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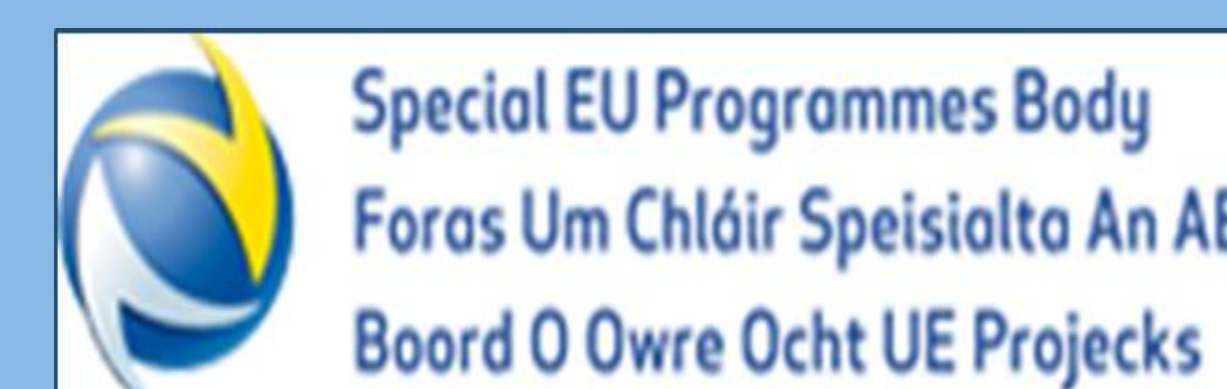
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Implementing a contact-based peacebuilding intervention in a post-accord zone: Challenges and opportunities

Stephanie Burns, Danielle Blaylock, Rhiannon Turner, Laura Taylor, Niklas Jeske

School of Psychology, Queen's University Belfast



Introduction

The 'Peace4Youth' programme (2017-2021) targets young people age 14-24 years old from marginalised / disadvantaged communities living in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and brings them together on a cross-community basis four days per week for at least six months.

Participants in the 11 funded projects are expected to show progress in three outcome areas: Good Relations (i.e., positive intergroup relations); Personal Development; and Citizenship.

Researchers from the School of Psychology at Queen's University Belfast are currently undertaking an impact evaluation of the Peace4Youth programme. The evaluation has a mixed-method design, incorporating a 4-wave longitudinal survey with young people to measure distance travelled in the three outcome areas, and annual focus groups with youth workers and project coordinators. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand: (i) the factors that hindered the establishment of the programme; and (ii) youth workers' perceptions of the factors that have influenced (positively or negatively) the achievement of the stated programme outcomes.

Methods

Six focus groups were conducted in June-July 2018 with 36 youth workers from 7 out of the 11 projects (from north and south of the border) that were established as part of the Programme. Focus groups lasted between 47 and 69 minutes.

Focus groups were audio-recorded then transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis guidelines (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

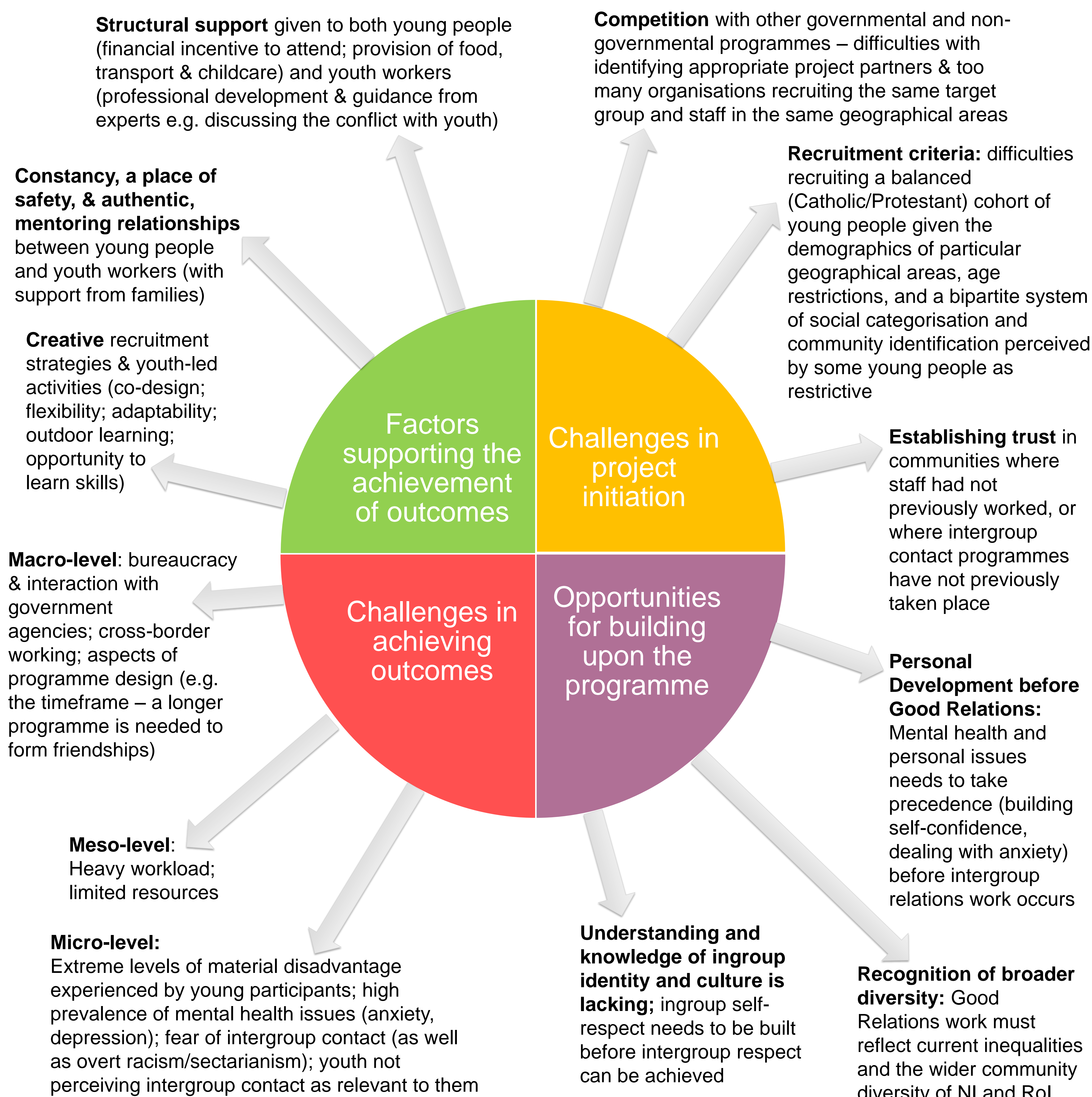
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Further information

- About the evaluation of Peace4Youth: www.cooperationireland.org/qub-evaluation
- Managed by the Special EU Programmes Body; see www.seupb.eu/piv-children-%26-young-people for more about the Peace4Youth programme

Results



Conclusions

The results presented here provide insight to some of the real-life personal and situational reasons why it can be difficult for (young) people to engage in intergroup contact in contexts where there has been violent sectarian division. The results also, however, point to positive factors that can help to motivate young people to become engaged in intergroup contact and increase their willingness to stay involved.

Some of these factors are linked to the ecology of young people's daily interactions, and include structural and psychological barriers (see Paolini, Harwood, Hewstone & Neumann, 2018). It is clear that youth workers working in the Peace4Youth programme use the framework of 'ecological intelligence' (see McConville & McArdle, 2019; Ross et al, 2015) to understand the complexity of the young people's lives in order to support them as they build intergroup contact experiences and friendships. This links to Turner and Cameron's (2016) work on the factors that need to be in place to develop young people who are 'contact ready' – here, the evidence supports the need for developing young people's personal skills before embarking on intergroup relations work. The data also point to the need for a contact 'mentor' to build and sustain intergroup relationships. The close support provided to young people by youth workers, and the fact that youth workers work in intergroup partnerships with each other, gives young people a place of safety to raise and address their fears about intergroup contact, to ask difficult questions about their ingroup identities, and to learn about the intergroup contact journey of someone they trust and are closely attached to. In essence, the youth workers from Peace4Youth are role modelling positive intergroup relations and promoting positive social norms to young people.

The data also show that Peace4Youth enjoys a high level of institutional support (one of Allport's original conditions (1954) for successful contact), given the investment and oversight provided by the European Commission, the Northern Ireland Executive, and the Irish Government. This support is clearly necessary, although the issues raised by the youth workers with reference to establishing and sustaining the projects (e.g. inter-project competition) could be addressed in the future by the creation of networks that provide strategic communication *between* and *across* governmental and community programmes that aim to promote reconciliation.