

CHILDHOOD IN TRANSITION

Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in
Northern Ireland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS



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CHILDHOOD IN TRANSITION EXPERIENCING MARGINALISATION AND CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

To be a child or young person is simultaneously exciting, challenging and difficult. Childhood to youth to adulthood is a progression through stages or periods of biological, social and emotional development. From birth the progress of the baby-toddler-child-young person is socialised, conditioned and monitored as an adult 'in the making'. Beginning with relationships in the family and the community, and reinforced by religious, cultural and institutional practices, children can experience inclusion or exclusion depending on whether they are perceived to conform or deviate from what is expected of them. In the socialisation of children, care and protection co-exist with discipline, regulation and punishment. Whatever the social context and cultural traditions experienced by children, their journey through childhood is one of continuous transition. It is transition on several levels – physiological, social, institutional and emotional. Physical growth and development, especially through puberty, is the most visible manifestation of transition. Within different cultural and religious traditions key moments are recognised and marked by rituals and ceremonies. The State intervenes not only in monitoring child and adolescent development but also through nursery, primary and secondary schooling. The emotional impact on children of their transition through each stage of formal education is significant, especially when they are assessed and ranked in terms of what is considered 'normal' social and intellectual progression.

In Northern Ireland there is a further, overarching and profound form of transition. It is a society emerging from thirty years of Conflict involving State and non-State armed groups. As well as killings, physical injuries and the trauma of war, the Conflict involved the suspension of normal powers of law enforcement and the due process of the law and the internment and incarceration of politically-affiliated prisoners. Eventual ceasefires and the initiation of the Peace Process led to the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement and political devolution to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Marked by the stop-start of the Assembly, devolution was finally achieved in 2007, with devolution of policing and justice in 2010. While political transition has evolved at a range of levels, and through a variety of institutions, the legacy of the Conflict remains a significant aspect of life in Northern Ireland. Generations have grown up under the spectre of war and the trauma of bereavement, displacement and violence. There has been minimal recognition of the longer-term consequences of trans-

generational trauma or of the persistent impact of deeply-divided, segregated and sectarian communities.

The needs and rights of children in Northern Ireland have been identified through: recognition in the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement that young people from areas affected by the Conflict face 'particular difficulties'; the establishment of the Commissioner for Children and Young People; the development of a *Strategy for Children and Young People*; the appointment of two Assembly junior ministers with responsibility for children within their remit; the inclusion of children's rights in the proposed *Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland* and the regional children's services plan. Yet there remain serious concerns regarding the translation of these commitments and initiatives into practical provision which will improve the lives of children and young people living in the most marginalised and divided communities. The relationship between the unusually high levels of persistent poverty and the legacy of the Conflict is profound but has yet to be addressed effectively by government departments. This has led to increased frustration and alienation within communities and a lack of trust in the political process. A perceived lack of political commitment to the needs and aspirations of children and young people has the potential to undermine their eventual participation in the democratic process.

It is instructive to note the comments made by Alvaro Gil-Robles, European Commissioner for Human Rights, following his visit to Northern Ireland in 2005. While recognising the positive 'quality-of-life' transition for many people, he raised concerns regarding the relationship between material deprivation, social exclusion and 'community justice'. Social inequality, he considered, was palpable as 'others, across the religious divide, have less demonstrably benefited from economic advances ... one cannot but suppose that tensions and distrust will linger longer in disadvantaged, socially isolated communities ... exclusion and poverty facilitate the continuing control of such communities by criminal and paramilitary structures'. In responding to such marginalisation, it is essential that there is among political leaders and state institutions the will, commitment and imagination to give clear political leadership as well as necessary resources to facilitate effective changes within these communities.

This research, within communities in Northern Ireland most affected by poverty and the legacy of the Conflict, raises concerns not only about long-term inequalities and infrastructural under-resourcing, but also regarding the systemic denial of children's rights. Just as some media commentators and political opportunists have demonised children and young people, seemingly seizing on every opportunity to condemn rather than understand, they have also been unremitting in their criticism of what they term the 'rights agenda'. Yet the State is a signatory to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and is obliged

to implement agreed international standards. This it has failed to do. This in-depth research challenges the marginalisation, demonization and criminalisation of children and young people by presenting evidence from their daily experiences and from adults living and working in their communities. It reflects the often harsh reality of life for children and young people as they negotiate the aftermath and legacy of the Conflict in the context of limited opportunities. The voices of children, young people and their advocates, challenge optimistic representations of transition in Northern Ireland and illustrate the alienating consequences of social, political and economic exclusion. The research also exposes the extent of rights abuses and establishes a framework for political action at a crucial, defining moment in the contemporary history of Northern Ireland. Its findings and implications should contribute significantly to public education, policy change and law reform by the devolved Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research project, *Understanding the Lives of Children and Young People in the Context of Conflict and Marginalisation*, set out to explore the conditions and circumstances specific to Northern Ireland regarding the legacy of conflict and transition to a 'post-conflict' society. It was committed to developing research with the most marginalised and 'hard-to-reach' children and young people - reflecting their concerns and aspirations about securing safer, inclusive and participatory communities. Given the focus of the research it was essential to develop an inclusive and sensitive methodological approach.

Preliminary focus groups

To place children and young people at the centre of the research, preliminary focus groups were carried out with 24 young people aged between 16 and 25 years. All were unemployed and had underachieved in education. Some had recently left care and some were young offenders or ex-offenders. Their recent experiences of childhood and transition through youth into young adulthood were invaluable in shaping the focus of the research and in identifying key themes to be explored in the main project. The preliminary focus groups also enabled the piloting of data collection methods. Ideas and 'stimulus material' for data collection were developed, altered or removed as a consequence of responses in these groups.

Research sites

Selection of research sites was determined by communities that were heavily affected by the Conflict and also ranked high on indicators of economic deprivation. Through material deprivation indicators, area data, statistics on 'Troubles-related deaths' and discussions with those working in the community and voluntary sector, twelve research

sites were selected. The final sample was narrowed to six communities - urban and rural, one in each of the six counties of Northern Ireland. Five were either predominantly Protestant or predominantly Catholic communities (some self-defining as Loyalist or Nationalist). One was 'mixed', albeit segregated. It was decided that none of the research sites would be in Belfast because of the volume of research already conducted in the City's communities and the lack of research in smaller towns and villages.

Community representatives

Through focus groups and personal interviews, 65 adults across the six communities participated. Defined as 'community representatives' their work in the communities included: generic and specialist youth and community work; health; child care and family support; formal and informal education; youth training; community restorative justice; community development; criminal justice; community or resident forums. Some worked generically with children and young people, others focused specifically on those deemed 'at risk', 'in need' and/or experiencing social exclusion. They were identified primarily through searches of local directories of community-based child and youth organisations. Letters introducing the research were accompanied by an information leaflet providing full details about the objectives of the study and what their involvement would entail. A follow-up telephone call provided further information as required and, where possible, a meeting was arranged. Key issues covered in the meetings included: history and background to the area (specifically the impact of poverty and the Conflict); their work (including barriers and enablers); services for children and young people in the community (including gaps in provision); issues facing children and young people growing up in the community; further contacts in the community.

Discussions with community representatives provided background information, perspectives and contexts relating to each community (particularly in relation to the impact and legacy of the Conflict and gaps in services for children and families). Without the support and dedication of those working with and for children and young people in each community, access to children and young people would have been difficult. Some of the young people involved in the research were particularly 'difficult to reach', and securing the trust of their workers was crucial to their participation.

Children and young people

In addition to the preliminary focus groups, 196 children and young people aged between 8 and 25 participated in the research, mainly through focus groups in each community. Interviews were also conducted with individual children and young people who were not part of groups and had experienced particular 'vulnerabilities'. Asked questions about the same topics as those in focus groups, they gave

detailed personal accounts of life experiences that could not have been achieved through any other method of data collection.

Data analysis and presentation of findings

Most interviews and focus group discussions were tape recorded, with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Where this was not possible, one of the research team took detailed notes. Transcripts were analysed to identify themes and a loose conceptual framework was developed. Each line, paragraph or section of text was coded, with new codes added and others merged until saturation was reached. Data analysis within each thematic category enabled key messages, commonalities and differences to be identified. This was followed by an interpretive analysis through which data across all categories was read. This enabled the identification of cross-cutting and related themes, as well as underlying issues pertinent to the experiences of all children and young people or specific groups.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND KEY FINDINGS

Images of children and young people

The interviews with children and young people clearly demonstrated their sensitivity to, and understanding of, negative labels ascribed to them. While they accepted that the behaviour of a small minority caused problems in their communities, for them as well as for adults, they carried a deep resentment that the atypical was presented as typifying the behaviour of all children and young people. They felt that children generally were viewed positively and supported within their families and communities. The major shift in how young people were perceived as they moved out of 'childhood', and the expectations placed on them in the home, in school and in the community, alongside a public climate of persistent rejection presented real difficulties in making this transition. Young people were viewed with suspicion, distrusted and disrespected. Consequently their self confidence was undermined and often they felt worthless, depressed and even suicidal. Their negative experiences of emotional and physical development, including peer pressure to 'fit in', emphasised personal vulnerability.

Key issues

- Children considered that they were respected and supported within their families and communities.
- For many young people, rejection and exclusion by adults was a common experience in their families and in their communities.
- The expectations and responsibilities placed on young people, in the home, in school and in their community, were not matched by appropriate information, advice and support.
- Young people described the difficulties they faced in the transition from 'childhood' to 'adolescence' – a period when they experienced

physical and emotional change but a perceived loss of adult protection and support.

- Young people considered the labelling of their behaviour as ‘anti-social’ or ‘criminal’ by sections of the media to be an unfair and unfounded misrepresentation. This was deeply resented.
- In all focus groups conducted with children and young people, there was evidence of diminished self-esteem impacting on their emotional well-being. While some young people responded through being hostile, angry and volatile – often bolstered by alcohol – others withdrew into themselves.
- Well-conceived and adequately resourced intergenerational initiatives challenged negative reputations and stereotypes that prevailed within communities.
- Promotion and protection of children’s rights is central to development of positive interventions, opportunities to challenge discrimination and stereotyping, secure free association, promote participation and create the conditions for good health and well-being among children and young people.

Personal life and relationships

Children reported instances in which adults listened to their views and took them seriously. Yet the majority of children and young people noted that this was not the norm. Not being listened to or taken seriously impacted on their feelings of self-worth, safety and belonging. Making time for children and young people and not judging them unfairly engendered respect and trust. It also provided constructive relationships between children/young people and adults. Mutual respect was key to positive relationships between children/young people and adults.

Key issues

- Children, more than young people, felt that adults were likely to listen to and respect their views.
- In their families and communities young people often felt prejudged by adults, without having the opportunity to have their views or accounts taken into consideration.
- Children felt it was important to be consulted to ensure their safety. Young people believed they should be consulted because their views were as valid as those of adults.
- When children and young people were consulted and included in decision-making processes they felt respected, cared for and positive about themselves. Lack of consultation led to feelings of disrespect, exclusion, sadness and anger.
- Young people often explained negative or anti-social behaviour by some young people as a response to feelings of exclusion and rejection within their communities. This view was shared by a number of community representatives.
- Children and young people regularly identified an individual community or youth worker with whom they shared mutual

respect. ‘Trust’, ‘care’ and ‘understanding’ were central to these relationships.

- Difficult circumstances experienced during childhood often led to individuals displaying violent and/or risky behaviours. For these young people, developing strong relationships with respected and trusted adults compensated for lack of family support.
- Community representatives noted the dual impact of poverty and the legacy of the Conflict on families. ‘Trans-generational trauma’, low incomes and ‘multi-generational poverty’, poor health and well-being each impacted on parents’ ability to cope and form positive relationships with their children.
- It was not unusual for support services to work with adults whose parents they had supported previously, illustrating the significance of trans-generational trauma and multi-generational poverty.

Education and employment

Within the context of many young people’s lives, formal education was considered stifling and irrelevant. While there were few job opportunities, the desire to leave school to enter paid employment (regardless of pay, conditions or security) was inevitable. Yet, for many, the only available options were courses, schemes and low-paid employment. Young people had a clear understanding of their ‘place’ in the economic/ employment market and most did not have aspirations beyond the experiences of family members or people within their local communities. For some, school experiences had damaged their self-esteem, capacity to learn and ambition. They reported more satisfactory educational experiences in colleges and informal education settings, where teaching methods and the environment were less formal, more accommodating of individual needs and interests, and inspired greater confidence.

Key issues

- Family and community were identified as key factors in shaping children’s educational experiences and aspirations.
- Identified inhibitions on attainment included: lack of appropriate resources; the low value placed on education in some families and communities; poor quality vocational education/training; limited job opportunities within local areas.
- Approximately half of the children and young people interviewed disliked school or considered it irrelevant. Their ‘rejection’ of school focused on school culture, teaching methods and the perceived lack of significance of subjects studied.
- Many felt that school did not adequately prepare them for adult life. They were particularly critical of careers advice, sex and relationships education, lack of opportunities to explore emotions and feelings in a safe and trusting environment.
- Children were considerably more positive about their relationships with teachers than young people.

- Young people often felt powerless in school, believing that they were silenced, judged and misunderstood by teachers.
- Many young people had experience of School Councils, but recorded a range of limitations, including: minimal influence and impact; tokenism; poor feedback about decisions; some issues being defined as ‘off-limits’; teachers having the ‘final say’; selective representation of pupils.
- Despite the presence of school counsellors or pastoral care teams, many young people were reticent to share information with these staff because they believed their confidentiality would be compromised.
- On completion of compulsory education, many young people attended schemes and courses with limited employment prospects. Employment opportunities were more restricted in rural communities.
- Employment aspirations and outcomes were generally low and related to whatever jobs were available in local communities. Formal education was not considered necessary for most locally available work opportunities.

Community and policing

The impact of the Conflict (including death, injury and fear) were recent experiences within the communities. Distrust of the police persisted and the much-publicised benefits of peace were not evident to children, young people or community representatives. Frustration, anger and resentment were directed towards the rhetoric of ‘peace’ and ‘change’ as communities attempted to address the legacy of the Conflict without necessary resources. Concern about the perceived ‘anti-social’ behaviour of young people was considered to have encouraged a climate of demonisation and marginalisation. During a complex period of transition from conflict, segregation and sectarianism between and within communities continued. Those interviewed believed that the police and politicians were out of touch with the views and experiences of their families and communities. Young people, in particular, were resentful about what they considered discriminatory policing as a consequence of their age.

Key issues

- Many community representatives and young people expressed frustration that the Peace Agreements had not brought significant change. They believed that the impact and legacy of the Conflict had been ignored, and that communities have been left without necessary economic and social support.
- It was recognised by young people and community representatives that many young people were confused about their cultural identities and did not understand the implications of transition from conflict.
- For working class young men with an unambiguous, strong cultural and community identity, there was a collective sense of

loss – formal education was not valued, local work opportunities were declining with few alternatives, and their cultural identities were felt to be under-valued.

- Some young men responded to these dramatic changes in employment and social opportunities, and their lack of status, through violence. They asserted their sectarian identity to defend a culture they believed was under threat.
- Children and young people believed they were purposefully excluded and marginalised in their communities. They were not invited to community forums or meetings and were not consulted in decision-making processes.
- Young people expressed frustration about feeling ‘unwanted’ in ‘their’ communities.
- Community representatives believed there was a ‘policing vacuum’, particularly regarding the challenging behaviour of some young people.
- Community representatives and young people expressed disillusionment with the police, who were considered unwilling, unable or ill-equipped to deal with community concerns.
- Police tactics had done little to generate trust or respect. Young people reported being ‘moved on’, ‘goaded’, ‘threatened’ and ‘harassed’ - sustaining a climate of mistrust and confrontation.
- Young people across all six communities were united in the view that they were policed differentially and unfairly because of their age.

Place

Despite the media-reported view that children and young people are ‘disconnected’ from their communities, most displayed a definite attachment to, and care for, the place in which they lived. While recognising problems associated with their community, they emphasised its improvement, rather than abandonment. Personal identity was strongly linked to place. For some this related to particular streets or parts of the community. The local and historical meaning of space created divisions and areas of difference *within* communities. This had consequences for identity and reputation, the use of facilities and services, and for feelings of safety and belonging.

Key issues

- The problems identified in all six communities centred on lack of adequate play and leisure facilities, street fighting/ violence, alcohol use and the general condition of the local area.
- Those in rural areas experienced exclusion from play and leisure services due to remote location and inadequate, affordable transport.
- For children, positive aspects of their communities included play facilities, friendships and feeling safe.

- For young people, positive aspects of their communities included familiarity with the place and proximity to family and friends.
- Older young people expressed concern that they would be forced to leave their communities to find employment, ending the availability of extended family support for those making the transition to independent living.
- Over time, housing policies and population movement had given neighbourhoods or clusters of streets distinct identities and reputations. Children and young people positioned themselves according to such known divisions within communities, often drawing distinctions between ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’ neighbourhoods or streets.
- Those living in the same locality had distinctive and contrasting experiences as a consequence of internal divisions within communities.
- The location and management of services, even in communities with a shared cultural identity, affected take-up - leading to experiences of exclusion or marginalisation amongst those who felt that ‘their’ local area had not been appropriately resourced.

Segregation and sectarianism

Every aspect of the lives of children and young people was defined by division – their identities, communities, schools, social networks, sporting activities and use of free-time. Notions of difference were perpetuated by a lack of inter-community contact and understanding. Segregated education and housing remained a significant barrier to ending sectarianism, often actively ensuring its continuation. Territorial ‘ownership’ of space and the use of violence to assert cultural identity went beyond the religious divide. Resentment towards ‘new cultures’ represented a fear that they would dilute the ‘host identity’ and further restrict employment or housing opportunities for ‘local young people’.

Key issues

- Children and young people from all six communities considered sectarianism to be a significant issue affecting their lives.
- Children and young people were ‘badged’ by the places they occupied; often feeling ‘imprisoned’ within their communities.
- Fear of being identified as ‘the other’ limited opportunities (freedom of movement, opportunities for play and leisure, social relations) and impacted on children’s/ young people’s feelings of safety.
- Perceptions about ‘the other community’ were formed long before children and young people met someone of ‘the other religion’.
- Limited exposure to those outside their community, and strong sectarian beliefs within communities, consolidated negative attitudes about ‘the other community’.

- Rioting and sectarian clashes symbolised a means of asserting cultural identity and were described as responses to perceived inequalities.
- ‘Concessions’ to one community were viewed as ‘punishments’ to the other. This created a sense of unfairness, insecurity and increased resentment towards ‘the other community’.
- Children and young people were critical of cross-community projects based on minimal social interaction and no long-term plans for maintaining contact. Projects with a starting point of commonality, rather than difference, were better received and involvement in such projects was felt to have been beneficial.
- Children and young people across the religious divide shared negative views towards foreign nationals.
- Territorialism, uncertainty and insecurity at a time of transition for established populations exacerbated the difficulties faced by foreign nationals residing in small close-knit communities.

Violence in the context of conflict and marginalisation

The violent past of Northern Ireland remains celebrated, glorified and ‘normalised’. Murals, commemorative events, parades and stories act as reminders of institutional and interpersonal violence. Cultural violence is reproduced in the language of opposition politics, the direct experiences of families and communities, the segregation and marking of space. Violence has remained a part of everyday life for children and young people living in communities defined by uncertainty, unease and the continued presence of paramilitaries or dissidents. These individuals continued to prey on vulnerable young people lacking status, identity, self-worth and a sense of belonging. They incited violence and sectarianism. Links between violence, boredom, frustration, lack of power and respect – together with a precarious material position at a time of economic, political and cultural uncertainty – were part of the complex mix underpinning the violent behaviour of some young people and adults in the six communities.

Key issues

- Many children and young people were exposed to community violence, sectarian violence, rioting against the police, paramilitary-style threats and punishments.
- The perceived anti-social behaviour of young people made them targets for those who continued to ascribe themselves paramilitary status.
- While children and young people felt threatened and intimidated by violence in their communities, they were resigned to its presence.
- As a by-product of being on the streets at night and weekends when (reportedly) there was more ‘fighting’, young people regularly experienced or witnessed violence.
- Violence impacted on children’s and young people’s feelings of safety, their freedom of movement, opportunities for play and levels of victimisation.

- A connection was made by children, young people and community representatives between boredom, alcohol use and violence. Alcohol use was a concern in rural areas and in communities where few facilities for young people existed.
- Alcohol was often used by young people as an escape from boredom and the difficulties of life. Yet its use often increased the likelihood of experiencing violence and emotional distress.
- Some young people exerted power over children, threatening and intimidating them. This was consistent with young people's experiences of adult power.
- Violence was deemed by some young people to be a legitimate response in defending cultural identity.

Services and support

Transition from conflict had not led to noticeable structural change within the six communities. Disparities in investment persisted, with gaps in provision exacerbating poverty and disadvantage. Representatives from the community and voluntary sectors considered that statutory services depended on non-statutory provision to meet identifiable local need – developing essential services based on understanding of the local contexts/ issues and respectful relationships with children, young people and their families. Despite the value of this work, non-statutory services were generally: under-funded and unrecognised; insecure and short-term; influenced by funding agendas and heavily bureaucratised. Lack of investment in local services was expressed as evidence of the low value placed on children, young people, community/youth work and communities in need.

Key issues

- Children and young people felt that poor play/youth provision was an indication of their low status in communities.
- Of those adults with whom they had regular contact, children and young people felt most respected by youth workers.
- Community/ youth projects acted as a local support service for children and young people. Individual workers often filled the void for those who lacked positive adult relationships.
- Children and young people considered they could be better supported through expanded community/ youth provision, as well as improved quality of information and advice in schools.
- Young people noted the difficulties involved in recognising the signs of depression and poor mental health amongst their peers. Some stated that they were silenced by embarrassment or the stigma associated with poor mental health.
- A significant minority of children and young people had experienced the death of a relative, friend or acquaintance through suicide.

- Young people perceived a connection between boredom, low self-esteem, feeling down and use of alcohol or drugs as a means of filling time, increasing confidence or as a form of escape.
- Some community representatives related the high incidence of young people taking their own lives, self-harm and depression to emergence from conflict and young men lacking identity or status.
- Community and voluntary groups considered that they were expected to meet the deficit in local services.
- Programmes and projects for children/ young people were increasingly funding-led, rather than needs-led. Adult concerns, rather than those of children and young people, dictated funding agendas.
- Opportunities for qualified youth workers to utilise their skills were limited by time spent applying for funding and satisfying administrative demands made by funders.
- Insecure funding forced organisations within communities to compete for scarce resources. This inhibited information sharing and partnership working.
- Short-term, insecure funding had many negative implications for organisations aiming to develop services in communities: limited opportunities to develop trust and build positive relationships; loss of foundational work; lack of sustainable, developmental work; sudden rather than gradual withdrawal of services; loss of confidence and difficulties in recruiting for future provision; difficulties recruiting and retaining workers and volunteers.
- Long-term, holistic, preventive programmes based on individual strengths were considered more valuable than ‘crisis’ or reactive interventions.
- Intergenerational relationships appeared to have worsened. Community representatives prioritised the need to develop mutual respect and understanding between children/young people and adult community members.

The rights deficit

Children and young people lacked understanding about the meaning of rights, and had received limited formal information about children’s rights. Many associated rights with privileges, responsibilities and restrictions, illustrating how rights have become defined as transactional in popular discourse. Children and young people clearly articulated rights to which they felt entitled. Yet they provided examples illustrating how their rights were not promoted or protected at home, in schools, and in communities. This revealed a gap between the rhetoric of children’s rights contained within policies and political discourses and the reality of their lived experiences. Adults tended to associate children’s rights with child protection or barriers to effectively working and engaging with children and young people.

Key issues

- Few children and young people were familiar with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Even fewer were aware of the existence of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.
- Very few children and young people had learned about children's rights in school.
- Most children and young people considered they should have the right to form an opinion, express their views and have these taken seriously.
- Children and young people were generally not encouraged to express their opinions, describe or explain their emotions and behaviour. Nor were they involved in decision-making processes – either as individuals or as a social group within their communities.
- Children and young people recognised that effort, time and communication skills were required by adults - to listen, interpret and understand children's views, experiences and actions.
- Some young people acknowledged the significance of the right to vote and their exclusion from public decision-making until they reached 18. A few suggested that the voting age should be lowered to 16, consistent with other social responsibilities.
- Children and young people emphasised their right to age-appropriate information and its importance in informing decisions about their lives, opportunities and destinies. They felt they were denied access to appropriate information concerning sexual health, relationships and sexualities; mental health and well-being; education, training and employment opportunities; substance use.
- The right to practice their own religion and culture was important to many children and young people, especially *outside* their community.
- Many felt they should have the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. They did not consider it appropriate that their presence on streets and in other public spaces in their communities was regulated and controlled.
- Children considered that basic needs should be met, with a full range of public services available within all communities.
- Children and young people considered access to primary, secondary and tertiary education to be a universal right. They felt that the curriculum should be relevant to employment, and matched to interest as well as ability. They noted the negative impact of intransigent rules and tokenistic School Councils, raising the need for effective participation in school decision-making processes.
- The right to play, leisure and relaxation was considered important by children and young people of all ages. However, they noted that *safe* play areas were not always available for children. Leisure facilities were lacking, particularly for those aged 13 and above, for girls and young women, and for those living in rural areas.

- Children and young people felt discriminated against by appearance and age. They considered that they should be able to dress and adopt styles without being judged and stereotyped. They resented being treated differently, or excluded, because they were young.
- Children raised the rights to 'be safe' and to 'be loved and cared for'. For young people, discussions about safety concerned protection from violence - particularly on the streets, where they were susceptible to intimidation and violence perpetrated by other young people or adults.
- Community representatives generally mentioned children's rights negatively, suggesting that they inhibited interaction between children and adults because children 'used' rights as a 'threat' or because child protection placed restrictions on adults' responses to children.

Cross-cutting themes

The following themes emerged from the research and are evident throughout the full report:

- How children were perceived and respected by adults - in families, their communities and service provision – significantly affected their responses and behaviour.
- Lack of respect and age discrimination remained prevalent at every level in the lives of children and young people, emphasising and exacerbating negative intergenerational relationships in communities and in institutions.
- Lack of participation in the decisions that affected their lives, interpersonally and institutionally, led to children and young people feeling undermined, unimportant, excluded and resentful.
- Family and community experiences had a significant, often defining, impact on the lives of children and young people in terms of education and employment, culture and identity, opportunities and inhibitions.
- The persistence of separatism generated social isolation. This impacted on the opportunities and aspirations of children and young people and contributed to negative attitudes and responses towards others. Segregated education and housing create insurmountable barriers to ending sectarianism and actively ensure its continuation.
- Relationships between children/young people and significant adults were vital. Mutual respect was considered essential to positive relationships, and was dependant on adults listening to children and young people, understanding the contexts of their lives, and advocating on their behalf.
- Social injustice and material deprivation were determining, structural contexts that affected the opportunities available to children and young people, inhibiting their potential and aspirations.

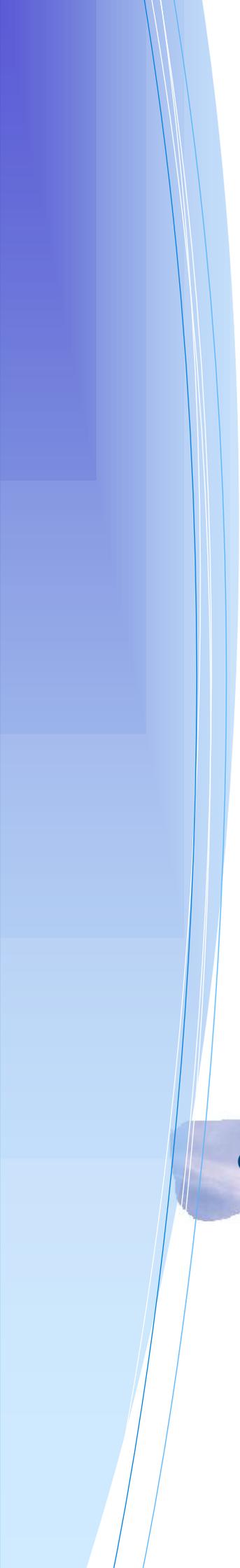
- Despite a powerful rhetoric to the contrary, within communities and in service provision children's rights standards were not understood or realised. This resulted in a serious rights deficit in most aspects of children and young people's lives.
- Perceptions about, and the reality of, young people's anti-social behaviour required more thorough understanding. Individualising 'bad' behaviour, pathologising young people and demanding more authoritarian measures, not only failed to consider the structural, cultural and sectarian contexts of violence but also escalated the potential for conflict and confrontation.

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ACCESSING THE FULL REPORT

Childhood in Transition: Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in Northern Ireland and *Childhood in Transition: Summary of Research Findings for Children and Young People*. Both versions are available from the *Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative* website: www.qub.ac.uk/ctsji For hard copies contact Dr Siobhán McAlister, Research Fellow, Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative, Queen's University. Tel: 02890 971341. Email: s.mcalister@qub.ac.uk



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