

Twenty years into the future: The voice of young people living in Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland

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Peace-building scholarship suggests that in societies transitioning from war to peace there is a need to balance redressing past wrongs with the need to envision a shared future (Lederach, 1998) and construct a shared understanding of the common good (Jaede, 2017). To this end, Youth Link is developing and piloting an education programme entitled 'Remembering the Past; Shaping the Future' aimed at addressing sectarianism and building an inclusive society and future based on the common good.¹ In the first session, students are invited to participate in an envisioning exercise in which they present "newspapers" depicting the kind of society they would like in 20 years. The envisioning sessions were piloted with 198 participants in post-primary schools and youth groups across Northern Ireland (Belfast, Armagh, Portadown, Magherafelt and Derry / Londonderry). There was equal representation along gender lines and across both Catholic / Nationalist / Republican and Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist communities. The posters that were produced represent the voice of young people and provide a snapshot into some of their concerns and priorities. These were analysed using thematic analysis, the results of which are outlined below:²

1. Equality:

The desire for a more equal society was one of the most dominant themes to emerge from the posters. This was largely defined in terms of the gender pay gap and wanting to see it reduced (both within the working world and within the sporting sector); the legalisation of same-sex marriage (although there were a small percentage of people who disagreed with their peers who supported this); and the desire to see greater racial diversity and inclusion. Awareness around poverty and wanting to see it addressed was also strongly expressed. Interestingly, this related more to concerns such as homelessness rather than directly talking about issues relating to class and classism. It's significant to note the way in which equality was prioritised in the posters by the young people; it is clearly something they value and would like to see improved in the society moving forward.

2. Safety and security:

Concerns around safety and security were also frequently expressed. This included concerns around crime and violence and the influence of paramilitary groups. Some groups also identified the need for better policing within their communities. Interestingly, the issue of

¹ The project is core funded by the Community Relations Council and supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It forms part of a wider project entitled 'Remembering the past; shaping the future' which aims to develop curriculum related to reconciliation and peace-building for teachers and youth workers to deliver with young people.

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guns was raised by several groups. Reflecting American politics to a certain extent, some groups identified the need for a gun free society while some saw carrying firearms for self-protection as part of the society they would like to live in. Further to this, safety and security concerns were also defined in terms of the threat posed by terrorism and bombs targeted at tourists.

3. International peace and cooperation:

Related to the theme of safety and security was the desire for more international peace and cooperation. This was expressed largely within the context of current conflicts in the Middle East. Together with their awareness of the risk that that terrorism poses suggests young people have quite a strong global perspective and sense of identification.

4. Economic well-being:

The need for a stronger economy and the future well-being of young people also emerged as a dominant theme in the posters. This included the need for more jobs and concerns about future employment options. These concerns could be exacerbated by the uncertainty that Brexit brings.

5. Environmental sustainability:

Particularly striking is that all the groups in the pilot study raised concerns about the environment. This very specifically related to the amount of plastic in the oceans and impact of climate change caused by CO₂ emissions on the well-being of both the animal kingdom and human life. The dominance of this theme shows that young people are deeply concerned about the environment and are aware of the interdependence between our well-being and the environment.

6. Health care:

A good health care system was also identified as integral to the kind of society young people want to live in. This was defined in terms of better access to health care and the need for more jobs through which this could be enabled. In addition, there was a strong awareness around cancer and the need to find a cure for it. Alzheimer's as a health care concern was also raised, albeit to a lesser extent. One group identified HIV/AIDS as a health care concern. This was particularly interesting given the taboo that often exists around HIV/AIDS and the limited attention it receives (despite the rise in HIV rates across Northern Ireland [Public Health Agency, 2017]).

7. Mental health:

Issues relating to mental health and the high rates of suicide that exist in Northern Ireland also emerged as key concern for young people looking towards the future. Recognising the detrimental effect that social media could have on the mental well-being of young people some groups looked to a society in which the use technology and social media was reduced and regulated.

8. Education:

Although emerging as a slightly less dominant theme, the need for a good and quality education was important to the kind of society young people want to live in. Interestingly, several groups identified the desire for more integrated education. This could indicate a shift in how education is beginning to be perceived by the younger generation compared to the 'adult' generation who grew up during the Troubles.

9. Community relations:

Concerns relating to sectarianism and community relations also emerged as a dominant theme in relation to the kind of society young people want to live in. However, while wanting more integration and positive relations to exist between groups strong and opposing views relating to whether Northern Ireland remains in the UK or is united with the Republic of Ireland were also expressed. Similarly, opposing views to Brexit were also expressed. Related to this, a couple of groups expressed a desire to maintain their culture and natural heritage. For some groups there was an obvious concern that reconciliation and/or the prospect of a united Ireland would result in a loss of their culture and identity while for others a united Ireland was central to the kind of society they want.

10. Local political leadership:

Reflecting frustration with the current political leadership (or lack thereof) the desire for a better governmental structure was expressed. Whether this was through the dismantling of Stormont, the creation of a new and single political party, or by other means, all groups expressed the desire for a political system that worked and benefitted all groups within the society.

What then do these emerging themes tell us about the priorities, concerns and society young people want to live in?

Firstly, the themes relating to economic well-being, education, safety and security suggest there is a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity among young people. The felt threat of terror attacks coupled with the uncertainty that Brexit poses could compound a feeling of insecurity, as would concerns about the environmental sustainability of the planet. That several groups wanted to see the removal of Trump from the political stage could indicate they see his politics as part of the problem. Arguably, the concerns young people have about the about the security of their future is eroding their sense of safety and well-being in the present day (both physically and mentally). As a post conflict society, Northern Ireland has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe, particularly among young men. This raises questions for youth workers and teachers, both in the community and faith-based sector, as to how we better help young people cope with the uncertainties they are facing. In our decision-making and voting patterns what can we be doing to try and secure a more hopeful future? Can the principles of the common good help us with this?

Secondly, what is perhaps more hopeful is that there was strong value for equality expressed by almost all the groups; equality is central to the principle of human dignity and pursuing the common good. Young people also expressed a natural understanding of our interconnectedness with the environment. This understanding was also reflected in their concern and desire for international

cooperation and peace, particularly in the Middle East. Significantly, interconnectedness is also a key principle of the common good. It is from this principle that the other principles (human (and environmental) dignity, solidarity, and civic participation) follow and a society can begin to flourish. This acts as a positive indicator relating to the importance of developing and strengthening young people's understanding of the common good.

Thirdly, intergroup polarisation and community relations remain an issue and concern among young people. Significantly, reflecting the sense of insecurity experienced among young people, the most recent Young Life and Times survey indicates that young people are less optimistic about the future of community relations than adults (Schubotz, 2017). Nonetheless, in thinking about borders and belonging, groups held opposing views on Brexit and the question of a united Ireland. It was interesting to note the language that was used to express these views: some talked about the prospect of a united Ireland with a somewhat hopeful tone. Others talked about it with deep concern and hoped that in 20 years their community and the borders defining Northern Ireland (and their identity) would still exist. This carries with it a more fearful tone over the security of their cultural identity within the United Kingdom. While many groups did talk about wanting a more integrated society, with an integrated education system and no more peace walls, these concerns show that the Constitutional question (about whether to remain in the UK or unite with Ireland) continues to be keep young people politically polarised. Competing desires to see Northern Ireland or Ireland win the football world cup could also be indicative of this. Despite this, young people seemed to be comfortable with holding sometimes competing visions of society together. Nonetheless, this analysis suggests there is a need to have more open discussions with young people around the Constitutional question and the uncertainty and fears this carries with it. In the context of Brexit and increased group polarisation, this analysis reaffirms the importance of educating young people about the common good and exploring their visions of the future in a way that enables young people to live in a plural and integrated future and helps the society move towards a positive peace.

While the analyses into the concerns of young people highlighted in this paper are by no means exhaustive, they provide an insight into the kind of society they want to live in. For those in leadership, whether within the faith, community, academic, or political sector, it requires thinking about the extent to which our decisions and policies are promoting a secure society based on the common good in which all can flourish.

References:

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