevance.

Arguably, the process of reducing barriers between communities and cultures through mutual sharing, or community relations work in Northern Ireland, was beneficial in de-escalating long-standing hostilities and suspicions. Both communities eagerly engaged in these processes particularly as a strategy for protecting community identity during the 1990s. The need to navigate the unstable post-Agreement landscape in the early 2000s further served as a powerful motivator for communities to develop cultural competence with and about their close but 'different' neighbours.

However, the impact of dialogue has plateaued as violence and the threat to identity of communities has waned and also widened. This has given way, as the young people articulated, to almost 'acceptable' levels of low-lying sectarianism and everyday fear (seldom realised in terms of actual harm but constantly negotiated in real terms). A new cultural norm is taking root in which living uneasily together within deeply flawed political and community structures is seen as the best that can be achieved. This accounts for the perception among young people that while the present is somewhat different and new issues are on the agenda, the past remains ever-present and burden they cannot escape.

To break this impasse, we propose a move away from what one might think of as harmonious dialogue, which has run its course. A shift is needed towards politicising dialogue and action with and by young people (Hamilton & Hammond, 2023). Young people consistently express that political knowledge and participation are vital for a new future, advocating for ideas such as lowering the voting age to 16. By genuinely empowering young people, Northern Ireland can work towards a more inclusive and cohesive society while cultivating a new generation of leaders capable of challenging ongoing segregation and the blind acceptance of a negative peace, creating space for new and complex identities.

Political pressure and youth activism that challenge current leaders to do more to address social and political segregation are critical starting points. This will require adequate resourcing of the youth sector and a rethinking of what political education looks like in schools, which currently varies and tends to focus apolitically on citizenship education.

Therefore, while dialogue - particularly among young people - in Northern Ireland is often promoted as a solution to division, it must be contextualised within the broader spectrum of necessary societal changes. Only through a commitment to addressing systemic inequalities, divisions, and the threat of violence can the region hope to pave the way for lasting peace and understanding. A contextual intercultural (or intercommunity) dialogue that does not address the wider context, or is not tailored to the current realities, will yield limited results.

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