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


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Introduction

The Peace4Youth programme (2017-2021) targets young people aged 14-24 years old from marginalised / disadvantaged communities living in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and brings 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).

Results

Structural support: given to both young people (financial incentive to attend; provision of food, transport & childcare) and youth workers (professional development & guidance from experts e.g. discussing the conflict with youth)

Constancy, a place of safety, & authentic, mentoring relationships between young people and youth workers (with support from families)

Creative recruitment strategies & youth-led activities (co-design; flexibility; adaptability; outdoor learning; opportunity to learn skills)

Macro-level: bureaucracy & interaction with government

Meso-level: heavy workload; limited resources

Micro-level: Extreme levels of material disadvantage experienced by young participants; high prevalence of mental health issues (anxiety, depression); fear of intergroup contact (as well as overt racism/sectarianism); youth not perceiving intergroup contact as relevant to them

Understanding and knowledge of ingroup identity and culture is lacking; ingroup self-respect needs to be built before intergroup respect can be achieved

Competition with other governmental and non-governmental programmes – difficulties with identifying appropriate project partners & too many organisations recruiting the same target group and staff in the same geographical areas

Recruitment criteria: difficulties recruiting a balanced (Catholic-Protestant) cohort of young people given the demographics of particular geographical areas, age restrictions, and a bipartite system of social categorisation and community identification perceived by some young people as restrictive

Establishing trust in communities where staff had not previously worked, or where intergroup contact programmes have not previously taken place

Personal Development before Good Relations: Mental health and personal issues needs to take precedence (building self-confidence; dealing with anxiety) before intergroup relations work occurs

Recognition of broader diversity: Good Relations work must reflect current inequalities and the wider community diversity of NI and ROI

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 Paulini, Harwood, Hewstone & Neumann, 2018). It is clear that youth workers working in the Peace4Youth programme use the framework of ‘ecological intelligence’ (see McConville & Acsadie, 2018; 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 identity 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-provincial comparisons) 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.

Literature cited


Further information
- About the evaluation of Peace4Youth: www.cooperationireland.org/software-evaluation
- Managed by the Special EU Programmes Body; see www.seupb.eu/piv-children.
- See www.sout.eu/piv-children. 52% young people for more about the Peace4Youth programme