

The problem with peace

The Northwest was often at the forefront of the Troubles in Northern Ireland but now that young people here are growing up in supposed 'peace', what is life like without the constant threat and fear of violence?

Some might think that life is now full of possibilities in this land of new-found freedom but it seems that many teenagers today are still living with troubles of a different type, with segregation still prevalent and ever increasing outside pressures such as; self-harm, suicide, body image and binge-drinking.

Segregated communities and divided schools are still very much the norm in the North West. While many young people recognise the need to mix – joining cross-community organisations as well as attending integrated schools - they are fearful of the consequences. They are well aware that sectarianism will continue in their day-to-day lives through part-time work and their social lives, but these young people remain determined to integrate and are hopeful that more and more young people will, in time, do the same.

Ben (15) said: 'I have mates who are Protestant and Catholic but some of them have other friends who wouldn't want to hang around with people of a different religion. They'd get stick at home or school. I don't understand it, if someone's a good laugh, it doesn't matter to me what religion they are.'

Currently only around 5% of the school population attend integrated schools, although statistics show that approximately three-quarters of parents support integrated education and would choose an integrated school for their children if one was available. Of the miniscule percentage of schoolchildren attending integrated schools, a study by McCully states: '93% felt that integrated education had had a significant positive impact on their lives, mainly in generating a respect for diversity and promoting a feeling of security in plural environments. By supporting this style of education we are by-passing the fear of the 'other' community, which for some reason still exists today.'

Public housing is another key area where segregation is still rife with less than 10% of public housing areas integrated. Jack (16) said: 'Where I live, everyone's the same religion so everyone goes to the same school, the same church, the same shop. I only started meeting people of a different religion last year when I joined a cross-community project.'

How are people supposed to be moving on from the past if they don't do it together? We need to accept each other's beliefs and move past what happened in the past. We still have a long way to go but at least there are young people out there in the Northwest quietly building bridges instead of walls.

The Walls of Derry are well known to many young people but for all the wrong reasons. They have become a magnet for underage drinkers, the numbers of whom have swelled incredibly since the start of the ceasefire. It seems that while the Troubles were terrorising Northern Ireland during the 1970s, it was much more common for young people to go to youth or sports clubs, often run by the church, suggesting that more young people took part in volunteer work and fundraising for their local communities.

These days young people are more likely to be found at home, with mobile phones, X Boxes, internet, social networking sites and everything else keeping them closer to technology rather than the community. This lack of involvement may explain why suicide levels have risen to a new level.

A University of Ulster study into any correlation between suicides and the amount of deaths by murder or organised crime showed that the lowest year for suicides was 1972 when 47 people in Northern Ireland took their own life, yet this was also the height of the political conflict with 497 people murdered in that single year.

To put this into perspective, in 2008, 282 suicides were provisionally recorded for Northern Ireland. Likewise, a recent Church of Ireland study carried showed a staggering 370% increase in underage drinking in public places in Ireland since 1996. Almost 80% of teenagers surveyed in Northern Ireland claimed to have been 'really drunk' before they were 16.

Many of the young people I spoke to admitted they started drinking around the age of 14 or 15. Molly (17) said: 'I don't go up the Walls every weekend getting in a state, but I would be a social drinker.' Joe (16) added: 'There's nothing else really to do so I started drinking a couple of years ago.' Statistics show quite clearly that there is a huge need for more youth clubs, sports events and an altogether bigger sense of community in today's youth.

Ideally, these would all be integrated. After all, if it means that we're off the streets and staying alive, isn't it worth it?

About this story

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