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Sectarianism In Northern Ireland: Youth Work and the Art of Having the Difficult Conversation

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Sectarianism In Northern Ireland:
Youth Work and The Art of Having The Difficult
Conversation

Dan Knishkowsky

Ireland: The Transformation of Social and Political Conflict

Spring 2012

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Abstract:

This report is the outcome of a month-long exploratory study on youth work in Northern Ireland regarding sectarian issues. It is an investigation of how sectarianism transfers from generation to generation, and how this often results in cycles of violence. The goal of this exploration was to find out what efforts are being made to combat this cycle at a youth level, and gain a more nuanced understanding of how these efforts can be effective.

Data was obtained through literature, structured interviews, and participation and observation in a youth workshop. It is concluded that cross-community contact at a youth level can be an important starting point, but needs to be expanded on. Difficult conversations about contentious issues need to be had. This report will analyze the techniques that go into facilitating these conversations and assess how the location of discussion, demographic of those involved, and ability of the facilitator all play an important role.

I would suggest that doing more field research on the topic would further this study. The opportunity to speak with more youth workers, and in particular, youth themselves, would provide a deeper understanding of the issue. As this paper discusses the need for a long-term vision in youth projects, it would be productive to run a similar study in a few years time.

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Introduction:

“The graves of one group or another were not a bygone static entity. The past was alive, in fact, literally circulating in the streets each year in the parading season, when violence would erupt around who had the right to remember what date in history, in which way, and on whose geography. I was surprised to discover that ancestral domain was walking and talking in the streets of Belfast.”¹

-John Paul Lederach

As John Paul Lederach notes here, Belfast is a city where the past is neither out of sight nor out of mind. Although the violence has stopped, the legacy of the conflict remains constantly visible—murals of masked gunman whose stare follows you down the street, flags waving as a stern reminder of whose neighborhood you have dared to cross.

With history still so alive in present society, the worry, of course, is that recurring violence is not far away. According to TIDES Training, a peace building non-profit in Northern Ireland, the cycle nature of civil war can be referred to as “The Balkan Effect.” Mediator Sean Obaioill describes this phenomenon as recurring civil wars that spark about “every 50 years.” Societies begin to develop a mindset that “if our children don’t fight it, our grandchildren will.”² How can this cycle be broken?

It appears that this cycle could be best broken at a youth level, working with upcoming generations. This raises a number of very difficult questions, however. Must there be a shared narrative by both sides in order to have a peaceful future? Must we seek out the “truth” of what happened before we can focus on what is to come? When looking forward, must a new, neutral identity emerge? Or can two diametrically opposed identities coexist peacefully and tolerantly?

I sought to answer these questions by examining initiatives being made at the youth level. This included both formal and informal education, mediation, cross

¹ John Paul Lederach. The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding. 134

² Interview #1: Sean Obaioill

community retreats, and youth groups. This paper will begin with a detailed description of the sectarian attitudes that divide Northern Ireland, followed by a brief history of youth work there. I will then focus on current initiatives and organizations working to promote positive and sustainable cross-community relationships.

I was able to meet with current youth workers, mediators, and policy makers to get a better understanding of the work that is being done, and the vision that is needed for the future; I also had the opportunity to hear about the specific techniques used by these people to open up difficult cross community discussions. I will explain these projects, and the techniques that make them successful, in detail, while also assessing their longevity within the larger scope of Northern Ireland peace and reconciliation.

My goal is to gain a better understanding of how sectarian attitudes manifest themselves in young people, and what work is being done to combat this in the hope of breaking the cyclical nature of conflict. In researching a country that was described to me as “obsessed with the past,”³ I aim to bring light to initiatives that are more forward thinking, investing their funding and efforts into developing a shared and peaceful future.

³ Interview #1: Sean Obaill

Methodology:

Although I entered the field of research with numerous questions, I decided not to come in with a wholly defined topic of study. Having previously done extensive research on non-profit foreign aid groups, I was incredibly aware of the complexities that surround the developmental assistance of any kind, be it cross-community relations or economic prosperity. Through this aforementioned research, I learned that small grassroots efforts focused on patient, long term investment tended to be more successful—furthermore, what is successful in some communities may not work as effectively in others.

For these reasons, I decided to let my thesis emerge from the information I gathered, rather than hoping my findings would match some previously designed hypothesis. As stated in my introduction, I had hoped my project would focus on forward-thinking groups willing to make this long-term investment in the future of Northern Ireland. Although I was able to do extensive research on the past, I felt it would be crucial to immerse myself in the culture, and talk to numerous influential figures before discerning which direction my project would take.

Literature Review:

Even before I had sufficiently narrowed my topic down, I was certain at its core would be the concept of peacebuilding. For this reason, I began my research by reading John Paul Lederach's 2005 *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding*. This book provided me with that background theory that goes into peacebuilding, as well as providing a better understanding of the nuances that may cause a society that is divided, but innocuously so, to erupt into violence. This in turn

made it easier to understand what must be fixed in order to build peace. For Lederach, moral imagination “is the capacity to imagine and generate constructive responses and initiatives that, while rooted in the day to day challenges of violence, transcend and ultimately break the grips of those destructive patterns and cycles.”⁴ This book, therefore, was particularly relevant to my research, as I became interested in the topic precisely to find out what efforts are being made to break this destructive cycle.

Furthermore, *The Moral Imagination* provided me with a framework for understanding when talking with some of Northern Ireland’s most highly regarded mediators. Lederach stresses that peacebuilding, despite its theoretical guidelines, is more an art than a science. Like art, which may have aesthetic criteria yet is far more reliant on intuition and passion, peacebuilding is most successful when done with innovation and creativity.

Other sources that were particularly helpful were two online research reports, both published in 2004. “Voices Behind The Statistics: Young Peoples’ Views of Sectarianism in Northern Ireland,” by Shirley Ewart and Dirk Schubotz, assesses first hand accounts of sectarianism by nearly two hundred Northern Ireland students. The authors indicate that this project was meant to compliment a Young Life and Times survey carried out in 2003, which addressed the same issue but from a more quantitative point of view.

This source was particularly helpful for a number of reasons. Most importantly, “Voices Behind The Statistics” talked to children from different religions, socio-economic classes, and geographic locations across Northern Ireland. This provided me with insight towards the differing situations throughout the country

⁴ Lederach, 29.

as a whole; as previously mentioned, forward thinking initiatives cannot be carried out uniformly, but rather must adapt according to the environment in which they are being implemented. Furthermore, my interviews were held exclusively with adults who worked with youth, and I had very limited opportunity to actually speak with young people. This study provided me with excellent information from the perspective of Northern Ireland youth struggling with issues of identity, education, and cross community relations.

The second report that provided relevant background was Sheena McGrellis' "Pushing The Boundaries In Northern Ireland: Young People, Violence and Sectarianism." This paper draws information from three previous studies, and provides extensive quotations from young people on both sides of the conflict. In McGrellis' paper, they discuss parents', teachers', and friends' influence on sectarian ideas, as well as the positives and negatives of integrated housing and education. One key idea that I took away from this paper was that integrated education and cross-community retreats are a good start, but there is a long way to go. Quotes from young people will be expanded on later in this paper, but many young people tend to agree with many adult youth workers that I interviewed—just getting people in a room together getting along is not enough. Cross-community work should be more than providing a safe, neutral space, because these difficult conversations need to be had for progress to be made. There is, of course, more risk to this approach, which I will demonstrate in the sections to follow.

In addition to these documents, I also found it helpful to read former SIT student Coreena Walsh's paper, "An Exploration of the Existence of and the Relationship Between Sectarianism and Racism in Present Day Northern Ireland." Her paper provided me with some excellent quotes from influential figures such as

Duncan Morrow whom I could not schedule an interview with. Morrow is the former CEO of the Community Relations Council in Belfast, and it was highly recommended that I speak to him. Unfortunately, our schedules did not match up, but I thank Coreena for giving me the opportunity to hear what he had to say.

Finally, I read *Getting To Yes* by William Ury and Roger Fisher, as well as Ury's follow up *Getting Past No*. The subtitle to *Getting To Yes* reads "Negotiating With Difficult People," and I found this book particularly helpful when interviewing a number of professional mediators. Sean O'baoill, of TIDES Training and formerly of Mediation Northern Ireland, recommended these books as must-reads for my research. O'baoill consistently referenced them when discussing mediation techniques, although he stressed, much like Lederach, that intuition often was more important than strict adherence to theoretical guidelines. These books were an excellent starting point, however; they offered me the chance to first read the theory, before hearing experienced mediators give their take on this theory. Finally, I got to see these techniques in action when I attended a youth workshop on flags and symbols led by O'baoill and TIDES Liza Wilkinson.

First Hand Sources:

The majority of my research for this paper was conducted through interviews with leading Northern Ireland youth workers, mediators, and community relations officers. Although I prepared a long list of questions for my first interview, I quickly found that a more loosely structured discussion actually was more helpful and more relevant to my topic. As I had decided to let my thesis emerge from my findings, it made more sense to let those that I interviewed give me their perspective on youth

work and sectarianism in Northern Ireland, rather than directing them too much with my own questions. I will briefly give a chronological summary of my interviews, before conducting an analysis of my research findings.

My first interview was with Sean Obaill of TIDES training, and formerly of Mediation Northern Ireland. This was a very productive way to start my interviewing process, both because Obaill had provided my initial interest in the topic, and also because he was incredibly generous with his time and willing to provide extensive detail and context. This interview left me with a number of more concrete ideas of how the project could evolve, and was absolutely crucial for my research.

I next met with Jenny Cornell, a former youth worker at Greater Shankill Alternatives, to discuss her experiences with cross community retreats. She also told me more about the integrated school system, and why she chose to send her children to schools that were mixed, but not formerly integrated. This was important because most of what I had read about integrated education was formal literature, and Cornell was able to give me a more critical analysis of both the successes and failures.

After meeting with Cornell, I met with David Robinson, a Good Relations Officer at the Belfast City Council. I got a chance to hear about the Council's initiatives to enhance cross community relations at a youth level, but also about David's past work with Corrymeela, the famous center for peace and reconciliation. David volunteered there before being a part of the Quest Programme, which aimed to build leadership capacities in Northern Irish youth. The program worked inside of Corrymeela in the hopes that these young people could then to volunteer there as well. David provided me with a number of perspectives on youth work and also insight into what needs to be done looking forward.

My next interview was with Colin Craig, founder of TIDES Training and former director of Corrymeela. This was a more informal interview, as I happened to run into Colin when going to TIDES to meet with another mediator, Liza Wilkinson. Along with giving me a brief history of Corrymeela, and youth work in Northern Ireland, Colin discussed the need for a long-term investment in change, rather than projects that merely provide temporary contact between the two sides. This idea became central to my project, and will be expanded on in detail.

I then was able to talk informally with Wilkinson in the car on the way to Lisburn, where I was allowed to sit in on a youth workshop. The workshop consisted of young people from Lisburn, a predominantly Protestant Unionist Loyalist area, and from Newry, a predominantly Catholic Nationalist Republican area. The workshop was about flags and symbols, and also present were a few youth workers and police men and women. I was able to talk with a number of teens, as well as observe their interaction with each other, the mediators, and the police.

The following morning, I was able to meet with Matt Milliken, a professional youth worker, and current Assistant Advisory Officer of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. Milliken provided me with a history of the education system in Northern Ireland and stressed the importance of not only bringing youth from opposing backgrounds into contact, but also of stimulating discussion between them about the divide.

My final interview was with Michael Arlow, the director of The Spirit of Enniskillen Trust. Arlow, like Milliken, commented on the importance at engaging youth in difficult conversations about the sectarian issues in Northern Ireland. I was also able to talk to Shane McGlaughin, a “Future Voices Support Worker” at The Spirit of Enniskillen, about how he conducts these conversations with youth groups.

He cited a number of techniques and games similar to those in use at TIDES, and provided me with yet another perspective on how to approach these conversations.

I found that these interviews provided me with an expansive overview of the type of youth work and initiatives being done in Northern Ireland, and also gave me varying perspectives of what needs to be done going forward. Some people stressed education, while others stressed informal youth work—others insisted that a combination would provide children with the best possible opportunities to create positive cross-community relations. My topic and focus evolved out of these discussions, and what follows is a comprehensive overview of current efforts to combat youth sectarianism, and gathered suggestions for a shared, peaceful future.

While conducting interviews, I used a hand held tape recorder when appropriate, and also took notes on themes and issues each person found were important. Upon looking back through my notes, I found that every single person I interviewed seemed to reference similar themes, albeit at times from different view points. This reflection allowed the greatest opportunity for me to decide the exact thesis that would emerge, and which aspects of my projects were relevant to each other. I also found that having a tape recorder was essential, because of the discussion style I adopted during the interviews; as previously mentioned, I rarely came in with a list of questions, and as such each interview was incredibly unique. I think it would have been hard to get the most out of them and draw parallels between other interviews had I had not been able to record them and go back afterwards.

The only problems I encountered when conducting field research were all because of timing. Due to the Easter break, it was initially difficult to schedule interviews, with so many people going on holiday. At first, I was worried I would not amass enough information to complete my project with any sort of authority, but

luckily had a very busy final week, and was able to talk to just about every single person I had hoped to. As much as I learned about youth work in Northern Ireland, I also learned about the trials and tribulations of conducting field research, and I am yet again grateful for the skills I have gained during this program.

Sectarianism In Northern Ireland—Generation to Generation:

From Sean Obaill’s quote that “if our children don’t fight it, our grandchildren will,”⁵ to John Paul Lederach’s idea that “the well being of our grandchildren is directly tied to the well-being of our enemies grandchildren,”⁶ it seems there is quite a lot riding on the upcoming generations here in Northern Ireland. These children can either rise to Lederach’s challenge and transcend the cycles of destructive violence, or get swept up in this cycle and follow the predicted “Balkan Effect.” They are either the way forward, or they are the way back.

It appears crucial, therefore, to build up young people’s capacities to transcend the sectarian divide. How can this be possible, however, when the divide is many centuries long? The statistics do not make for pretty reading. Nearly every person I interviewed was quick to reference the study that “indicates that children can recognize 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.”⁷ The article “Voices Behind The Statistics” demonstrated that 60% of the young people interviewed had been taught negative things about people of opposing religious background by their parents.⁸ The article goes on to say that two-thirds of young participants had felt personally affected by sectarianism, which only heightened their “animosity towards the other community.”⁹

This, of course, provides the reason behind why it is so difficult to make

⁵ Interview #1: Sean Obaill

⁶ Lederach, 35.

⁷ Shirley Ewart and Dick Schubotz. “Voices Behind The Statistics: Young Peoples’ Views of Sectarianism in Northern Ireland.” 14

⁸ Shirley Ewart and Dick Schubotz, 15

⁹ Ewart and Schubotz, 15.

progress. If each time someone is a victim of sectarianism, their own sectarian views heighten, how can a cycle of centuries of hatred and violence be broken? It may be true that for a fifteen year old child the most they have experienced in simple name calling, but when their parents, or their neighborhoods, or their friends have lost relatives to violence, its not simply a case of sticks and stones.

Youth do not need to just shake off a harmless jibe, but rather generations of keeping score of who has done what to whom; this is quite the task, especially when it also remains important to teach young people about their heritage and where they come from. How can young people be taught their history, without taking their parents' and grandparents' burden upon their shoulders?

We will start where sectarianism has most often manifested itself violently. Most of the people I interviewed indicated that the majority of both victims and perpetrators of sectarian violence during The Troubles came from lower income, working-class backgrounds. As the aforementioned statistics show, victims of sectarian abuse tend to adopt more sectarian attitudes themselves, so it follows logically that young people from working class backgrounds may have more negative views of the opposing side. It is not surprisingly, therefore, that threatening sectarian symbols are most prevalent in these working class areas in Belfast. Although much of the violence was fought in these neighborhoods, it would be myopic to suggest that these sectarian attitudes do not extend outside of the working class.

Although acts like waving paramilitary flags can be seen as more obvious forms, there is a more subtle sectarianism that can also serve as indoctrination of young people. Michael Arlow, the director at the Spirit of Enniskillen Trust, said this attitude is particularly prevalent in the middle classes, who try to distance themselves from the conflict: “[The middle class] will say ‘you know all that stuff, The

Troubles, the fighting, it was really nothing to do with us. So there's no need for self reflection or agonizing over this.' In fact, when you see how it works in reality, it's at least as bad there.'¹⁰

An anecdote from "Voices Behind The Statistics" does a good job at demonstrating this subtler transfer of sectarian views. When asked about whether he picked up sectarian views from his parents, one boy who was part of the study replied:

"My dad would always say: 'I'm not a Unionist, I'm not a Loyalist, I'm just neutral.' But anytime Catholics or Sinn Fein 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.'¹¹

Another participant in the "Voices Behind The Statistics" study commented that:

"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.'¹²

This made me realize the complexities of the problem I was trying to research, and also alerted me to just how deeply entrenched the dividing line is. Although these attitudes are not necessarily dangerous unless they manifest themselves in violence, for Northern Ireland to continue to be a society that is very much divided by an "us vs. them" mentality could be quite risky. Certainly the country is relatively peaceful at the moment, but there are still a handful of groups who feel as though their war is not over.

Sean Obaoil discussed with me the implications of "dissenting" groups, who do not believe the Good Friday Peace Agreement of 1998 has benefited them. Although

¹⁰ Interview #7: Michael Arlow

¹¹ Ewart and Schubotz, 31.

¹² Ewart and Schubotz, 31.

he said dissenters are the smallest minority, and there are no signs this minority will get bigger, those who still want revenge are heading down the path towards the “Balkan Effect.” This is why I believe that something proactive must be done to eliminate sectarian attitudes in youth—that way if dissenting voices turn violent, there is less of a likelihood that young people will get involved, thus breaking the cycle of violence.

Although most kids interviewed in “Voices Behind The Statistics” and “Pushing The Boundaries In Northern Ireland” cited parents, friends, and neighborhoods for the driving factors behind developing sectarian attitudes, others were just as quick to point towards schools. I was fortunate enough to get a concise history of the Northern Ireland education system from Matt Milliken, a professional youth worker at the South Eastern Education and Library Board. He believes that “the structure of education in Northern Ireland is a direct product of the conflict.”¹³ There has been mistrust between the two communities for centuries, and during the Home Rule issue of the early 1900’s, a major push for separate education. The Protestant schools tended to be state funded by the British government, whereas the Catholics tended to set up their own private schools.

At the time, splitting up education this way made sense, because people were fearful of opposing sides. The ramifications of this, however, were that subsequent generations could be raised without even the slightest contact with children from opposing backgrounds. The divide would grow deeper, fear would grow stronger, and a spiteful vengeance would emerge. So while separate education was initially a product of the conflict, it also would serve as a catalyst for further conflict.

As the two sides grew more and more distant from each other, they also grew

¹³ Interview #6: Matt Milliken

increasingly competitive—for identity, for land, for jobs, for political power. It is not simply a religious war, but a power struggle, summed up brilliantly by former CEO of the Community Relations Council, Duncan Morrow:

“Sectarianism has clearly something of a religious difference at its core...however, what it is is the imposition of a “them and us” pattern on the basis of that kind of a division...it’s the “them and us” pattern in which “them and us” are not just different, but rivals. They’re not just different. If they’re just different, then hey, it doesn’t matter, but the issue is they’re actually competitors for power. So power is in play and the issue of power is the issue of “if you win, I lose—the zero sum game.”¹⁴

Sean Obaill described the goal of his mediation to get both sides asking themselves, “What do I lose if I let *them* be their identity?”¹⁵ But before we can get into facilitating that difficult conversation, first its important to just get two sides being comfortable in the same room.

¹⁴ Coreena Walsh. “An Exploration Of The Existence Of And The Relationship Between Sectarianism And Racism In Present Day Northern Ireland.” 18.

¹⁵ Interview #1: Sean Obaill

Contact Theory—Corrymeela and Beyond:

One benefit of researching The Troubles of Northern Ireland as a student in 2012 is that there is an enormous wealth of literature, case studies, and statistics ready available. The conflict in Northern Ireland is a relatively discrete, and feasibly researched topic, which has often led to it being used as the paradigm case for those studying peace and conflict. This was not so, however, back when cross-community efforts first began.

Colin Craig, formerly the long time director at Corrymeela, explains how their cross-community efforts first began:

“We had no blueprints for doing this...you can go and read books about Northern Ireland now, but they weren’t there in ’70 and ’71. We were operating on instinct. Some of it was naïve. Positive, but naïve.”¹⁶

It is this naïveté, however, that Lederach feels is the essential starting point for peacebuilding efforts. Much has been made already in this paper of cycles of violence and hatred, and in order to break this cycle, one must seek answers outside of societies generally accepted norms. Lederach states that:

“Naïveté does not take what is presented on the surface and generally accepted as final truth as the primary measuring stick of how things work, are held together or fall apart.”¹⁷

Colin Craig talks about the first step towards changing what a conflict he said people had begun to “habituate” to, and references the idea of “Contact Theory,” first proposed by Gordon Allport in 1954. Allport was a social scientist who theorized that intergroup contact could help alleviate the tension and negative attitudes of both sides towards each other. His theory relied on four key conditions, which were “equal

¹⁶ Interview #4: Colin Craig

¹⁷ Lederach, 115.

group status within the situation; common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom.”¹⁸

Corrymeela, opened in 1965 on the remote and beautiful North Antrim coast, seemed a perfect place to bring two sides together in a safe, neutral environment. Craig describes Corrymeela as “the leading place that offered a space” because it “refused to belong to either side. It was built of everybody...for everybody...across class lines...as well as along religious lines.”¹⁹

Craig talks about Corrymeela as being a very necessary space in the context of the conflict, initially as just a way to get people out of harm’s way, but then as a place to begin to build relationships. He says that specifically in the early 1970’s, “people kind of thought this was going to go way.”²⁰ This made it so the focus was more towards just getting people—especially children, he says—out to a safe place, away from the violence. Although Craig said the mindset at the time was that “somebody will come in with an answer...it never happened.”²¹ Soon, the focus shifted towards “Contact Theory,” in hopes that intergroup contact could provide the base for building relations, and ultimately ending the violence.

“If you have people divided up, you have a view that if only we get to know each other, ‘well, we’re just like each other’ and that’s fixed it. It didn’t. In the midst of the background social definition of whose good, whose bad, violence, etc...those background definitions were much more powerful than the actual encounter over a weekend or a week...so when they got back, the core messaging came back in to dominate. Now, somewhere in people’s heads they had a memory...for example ‘well, that’s not true, because I know so and so....’ Human beings have a great capacity for flexibility, so we constructed new boxes in our brains called exceptions...for example ‘most Catholics are like this, but these ones aren’t’ or ‘most Protestants are like this, but these ones aren’t.’ Because what do we do with the anomaly? We make an exception, sort of, so that we can understand how to cope

¹⁸ Thomas F. Pettigrew. “Intergroup Contact Theory.” 2.

¹⁹ Interview #4: Colin Craig

²⁰ Interview #4: Colin Craig

²¹ Interview #4: Colin Craig

with that.”²²

This quote from Craig became central to my project as I continued my interviews. Most research I read and youth workers I spoke to all came to similar conclusions, that while contact can provide a positive starting point, ultimately history has engrained these sectarian attitudes so firmly in peoples’ minds, that it will require more to break it. In the context of the 1970’s and 1980’s, a neutral place for contact was necessary and crucial, because the country was in the midst of a violent conflict. At the time this was more to provide temporary respite than try to achieve major progress.

Craig was keen to point out that the current climate in Northern Ireland is much different than the context that made the work done at Corrymeela so important, and that currently many groups working effectively towards a shared future have become offshoots of Corrymeela, rather than staying inside the space itself. He lists Future Ways, Mediation Northern Ireland, and TIDES, which he founded in 1999.

Craig references the famous sign at Corrymeela that reads “Corrymeela begins when you leave,” and says it was both “a real positive and a real constraint.”²³ He describes this as a very positive message because it was clear, even when they were first getting started, that Corrymeela would be a great place to “gather people and initiate that first contact,” but that they needed to “go further” to break that habitual thinking. He says that at the time, Corrymeela was not necessarily equipped to take things further, and so they were in some ways “walking [themselves] into the problem.”²⁴ Corrymeela solved one problem, which was how to get people from opposing views into a safe space where they can talk, but opened up the next

²² Interview #4: Colin Craig

²³ Interview #4: Colin Craig

²⁴ Interview #4: Colin Craig

problem: how do we get them to talk constructively, deal with a divisive past, while working collectively towards a better future?

Currently, there are many organizations focused on cross-community retreats, putting a lot of store in the “Contact Theory,” each with varying degrees of success. Craig believes contact is great for getting people engaged, and “building relationships,” but, as he pointed out, humans prefer to make exceptions to their views rather than fundamentally changing their world outlook. Sean Obaill also discussed with me humans’ tendency to shy away from making a reflective, critical change to their own viewpoints, but using a metaphor about a traveler looking at a map. If the traveler is in a mountain range, and see threes mountains, but the map only lists two, either the world is wrong, or his map of the world is wrong. When the world does not fit people’s conception of it (or map), people tend to blame the world for being wrong, not their map.²⁵ This is the type of thinking Colin referred to when people make exceptions, rather than abandon the views they have been brought up with.

A similar theme is discussed in “Pushing The Boundaries In Northern Ireland,” which comments on both the benefits and drawbacks of cross-community contact. The author of the article, Sheena McGrellis, states that her research indicates while contact between groups in such situations “promotes interpersonal contact satisfactorily it does not necessarily promote inter-group contact (Cairns, 1996).”²⁶ McGrellis cites a conversation with two young people, among the two hundred interview, as evidence to the previous claim:

“Liam: But not, you know, aye, starting from scratch and cross-community work. I know cross-community work has been done in the past and it's worked like, they've been taking them away for weekends and they've all got on grand, but when they go

²⁵ Interview #1: Sean Obaill

²⁶ Sheena McGrellis. “Pushing The Boundaries In Northern Ireland: Young People, Violence, and Sectarianism.” 22.

back into their own communities then, you know what I mean, they're listening to the same things, like say you're sitting in the house and your father sitting watching T.V., [saying] "and them fucking auld orange bastards", and all, you know they're hearing the same things and they're just going back to the way they were and they're forgetting about the work they done at the weekend.

INT: So how do you think you can continue, you know the work, building on whatever has been done when they're away on cross-community weekends

Julian: Take them away every weekend (laughs). (Youth Values, 1998)²⁷

Clearly, taking youth away every single weekend is not a practical option, so what is? For Colin Craig, the way forward requires a shift in vision from policy makers, organizations, and the people themselves. What needs to be done, according to Craig, is "longer term, harder to discern...politics wants it done today and now. This is a five or ten year investment into people."²⁸ He gives the excellent metaphor of headache tablets, to demonstrate the need to fix the underlying root causes of conflict in Northern Ireland, rather than just temporarily provided relief to those affected by conflict.

"Just throwing programs at stuff doesn't work. It's like headache tablets...it certainly takes the pain down, but it doesn't do anything about the fundamental cause of the headache. At the moment, all the funding is set up for throwing the headache tablets...'Is that good?' Yes, because it takes away the pain. 'Is it going to change the long-term pattern?' No."²⁹

David Robinson, currently of the Belfast City Council and formerly a volunteer at Corrymeela, shares Craig's sentiment about the direction Northern Ireland needs to take. Like Craig, he believes strongly in the Corrymeela credo, but accepts that the work must continue beyond. Robinson followed his year at Corrymeela with work at Quest Programme, which worked inside Corrymeela, building leadership capacity in young people. The goal was to put young people on track to become volunteers there themselves. His work with Quest leaves him well placed to understand the

²⁷ McGrellis, 23.

²⁸ Interview #4: Colin Craig

²⁹ Interview #4: Colin Craig

complexities that make relationships sustainable beyond the initial contact. Robinson believes, however, that some other cross-community programs have not followed this example, and are not necessarily doing enough to have a sustained impact.

“There is an argument that these projects or programs are actually holding back the need for development...so long as people can access some funding to go on a program, it delays the need to transfer that back out. That’s what we need to do. We need to stop funding programs, and fund people to do that in a community, or school, or youth club or church group. It has to happen at the local level in order for it to be sustained and actually have maximum impact...

...it is about quality of life. Good relations is the prerequisite to their quality of life...it’s not all “fluffy duffy” ‘let’s all be friends’...it’s that you need to find a way of living with these guys in order to improve the quality of life for those living in your neighborhood. It’s about having the hard conversations.”³⁰

This places the onus on youth workers and facilitators to make sure that there are more to cross-community programs than just meet and greets. It also implores communities to set up their own support systems to help foster the learning once children come back into their own community. More than anything, it demonstrates that the children themselves need to be committed to the idea of change in order for cross-community programs to be successful.

It becomes clear from this that the most effective youth programs will be those focused on making a serious investment in the future, and helping to provide support, education, and stability beyond just that first initial contact. In the following section, I will look at the impact of both formal and informal education, and look at different ways to stimulate the difficult, but necessary, conversations.

³⁰ Interview #3: David Robinson

Youth Work In Northern Ireland—The Benefits of Informal Education:

One major issue to address before we can answer “how can we get two opposing sides to talk constructively” would be “where can we get two opposing sides to talk constructively?” Whether it was professional youth workers, or highly esteemed mediators more familiar with negotiating with paramilitary groups, everyone I interviewed agreed that the first step in building relationships was making sure children felt comfortable being in a room together. Finding the right venue, therefore, would be crucial to facilitating the conversation—some options include integrated schools, cross community retreats, or youth workshops.

Each of these offers different opportunities for contact, as well as opportunities to tackle the aforementioned question, “what do I lose by allowing the other side their identity?” Without getting this question out on the table, personal relationships might be made, but the “them and us” competitive dynamic persists.

Progress can be made through both formal and informal education, but I have chosen to focus on informal education for a few reasons. Matt Milliken explained that the academic setting in Northern Ireland was particularly “conservative,” and it is decided at a young age whether children will be put on an academic track or whether they will learn a technical trade. This means that those who grow up to teach have “really never left the classroom.”³¹ This is not to discredit their ability to teach, at all, but it does raise the issue of whether these teachers are equipped to facilitate these difficult discussions.

Particularly because Northern Ireland is very rural, teachers who work in segregated schools in remote areas may have had little, or no experience interacting with people from an opposing background. This would hardly make them qualified—

³¹ Interview #6: Matt Milliken

through no fault of their own—to educate young people on cross-community relations and sectarianism.

Efforts have been made with integrated schools to promote cross-community contact, but many find that the necessary discussion is still not happening. “Pushing The Boundaries In Northern Ireland” finds that many students feel integrated schools have taken steps in the right direction but are not doing enough.

“Those who attended the integrated school (the majority of whom were from middle class backgrounds), made positive comments on their experience and how it gave them the opportunity to meet and make friends with their peers from other communities and backgrounds. Some however, felt that the system was not very effective in addressing issues around difference and division. The fundamental issues of identity and culture were, according to young men in one focus group, ‘glossed over’.”³²

An interview with one student again demonstrates that while the contact is made, the discussions are not being had:

“INT: So does it (integrated school) kind of – integrate you?

Karin: There’s things like uniform free days, nobody’s allowed to wear football gear and you’re not allowed to wear things with labels in case it’s going to offend somebody, but if that’s your style, if that’s what you’re into, people should learn to have to accept that rather than be hidden away and like kinda brushed away ‘cos in the real world that doesn’t happen. (ff1, 1999)”³³

This shows that Obaill’s fundamental question was not being discussed. This study is from 1999, however, and I did learn that there is progress being made. Liza Wilkinson of TIDES said that she often will lead workshops with teachers to help them build necessary skills for leading these discussions. Like Milliken, she said there is a certain difficulty to bringing these conversations into the classroom, where most teachers are more content sticking with subject matters they know; furthermore, these issues are divisive and can cause already rowdy school children to become difficult to

³² McGrellis, 20.

³³ McGrellis, 20.

manage.

Michael Arlow, the direct of the Spirit of Enniskillen Trust, said the government is focusing on “shared education,” as means to address the sectarian divide:

The government have taken four main policy approaches towards using education to address the conflict. One was through contact programs where people were brought together from different schools, with mixed degrees of success...Secondly, through curriculum...things like the ‘mutual understanding’ curriculum, or the ‘citizenship’ curriculum...the third area has traditionally been integrated education...those have had impact but it’s always been limited, because education can only achieve so much I think. This fourth area of sharing education has emerged in more recent years...the government is putting something into place called ‘the entitlement framework’ which means that every post-primary school, secondary school in Northern Ireland has to provide a number of subjects and where they can’t do that, they have to collaborate with other schools.³⁴

He went on to explain that many segregated schools are seeing the fourth area as an opportunity for cross community relations, which he sees as the “obvious” choice.

Catholic schools that do not have the resources or funding for certain subjects can send their students into Protestant schools that would offer the class, and vice versa.

He explained that young people who have gone through Spirit of Enniskillen’s leadership programs have played a major role in making that collaboration effective.

He said that students who participated in Spirit’s “Explore” program were going back into their own schools and helping to “facilitate these conversations.” He also said that these students serve as role models to younger students, and can teach them a positive “approach to difference.”³⁵

This report is not intended, of course, to be a condemnation of formal education in anyway. Merely, from what I have gathered, it appears that collaboration between the formal and informal education sectors seems to be the most efficient and beneficial way to tackle sectarian issues. For example, teachers have great authority to

³⁴ Interview #7: Michael Arlow

³⁵ Interview #7: Michael Arlow

make a difference in children's worldviews, but yet are not always equipped to have the conversation; furthermore, students may be more willing and able to participate in a "shared education" if they have always been a part of a cross-community leadership program. This can serve as a model to inspire other students, and promote better student-teacher relationships.

In the section that follows I will discuss the art of having that difficult conversation, and assess programs that are working to sustain the learning after the conversation has ended.

Youth Work Techniques—The Art of Having The Difficult Conversation:

I was fortunate enough to talk to a number of people the techniques they use to make cross-community youth discussion most productive. Sean Obaioill walked me through a the step by step process of how he opens a mediation session. He calls the process “phatic to cathartic,” with phatic being defined as “small talk.”

He begins with simple greetings, offering a cup of tea and just making the participants feel comfortable. Next, he would ask each participant to share their name with the group, the step he referred to as “indisputable facts.” He stressed that it was important to note each name individually, because people who grew up in Northern Ireland can very often tell just by people’s names which side they might fall into. Obaioill said names that were particularly obvious indicators of where someone was from were especially important to note, and he would often make a joke about them to enforce this point. He demonstrated this joke by using my name as an example, asking me “Are you one of this Knishkowsky’s from Ballycastle?” He explained this joke was intended to point out that “we don’t hear that name much around these parts.”

My first instinct was to wonder why he would want to make it so obvious which background someone might come from, given that it could make a child uncomfortable. He explained that this was a necessary part of the process. He reminded me they were not here with the attitude of “let’s all be friends,” but rather always keeping that question in mind, “what do I lose if I let them have their identity?” For this reason, it is important to embrace one’s background and heritage, rather than hide it.

He explained this point better by referring to Rwanda, a country who has taken

a different approach to bettering relations in the aftermath of their civil war. “In Rwanda,” says Obaill, “the official policy is ‘we are all Rwandan. No more Tutsis, no more Hutus.’”³⁶ He went on to explain, of course, that people all still know the difference, and any official government policy is not going to change that. Pretending that everyone is the same is not going to better relations, if as soon as the youth return home, they are reminded of their differences. No, instead the goal should be for kids to try and understand these differences, and learn to respect and tolerate them.

The next step in his process is “disputable facts,” and involves asking the participants where they are from. This is disputable in Northern Ireland, Obaill explained, because most people will name the city near where they are from. They do this because cities do not give away which background you might be from, but smaller towns are usually clues. For example, “Belfast” does not give away whether you are Protestant or Catholic. “West Belfast” does not give it away yet either, so he will keep asking; once they get more specific, (i.e. “Fall’s Road,” or “Shankill Road”) he will usually know what perspective they are coming from.

From there, he moves onto the step he calls “opinions” and this involves asking the youth what they would like out of the session. He explained that one of the most crucial aspects of leading a youth session is making sure the kids are learning what they want to learn, not what he wants to teach them. He explained that “content is not the solution. The process is the solution.” For Obaill, it is not his role to simply tell young people facts and stories, but rather guide them to think about things in new ways, and draw knowledge out from within them:

Meditative behavior is about control of the process. Education is usually about content, and I do not make education about content, I make it about process...to “educate” is to bring out, not to put in. The very old idea of education is ‘I have

³⁶ Interview #1: Sean Obaill

knowledge, you have none. I will now fill your head with my knowledge and you will be educated.’ “To educe” is actually to bring it out of you. My job is to ask the right questions to get their opinions out in a way that is safe and holds boundaries.³⁷

The next step is “contentious issues,” and Obaoill stressed that he makes sure the kids are aware that they are moving into more difficult territory. “Contentious issues” could be discussions of interfaces walls, of parades and marching season, of bonfires, or of paramilitary organizations. I was fortunate enough to be able to watch Obaoill and colleague Liza Wilkinson lead a youth session about flags and symbols, which I will discuss in detail shortly.

Obaoill explained the difficulties of guiding people into discussion about contentious issues. He said the biggest myth about mediation and reconciliation is about truth. Many people believe that “the truth will set you free,” and approach the other side with the attitude that “if only you knew the truth, you would see it the way I see it!”³⁸ This is, of course, at the root of the conflict. Whose country is it? Who threw the first stone? Who did what to whom? Who are the victims and who are the perpetrators? These questions could be answered in multiple ways, but each answer would be given as though absolute truth. People’s perspectives cloud their objectivity, and thus what we are left with is many subjective truths. What can we do with these?

As Obaoill explained earlier, people have a tendency to blame the world for not matching their map, or conception of it, rather than readjust their thinking. So trying to convince an opposing side to see another truth is certainly not going to be the way forward. The conversation is less about trying to come to an agreed story, an agreed history, but recognizing differences and learning to live with them, side by side.

This is why Obaoill said he strictly adheres to the policy that he is not there to

³⁷ Interview #1: Sean Obaoill

³⁸ Interview #1: Sean Obaoill

teach them, but rather guide them to learn on their own. He can tell them what the flags and symbols are and who flies them, but what they mean to a certain individual is as subjective as it gets. He explains that “you ask the right questions, at the right time, in the right order and let them answer their own questions.”³⁹

The final stage in his process is “cathartic” which is intended to bring out “unresolved, deep-seated emotions.” He said this stage is, of course, the most difficult to mediate, but naturally the most rewarding:

“Guilt, I am very careful about. Anger, I’m OK with. Fear, I’m OK with. Shame is like guilt, very dodgy stuff to open up at all...there’s some of those I go near all the time, and some that I rarely go near. There’s another line here...there’s a line after “phatic” going to “indisputable facts.” You should be clear, ‘I am going to cross this line today.’ As part of my introduction, I’ll start talking about ‘We are going to talk about conflict, we are going to talk about contentious things’...before I even ask them to take the risk of telling them their name, which is no risk at all, I tell them ‘we are going to talk about contentious stuff.’ They should be warned, they are going to cross this line...because normally we don’t...we don’t get into contentious stuff in public places...we’ll do it slowly, and we’ll do it carefully, but we will get there.

The line between “contentious issues” and “cathartic” is a different line...I won’t usually go there...unless I know there’s enough time and space to do it. That said, we sometimes slip into it, and I’m ready to deal with it when we do, In certain circumstances, I will deliberately take us there, but I will do it with lots of warnings of ‘this is where we are going. It’s not the same as where we’ve been.’”⁴⁰

I was given the opportunity to watch this process in action when invited to participate in a youth workshop about “Flags and Symbols.” This was the third and final workshop in series consisting of youth from Lisburn and Newry, as well as a few youth workers and members of the PSNI. Lisburn is a largely Protestant area, while Newry is mainly Catholic. As this was the final session, I missed the “indisputable facts” and “disputable facts” section, which were covered in the first session. It was clear, however, that where the kids were from instantly dictated where they sat in relation to each other. In our interview, Obaoill predicted that the kids would sit

³⁹ Interview #1: Sean Obaoill

⁴⁰ Interview #1: Sean Obaoill

down on instinct with those from Lisburn on one side of the room, those from Newry on the other, and that the boys and girls would not mix. The first thing I noticed upon arriving at the session was that Sean was exactly right. He made sure to mix this seating arrangement up, but chose to use a creative game—similar to music chairs—in order to make sure the new seats did not feel forced upon the youth.

I noticed that the PSNI and youth workers were sitting outside of the circle of youth, and that Obaoill and Wilkinson made a clear point of inviting them in. Although some of them reluctantly agreed, Obaoill told me that at the previous session, the PSNI in particular were stubborn and unwilling. He said he used this to his advantage, however, by making a joke at their expense in front of the kids. He joked that they were not comfortable enough sitting in with the children—while it may seem like he was merely intending to undermine PSNI authority to boost his own, he said it was actually a strategic move to give the authority back to the children. Obaoill describes this incident by saying:

“While joking away and laughing, I’m saying ‘there’s cop’s over there...there’s youth workers over there. They’re welcome to come in, they’ve chosen not to come in.’ And I’m naming this out loud in front of the group. I’m saying ‘They’re too scared, they don’t want to tell you stuff. They want to hear your stuff, but they don’t want to tell you theirs.’ And they sit there going ‘Is he undermining our authority?’ And yes I am, I am undermining your authority, because you’re sitting out of this group like a goldfish bowl, with your adult authority, and you have a bunch of teenagers sitting here and you’re going to watch them, expect them to share with each other and learn from each other, but you’re not going to tell the truth about you. So yeah, I’m going to embarrass you in front of the group. Even though you’re the one’s paying my ticket...don’t care. That’s what I do. That challenge is there, and those boundaries are there about contentious issues. And I reserve myself the right to challenge...It’s all part of the process that is ‘You are the group I am working with, you have the authority to decide what’s going to happen to you in terms of contact and once you agree to this, I have the authority to be the guider in terms of process.’”⁴¹

At the session that I attended, what followed the “phatic” was a discussion about items of personal significance. Obaoill and Wilkinson had requested the

⁴¹ Interview #1: Sean Obaoill

children bring in something that meant a lot to them and be prepared to talk about why. Although more than half of the group forgot, both mediators did an excellent job facilitating a productive discussion anyway.

Obaoill led the presentation by showing his item. He had brought his passport, which was from Ireland. The way he presented it exemplified John Paul Lederach's encouragement to be naïve, "unafraid of being perceived as stupid," with the "courage to ask basic questions."⁴² Obaoill is well aware that passports symbolizes a person's national identity, and that in Northern Ireland, whether you carry an Irish passport or British passport likely determines which side people would group you with. He presented the passport as though it was merely an item he had lying around in his backpack, and not one he had specifically chosen because it was controversial. By presenting it in this way, he was able to jump-start a discussion about identity, but under the pretense that it was an innocuous thing, rather than a divisive one.

Luckily, the young boy who shared next also brought his passport. He was from Lisburn, and his passport was British. Obaoill politely asked the group to raise their hand if they had an Irish passport, then to raise their hand if they had a British passport. He then asked who believed they were Irish, who believed they were British, and who believed they were Northern Irish. There was some overlap, with a number of Irish passport carriers also saying they were Northern Irish, and some—although fewer—British passport carriers identifying as Northern Irish.

A few more people shared before one girl pointed to her tracksuit bottoms as her item of significance. They were from the Northern Ireland football team, and offered Obaoill and Wilkinson yet another chance to approach the conversation of identity indirectly, this time through sports. The children were asked to raise their

⁴² Lederach, 115.

hand if they would support the Northern Ireland team against anyone else in the world. Most kids from Newry admitted they would support Northern Ireland against everyone except the Republic of Ireland. Most kids from Lisburn agreed that they would support Northern Ireland; some would support Northern Ireland even against England. A few youth from Newry admitted they would support anyone who was playing England, while some Lisburn youth would support England ahead of anyone else.

To me this demonstrated that while there is still a strong allegiance from the Catholic sector to support Ireland, and an equally strong dedication by the Protestant children to support England, there also is an emerging identity of being “Northern Irish.” These discussions of identity, whether opposing, shared, or just simply different, are a crucial part of building more positive cross-community youth relations. By approaching the subject through more positive or innocuous symbols (like football badges or passports) rather than through history and heritage—which are obviously contentious issues—it became easier for the young people to feel comfortable and participate.

The next section was a discussion of flags and symbols. We were broken up into four groups, with at least two members of each community present in each group. The groups were given four flags each, ranging from paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Forces flags to the Socialist flag. The members of my group included three girls from Newry ages fourteen to sixteen, and a boy and two girls from Lisburn, ages fifteen through eighteen. They had varying levels of knowledge about the flags, although one boy was clearly an expert on Loyalist paramilitary organizations (I have a sneaking suspicion, however, this may be because he had participated in youth workshop also led by Obaill the year before).

He told me that he also knew a lot about flags and symbols from participating in marching bands when he was younger, but that he did not particularly feel strongly about any of the organizations represented. He actually told me that he has a number of Catholic friends, and did not believe they would feel too uncomfortable seeing these flags. I have to admit I was very surprised by this, although the Catholic girls in my group did not seem to have any strong feelings, positive or negative, towards the Loyalist paramilitary flags. One girl, who looked particularly bored with the discussion, told me that:

“I don’t really care much about the sectarian thing. I don’t really care about these flags. It’s just a chance to meet new people and make friends.”

It appeared this sentiment was shared by a number of the young people in the room. Although the kids were segregated when they first sat down, and remained so when they were allowed to—during their smoke and bathroom breaks—they seemed genuinely intrigued by this new group of teenagers, and got on quite well when asked to work together in groups.

Clearly, the girl I spoke to held a viewpoint that was not shared by all. Some of the youth were still clearly very much trying to work through what they had been taught at home regarding sectarian issues. One boy, who I later learned had an Ulster Defence Association flag flying outside his house, was forced to hold up an Irish Tricolor at the end of the evening flag presentation. He held the flag up uncomfortably and muttered under his breath, “Me da would do my knees in if he saw me holding this up.”

It then became apparent that this boy has been taught to hold strongly sectarian views, and was certainly apprehensive about mixing with Catholics or learning about their culture. When its taken into account, however, that he had arrived late because

he had a football match, and yet decided to come to the workshop instead of going out with his teammates afterwards, it becomes clear that he is both curious and committed to this learning process.

Furthermore, one young Catholic boy who knew nearly nothing about flags and symbols had no idea the flag he was holding was meant to represent the youth wing of the IRA. As soon as he was told, he proudly announced that this was “his flag.” This seemed like a typical example of conforming to sectarian views that you have been brought up with, rather than what you learn on your own. Later in the session, he was holding a UDA flag; he crumpled it up and made like he was going to throw it on the floor. His friend, also Catholic and from Newry, told him not to because it was “disrespectful.” So within a half an hour, this boy had learned more about which flags were which (content), and also about how to be respectful of others identities (process). This seemed like a very positive example of the effective of Obaill’s “phatic” to “cathartic” model.

I also had the opportunity to talk to Obaill and Wilkinson more about the previous two sessions, in order to give myself a better context in which to analyze the one I got to attend. Obaill explained some of the games they played, including one called “Not On My Street.” This game consists of giving the youth group ten fictional characters, each with a personal back-story, and asking the young people to collectively rank who they would want to have live next to them.

I later learned from talking to Shane McGlaughin at the Spirit of Enniskillen, that they too used this game during youth workshops. The more I talked to McGlaughin, the more I realized that the techniques I had learned from the TIDES mediators were used elsewhere, and had proven to be very effective. Although Spirit of Enniskillen does not follow the “phatic to cathartic” model (mostly because it’s still being created

formerly by Obaoill), they seemed to use a similar step-by-step process.

McGlaughin says that groups meeting during cross-community retreats will never have the difficult sectarian discussion until the night time; the day time will be used to make each participant comfortable with one another and provide a healthy amount of face to face contact. He also said the youth participated in discussions about other highly contested issues for young people, such as drugs and sex. As all youth are dealing with these more universal issues, by starting with this, it can serve to unify them in trusting each other with intimate issues.

As for the game itself, I heard from McGlaughin, Obaoill and Wilkinson that it is a very successful way for starting these difficult conversations. Obaoill told me that the groups from Newry and Lisburn agreed on the order of eight of the ten characters, but were very divided on the fates of the final two. These were “Sinn Fein Councilor,” and “Member of The Orange Order.” According to Obaoill, one boy was shouting out “How can you possibly think a Sinn Fein councilor is better than a member of the Orange Order?” Eventually the discussion led to the verdict that neither is *better*, but rather just *different*; the group ended up putting the two characters a jointly tied number eight in the list.⁴³

As Obaoill and Wilkinson are part of TIDES, a separate organization hired to work with cross-community groups, they are not as responsible for continuing the contact; as Spirit of Enniskillen both brings the groups together and facilitates the discussions, I was keen to find out what they were doing to sustain the learning. Director Michael Arlow explained to me that the coordinators of the youth programs were all former participants. This meant that they were close in age to the youth participants, and had a direct understanding of what makes cross-community

⁴³ Interview #1: Sean Obaoill

discussions productive. Furthermore, it allows them the chance to build leadership capacities once the programs are finished, and continue their own learning.

McGlaughlin said the program coordinators find they are “learning double when they teach it.”⁴⁴

As Arlow explained the core values of Spirit of Enniskillen, I found key parallels between what he was saying, and what I had heard from other youth workers.

“A lot of community relations work in NI has been trying to create a neutral middle ground that is acceptable to everybody. We don’t go with that at all. Rather what we want to do is to give young people the skills, who may have diametrically opposing views, but give them the skills to talk to each other and value each others position.”⁴⁵

He also explained that the demographic of the youth group plays a major role in how productive the learning is. He said that Spirit of Enniskillen aims to have their youth groups made up of a “gender balance, academic ability balance, class and community balance...this paves the way for more enriching discussion.”⁴⁶

This is important for two reasons. The first is that “once you show how to deal with one type of diversity, that model can be applied to other types of diversity.”⁴⁷ The second is that issues like racism and classism are proving to be equally relevant issues for Northern Ireland youth, and so these too must have a place in the discussion. As Arlow explained earlier in this paper, “class prejudice is almost a harder nut to crack than the sectarian issue,” and as the middle and upper classes distance themselves from the conflict, they do not find the need for the self-reflection involved in these difficult conversations.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Interview #8: Shane McGlaughlin

⁴⁵ Interview #7: Michael Arlow

⁴⁶ Interview #7: Michael Arlow

⁴⁷ Interview #7: Michael Arlow

⁴⁸ Interview #7: Michael Arlow

David Robinson agreed that socio-economic status played a major role in the presence of sectarianism. He explained that the twenty-one neighborhoods in Belfast that were most economically deprived (and thus hardest hit by the conflict) at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, remain, in the same order, the most economically deprived.⁴⁹ For people from these neighborhoods, it appears that the peace process is not working for their benefit, and they could hardly be blamed for maintaining staunch sectarian attitudes. I discussed with him whether the political structure in Northern Ireland, divided on sectarian lines, was looking after the best interests of these poor working class neighborhoods.

“Someone who is sixteen years of age has had no experience of conflict. Someone who is eighteen years or age or twenty years of age will have very limited experience or memory of it. There are a number of projects that I know of where young people don’t really give a toss about politics, don’t really engage with it, but yet are quite political. They don’t really give a toss about “them and us” politics” of unionism and nationalism, but things they do give a toss about are education and jobs, and normal things that most people in Western democracies will exert their enthusiasm around.”⁵⁰

I was left wondering then why young people, particularly of a working class background, did not abandon sectarian politics in favor of something like a Labor party. Obaoill explained that attempts for a Northern Ireland Labor Party failed, and both he and Robinson explained their greatest concerns were around representation for youth from a working class Loyalist background.

“There’s two ways of getting out of Loyalism. One way is saying “I was terribly wrong and I’m terribly sorry”...and you become a middle-class Unionist...or you could say “I am not sorry...it was a dirty war. It’s over. Let’s do something better.” In which case, the Unionist establishment will never accept you...your own people then say “you’re getting ideas above your station, Mr. ‘Clever-big words-working at Stormont-not one of us’ and so they reject you.

The narrative keeps kicking in. Who are you? Who are you loyal to?...Sinn Fein gets to be revolutionary party...’we hate the establishment!’ Everyone’s going to vote for

⁴⁹ Interview #3: David Robinson

⁵⁰ Interview #3: David Robinson

that. Actually, right now, all the Loyalists are wondering about, “We’re still living in shit, how come that happened?” Now it is working class Protestants who have the lowest education attainment and huge levels of unemployment.

When you ask the question ‘why don’t they come together?’ absolutely they have shared interests. But they never saw that, the narrative was always stronger. The narrative history goes right to your core.”⁵¹

This is an excellent example of how the sectarian history plays such a huge role in society moving forward. Although Robinson explains how many kids would rather be thinking about jobs and education, the current political system is set up to confine young people to this sectarian divide. If you are from a working class Loyalist background, it is true that Sinn Fein may be working on issues that could suit you, but your narrative history would prevent you from ever voting for them. As politics do not seem to offer progressive options for these young people, there must be a different approach to building leadership within these communities.

For this reason, Robinson explains that there are a number of initiatives specifically focused on building leadership in youth from a working class Protestant background. One such project is surrounding bonfires, which are traditionally held on July 11th the night before the contentious parades. He described these bonfires as generally getting out of control and being both “an environmental mess, and an anti-social mess.”⁵² They have set up a program to work with four-hundred to five-hundred young people, although he insists only about 10% of the work is concerned with the bonfire itself.

Instead, the focus is on “getting youth involved, building relationships.”⁵³ He said the project allows these young people to learn more about their culture (i.e. why the parades and bonfires are held), while keeping them out of trouble and getting them

⁵¹ Interview #1: Sean Obaill

⁵² Interview #3: David Robinson

⁵³ Interview #3: David Robinson

to focus their energy into doing something productive. He said that there has been a lot of success with this program, scaling down the size of the bonfire, banning alcohol, and turning it into a more family oriented affair.

As for the young people, he said this project can build their confidence and encourage them to get involved in other community issues. “Once you have a relationship,” says Robinson, “you can challenge them to do more.”⁵⁴

Another significant project that Robinson is involved with on the Belfast City Council includes getting ex-combatants from both sides to come in and talk to young people. He said that their message was one of peace, encouraging cross-community discussion while remaining proud of one’s own identity.

“Yes it’s OK to be a unionist, its Ok to be a loyalist, its OK to be a republican...you argue your stock out with your friends, and it’s not about having to defeat people, it’s about having the confidence in your argument to put that argument across. Therefore, the need for political violence—for want of a better term—isn’t there because we have an agreed political structure, and agreed ways of having our arguments and discussions and debates. It’s true peaceful dialogue...”⁵⁵

The word in there that is particularly striking is “confidence.” With confidence and security, there is less of a need for competition. This type of dialogue gets right to the core of the driving question behind this mediation, and demonstrates that people do not have to lose anything by accepting and even understanding all types of identities.

Conclusion:

⁵⁴ Interview #3: David Robinson

⁵⁵ Interview #3: David Robinson

In the final chapter of John Paul Lederach's *The Moral Imagination*, he creates an imagined school for peacebuilding. Hanging above the entrance he insists there should be a sign that reads:

“Reach out to those you fear
Touch the heart of complexity
Imagine beyond what is seen
Risk vulnerability one step at a time”⁵⁶

I find there to be important parallels between Lederach's message and the direction of youth work in Northern Ireland. “Reach out to those you fear” states the need for cross-community contact, the necessary foundation for the more progressive work. Just as important as finding the space for the contact is providing the opportunity for the relationship to go further.

“Touch the heart of complexity” epitomizes the words of everyone I interviewed, repeating over and over again the need for young people to have that difficult conversation, and begin to understand the benefits of mutually coexisting identities.

“Imagine beyond what is seen” recognizes the need for leaders who are not afraid of being naïve, not afraid of asking the hard questions, and getting people to think beyond the status quo. The value of this vision cannot be understated, and the ability to challenge people and push them to be forward thinking, despite their deeply engrained historical narrative, is what will be necessary to break this cycle.

Finally, “risk vulnerability one step at a time,” stresses the need for investment in a long term vision, and patience to see this through. This commitment includes not

⁵⁶ Lederach, 177.

only aiming to better relationships, but also to fix the root cause of the divide in Northern Ireland.

Perhaps with the aid of dedicated youth workers, teachers, policy makers, and most importantly, young people themselves, this current generation can break the predicted cycle of violence and achieve a shared and peaceful future.

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