'What about listening to us?' The views of young people at Belfast interfaces

John Bell

Introduction

The Institute for Conflict Research was commissioned in January 2012 by the Community Relations Council to conduct a process of engagement with young people living in interface areas across Belfast. This process aimed to assess their views on the impact that living at an interface has on their daily lives, and how they would like to be included in dialogue around interface issues moving forwards. Discussions included both single identity and mixed Protestant and Catholic groups of young people, both male and female. The young participants ranged in age from 14 to 21, although the majority were aged between 15 and 18. Approximately 60 young people in eight different interface areas participated in the research which concluded with a workshop and feedback session on 25th September 2012 in the MAC Arts Centre.

There has been a wide body of research conducted on issues impacting upon residents in interface areas, and those studies which have focused on young people have tended to specifically focus on the relationship between interface areas, young people and violence.[1] While not shying away from engaging with these issues, this research aimed to be slightly more open-ended and hoped to shed some light on the views of a limited number of young people on what life is like for them growing up in interface areas today.

Keeping this in mind, this paper provides a summary of a number of the key findings from the research.   A more detailed final research report will be published later in 2013.[2]

Purpose of Walls/Barriers

There were very mixed views amongst young people as to the actual purpose which interface barriers served. While the majority were aware of the reasons as to why the walls had been put up in the first place in terms of

'stopping the fighting', there were differing views as to whether or not the walls continued to serve any purpose:

> *I just think it blocks communities. It doesn't make you any safer* (Young Protestant male).

> *I think they do* (stop violence). *Like the whole way up Duncairn Gardens there's a wall, like I think it does* (stop violence) (Young Catholic female).

Those young people who lived closer to an interface wall were more inclined to feel that the walls provided some security and that they would feel unsafe, or at the very least, uncomfortable if the walls were to come down. Young people who lived further away from the interface recognised that their views may perhaps differ from those who lived in the shadow of the wall:

…well, we don't live right beside a wall either. I'm guessing people who get vandalised all the time would like to see a peace-wall. Like before the wall was put up I'm sure they felt really in danger. But now there is less damage done to their houses and stuff (Young Catholic female).

However, even those young people who wanted the walls down felt that this would be very difficult as there are still those who are 'stuck in the past':

…People will see it as a safety measure, the old people…(Young Protestant male)

Other young people, and particularly young males, believed that if the 'walls were to come down tomorrow', it would not make a difference in terms of improving levels of interaction between communities. In this regard it was felt that there was still much work to do before any walls came down to prepare the ground and continue to improve relations between communities:

> *…it would not make a difference. It would just make you be able to see in to (name of area) maybe. Literally that's it…*(Young Catholic male).

Perhaps most negatively the several young males in this focus group felt that even if the walls came down they would still never venture in to the nearby Protestant area, indeed as one said, *'you would probably stay on the other side of the footpath'*. A young Protestant interviewed across the other side of this interface similarly agreed with this sentiment stating, *'I wouldn't go down there ever, even if there was no wall'*. Young females tended to be slightly more

optimistic in their assessment, but nonetheless tended to agree that the walls were a symptom of deeper societal division rather than the causes.

Crossing the interface?

Despite the view that 'things were better' and a small number of young people were moving across the interface into the 'Other' community, the spatial patterns of young people clearly remain heavily influenced by the interface and many young people were still reluctant to venture in to areas of the 'Other' community. Young males in particular seemed less likely to traverse the interface for fear of being 'beaten up'. In South Belfast some young Protestants discussed how far into the nearby 'Catholic' area they would venture:

I wouldn't go past Lidl like (Young Protestant male 1).

Aye, well there's a takeaway there on that road and I wouldn't go past it (Young Protestant male 2).

In North Belfast, two Catholic young people were reluctant to venture on to the Shore Road which they perceived to be a predominantly Protestant area:

I'd feel uncomfortable on the Shore Road, I just wouldn't walk about it. I'd need some reason to go there, and ones from my school (integrated school) *would know me as a Catholic* (Young Catholic female).

Discussions in North Belfast also focused on the use of the Waterworks. As such, some young people felt that the space in the park would be used differently depending on community background:

The Waterworks – below the bridge is for Protestants, you wouldn't really go past that on your own. Where the bend is in the park, there's a hill and it's usually full of them (Protestants) *and they all stand there, so you can't really walk past* (Young Catholic male).

Those young people who had travelled into areas of the 'Other' community unsurprisingly were those least likely to feel restricted in terms of where they went to:

Remember we walked up the Shankill? Nothing happened to us (Young Catholic female).

*I can honestly say that I have walked from the town up the Springfield Road
and no one has said anything to me* (Young Protestant male).

For those young people who had safely gone across to the other side of the
interface, this experience made them realise *'you are not going to get jumped
every day like'*. The *Ambassadors for Peace* youth group involving Corpus
Christi and Springmartin youth clubs was a good example of a project which
aimed to improve relationships between young people and increase their
feelings of safety around the interface. As part of the programme, over the
course of eighteen months young people from both communities met with one
another weekly, going in to one another's areas and visiting each community
centre. The young people felt that their participation in this group had provided
them with the opportunity to go in to an area and meet people they would not
normally have had the opportunity to meet:

*See before this group started I would never have went in to Springmartin…
if this group hadn't happened I still would probably never have been in
Springmartin* (Young Catholic male).

Young people tended to acknowledge that their wider family, parents and
friends were very influential in helping them define which spaces were safe
and unsafe in their area. However, as Madeleine Leonard's research suggests,[3]
many young people did not necessarily uncritically accept narratives of safe
and unsafe spaces which were told to them by others. Indeed, one young female
talked about her mum still worrying for her safety when she crossed the
interface to take part in a cross-community group which did not put her off
attending, while another spoke of her grandfather's concern for her safety when
working in a Protestant area which again did not stop her from completing her
work experience:

*It's different though, because when we used to go up I remember telling my
mummy and she was cracking up in case something happened to me for going
up there. She'd still be the same now…*(Young Protestant female).

*And when I was getting a taxi from my local place I would have asked for
a taxi to the Shankill Road and they asked 'What's your name?' and I said
(name), and they thought I was winding them up. So they took down the top of
their sign and said they would be sitting outside, 'As soon as you see my car
bounce in'. And he had to drive a different way. The taxi man was scared but I
wasn't scared. But my granda would have been 'You be very careful over
there'…And I didn't really mind* (Young Catholic female).

Despite the general perception that community relations had improved, there remain specific events which were felt to increase tensions between communities such as parades, the flying of flags and soccer matches such as Rangers-Celtic or Linfield-Cliftonville in the context of North Belfast. While a number of young Protestants could not understand why some members of the Catholic community would object to Orange Order and loyalist band parades, similarly some young people from a Catholic background could not understand why some Protestants would want to parade. As such the marching season was reported as a time when the potential for violence at the interface increased and a number of young people reported feeling more wary of going near the interface when parades or football matches were scheduled.

Accessing Shops and Services

The restricted movement associated with living at an interface impacted upon the majority of young people, and it seemed to be the case that this impact was particularly significant for young people from what could be termed enclave interface communities such as Suffolk or Short Strand. For young males in Suffolk in particular, their dentists and GPs were all in Dunmurry and Finaghy and very few services in wider nationalist West Belfast on the Stewartstown Road and beyond were utilised. Rather than using the nearest leisure centre which was situated in Andersonstown, they spoke about travelling to Lisburn:

We are surrounded basically...We can't go to certain places that the likes of them can. They can go up and round us. They don't necessarily have to walk down Black's Road, it's the quicker option, but they can walk round it (Young Protestant male).

At the same time, some young Catholics of the Lower Whitewell area reported a reluctance to use Tesco's in Newtownabbey given its close proximity to Rathcoole and most young people would not walk down the Shore Road to go in to town:

And even when you are over at Tesco's you keep your eyes open because that's where people get jumped most. Round that area and round Tesco garage (Young Catholic male).

Elsewhere in North Belfast, some young Catholics from the New Lodge felt that KFC was closer to the Tiger's Bay side of the interface, although they still reported using it. Several Catholic young people referred to wanting to use the new Grove Wellbeing Centre but felt unable to do so given the location. One

young female in particular spoke of not using the Grove, Asda or Lidl given the fact that they were on what she saw as the 'Protestant' side of the interface:

You wouldn't be able to walk to it (the Grove) *and Asda like to do shopping...My mummy walks up like. My mummy and my sister would get their shopping and walk back and it's nothing. But I personally wouldn't. And I'd love to be able to use the Grove* (Young Catholic female).

However, another young Catholic male interviewed in a different part of North Belfast did use the Grove and felt comfortable doing so.

It should be noted that while some young people reported difficulties in using particular shops or services given their location, other young people felt relatively unconcerned with where they could travel to, and a number of young people suggested that they even felt safe wearing their school uniform in public. They tended to contrast this to a few years ago when they would have been more wary of doing so:

Yeah. I was down after school today and walked down to Tesco's in my uniform (Young Protestant female).

Like I never think or it. Like I never think of Protestants. I just walk about (in uniform) (Young Catholic female).

This increasing sense of confidence for some young people to wear one's school uniform appeared to at one level be linked to the fact that levels of violence at the interface have significantly decreased. However, other young people reported ongoing difficulties in terms of school uniform clearly identifying community background.

Cross-community relationships

One issue which most young people felt was an indication that relations between communities were improving was that there were increasing signs of young people being involved in cross-community relationships. Indeed, several young participants spoke about 'going out' with someone from the 'Other' community:

My girlfriend's a Catholic like, she's from Poleglass (Young Protestant male).

I was going with a Protestant there for two months. And I was up there and he was in my house and all. I didn't care. From the Shankill. I was up there every weekend partying with them and all. And when I was going with my one I brought my friend up and she is still going with that Protestant now…(Young Catholic female).

However, on a small number of occasions several young people reported difficulties within their own community if they made friends or dated a young person from a different background. One young person who had a close Protestant friend referred to being called a 'hun-lover' by some of her Catholic friends in her area, while a young Protestant male recalled being teased by his friends for attending an integrated school with Catholics. Other relationships ended due to wider peer and community pressure:

I felt safe because I knew it was him and he wouldn't let anything happen to me, know what I mean? But the other ones in (name of area) *said I was* (name of former IRA member) *daughter because that's my second name. And the UVF said to the UDA that I was* (name's) *daughter* (Young Catholic female).

Several young people felt that community or peer pressure against relationships could be worse if girls brought boys in to their area rather than the other way round:

My sister's boy(friend)*, he used to riot with ones in here. So whenever they first started going out he had to be careful. Like they didn't go outside or anything. He came to our house. She walked down and met him and then they walked up. Then they went in the house and never went out. It's easier for him now like, they've been going out a while* (Young Protestant female).

Rather interestingly young people could at times express some sectarian attitudes while at the same time dating someone from the 'Other' community - however they qualified this by stating that their attitudes were limited to particular groups within the 'Other' community, and in particular young males. As such a group of young males referred to their friend's Catholic girlfriend as being 'dead on' while talking at other times about young males from across the interface who they knew as 'fenians'. In this instance some young people tended to differentiate between the 'good' Catholics or Protestants they knew from the others that they didn't know:

His girl is a Catholic, she's nice like. We're going to a party in her house at the weekend in (name of Catholic area). *She's different though, she's a Catholic, not a taig* (Young Protestant male).

It should be noted however that despite evidence of some cross-community relationships, there were many young people who stated that they did not have any friends from the 'Other' community, mainly because they believed that they did not have the opportunities to meet given that they went to different schools and lived in different areas.

It is also important to note that how one defines a 'friend' is also crucial. During the course of the discussions several young people reported having 'friends' from the 'Other' community. When asked where they would hang out or what they would do together it became apparent that the term 'friend' was being used when perhaps saying they 'knew' someone from the 'Other' community would have been more appropriate. It is important to bear this in mind when assessing statistics or survey data about cross-community friendships.

Interface Violence and Policing

With regards to attitudes towards the police, young people from both communities tended to believe that the police treated their community unfairly and were more lenient on young people from the 'Other' community, particularly in a riot situation:

They never go after the Catholics like when there's trouble, but they surround our area (Young Protestant male).

But look at it, in the Strand, like all the Catholics got arrested not the Protestants…I think the police are unfair to Catholics and stick up for Protestants more…Like they say that the police are 50/50 now but I don't think they are (Young Catholic female).

In South Belfast several young Protestant males referred to being moved on by the police from the interface even when they weren't doing anything as local residents had reported 'anti-social behaviour' in the area. Some young people found this perception that they were constantly 'up to no good' if in public as unfair, particularly since they had little else to do but hang out on the streets with their mates:

There's nowhere for us to go together, like if we wanted to go out together, there's nowhere really for us to go…We would be in our own area constantly like if we weren't in here (community centre) (Young Catholic male).

Indeed, there was a feeling amongst a sizeable number of young people across the areas that they were constantly being moved on by adults, and often the police, who were responding to complaints by residents:

We'd walk up and down the Cavehill Road until the peelers tell us to move. Then we go down to the Spar and get moved, then you go somewhere else and get moved. Then we go to the shop and get moved. Then we go to the park which is a public park but they say we can't stay there (Young Catholic female).

At times this treatment tended to feed into a perception that many adults had little time for young people and saw them as a 'nuisance':

They (adults) *think we're all hoods and rob grannies* (Young Protestant male).

The frustration amongst some young people that they weren't really taken seriously by adults was one reflected in their discussion of what needs to happen next in terms of further developing interface areas.

Regenerating the Interface

The majority of young people shared many of the same concerns that their adult counterparts have in the contemporary period, worries over jobs, money and services in their area coupled with their concerns over the restricted levels of movement associated with living at an interface. Overwhelmingly, young participants wanted an opportunity to feed in to the debate about how their local area should develop, particularly if as seems to be the case that various interface barriers are being looked at with a view to areas being physically opened up. In this regard a number of young people talked about the need for economic and physical regeneration of derelict land around the interface:

They spent 300,000 grand on two big balls down the bottom of the Falls. I would have spent it on the flats beside it. You look at this big attraction and there's two big wrecked flats beside it...Like that old barracks, nothing is getting done on the barracks land (Young Catholic male).

Aye, they should have spent the money on the surrounding areas (Young Catholic female).

Researcher - What would you do on the empty barracks land?

Build something, a 3g pitch, something for both sides (Young Catholic male 1).

Yeah, something for both communities to use (Young Protestant male).

A mixed housing estate… (Young Catholic male 2).

However, while the vast majority of young people were keen to be involved in discussions around regeneration and transforming the interface, there was general consensus throughout the research that their views were rarely sought by adults, and that they were often viewed as a 'problem' rather than as part of the solution to improving relations between communities:

Young people are only included when violence happens (Young Catholic female).

It was significant that several young people from different interface areas spoke of their attendance at the consultation event in the MAC Arts Centre on 25th September as the first time they had ever been invited to a discussion on interface issues with other young people:

Apart from tonight, we have never been invited to a cross-community discussion about interfaces. Also this is the first time we have been invited to a cross-city interface discussion, as not all interfaces have the same problems (Young Protestant male).

This tendency to feel excluded from the decision making process was compounded for those young people who believed that they had benefitted little from the Peace Process due to a perceived lack of investment in their areas:

In East Belfast we have the Titanic Quarter, but there was no local investment from this such as jobs etc…(Young Protestant male).

The majority of young people spoken with during the course of this research felt a sense of disempowerment and detachment from the decision making process. However, young people themselves were keen to become more involved in dialogue around interface issues and suggested a number of ways in which they could be more included in debates on the 'Peace Process', interfaces and good relations issues:

We need more opportunities to talk to young people from the other side of the interface (Young Protestant male).

There should be meetings between young people and adults from different interfaces so that we can talk to them about it (Young Catholic female).

Recently published research on interfaces found that 64% of approximately 1,500 general respondents believed that interfaces should be a main priority for the Northern Ireland government, while 63% of interface residents would like to know more about initiatives and discussions about the walls and barriers.[4] Although these results are very interesting, and indicate that local residents want to be consulted with on interface issues, this is based upon the views of adults in interface areas. We know little about the views of young people outside of small scale research projects and consultations. To date there seems to have been a lack of opportunities for young people from different parts of Belfast, and from different communities, to discuss issues relating to the walls, security and regeneration.

It is clear that in line with the Programme for Government,[5] young people who live in interface areas should be part of the area based action plan discussions on developments at the interface, including any potential changes to security architecture. But effective consultation and engagement with young people needs to allow space for them to ask questions they feel are relevant (within reason) rather than simply being told of developments which are happening and why they are happening.

Summary

If as Margaret O'Brien and her colleagues argue, one of the main principles of a 'just city' is that it enables the free movement of children through it,[6] then it is debatable whether or not Belfast in the contemporary period would qualify. While clearly some young people living at the interface feel relatively free to go where they please, there remain issues associated with a restricted sense of movement in and around the interface for many others, particularly with regards to accessing particular services and facilities.

It is crucial in the forthcoming debates around regenerating interface areas and developing area based action plans to potentially think about removing barriers and transforming the interface that young people are included in this process. Part of this process moving forwards may involve rethinking the strict dichotomy around defining public and private space. This may require a shift in thinking to one where space is defined on a sense of belonging rather than ownership.[7] It has been argued that regeneration plans which emphasise divisions between public and private space and introduces social mix may leave little room for the interpretations of young people.[8] It is imperative in the

Northern Irish context that this doesn't happen and the views of young people are included in the regeneration process.

While there are a number of issues to be addressed in terms of intra-community relationships between young people and adults, it is of concern that there remains a general lack of opportunities for young people to have *sustained* 'face to face' contact with others from different backgrounds given persistent segregated living and segregated education. In such a context there remain sectarianised narratives from which some young people draw upon to refer to the generalised 'Other' which need to be challenged.

As part of the *Ambassadors for Peace* project in West Belfast, young people from Ballymurphy and Springmartin set a target date of 2019 as when they would like to see the first of the walls come down. While this may be seen in some quarters as wishful thinking, at least this small group of young people are starting to think about what the interface may look like in a few years time. As such, we as adults need to start listening to the young people themselves. Madeleine Leonard is absolutely right when she suggests that children are not merely 'empty vessels' into which are poured adult thoughts and prejudices. Children and young people must be viewed as individuals in their own right, as residents in interface communities, whose input moving forward can only make interface areas better places to live.[9] While this has been a limited research project which has only engaged with a relatively small number of young people, nevertheless their voices are valid and should be listened to moving forward.

Notes

[1] Jarman and O'Halloran 2000; 2001; Byrne et al. 2005; Hansson 2005.

[2] Bell (forthcoming).

[3] Leonard 2006; Leonard 2008.

[4] Byrne et al. 2012.

[5] OFMdFM 2012.

[6] O'Brien et al. 2000: 258.

[7] Laughlin and Johnson 2011.

[8] Laughlin and Johnson 2011: 452-453.

[9] BIP 1998.

References

Belfast Interface Project (1998) Young people on the interface. Belfast: BIP.

Bell, J. (Forthcoming 2013) *'What about listening to us?' The views of young people living at Belfast interfaces*. Belfast: CRC.

Byrne, J., Gormley-Heenan, C. and Robinson, G. (2012) *Attitudes To Peace Walls Research Report*. Belfast: OFMdFM.

Byrne, J., Conway, M. and Ostermeyer, M. (2005) *Young People's Attitudes and Experiences of Policing, Violence and Community Safety in North Belfast.* Belfast: ICR.

Hansson, U. (2005) *Troubled Youth? Young People, Violence and Disorder in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: ICR.

Jarman, N. and O'Halloran, C. (2000) 'Recreational Rioting: Young People, Interface Areas and Violence', in *Child Care in Practice*, 7(1), pp.45-58.

Jarman, N. and O'Halloran, C. (2001) *Peacelines or Battlefields? Responding to Violence in Interface Areas.* Belfast: Community Development Centre.

Laughlin, D. L. and Johnson, L. C. (2011) 'Defining and exploring public space perspectives of young people from Regent Park, Toronto', in *Children's Geographies*, 9: 3-4, pp.439-456.

Leonard, M. (2006) 'Teens and Territory in Contested Spaces: Negotiating Sectarian Interfaces in Northern Ireland', in *Children's Geographies*, 4, pp.225-238.

Leonard, M. (2008) 'Building, Bolstering and Bridging Boundaries: Teenagers' Negotiations of Interface Areas in Belfast', in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34:3, pp.471-489.

O'Brien, M., Jones, D., Sloan, D. and Rustin, M. (2000) 'Children's Independent Spatial Mobility in the Urban Public Realm', in *Childhood*, vol. 7: pp.257-277.

OFMdFM (2012) *A Programme for Government 2011-2015*. Belfast: OFMdFM.