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“Living through it, living after it: personal reflections on ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland”

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“Living Through It, Living After It: Personal Reflections on ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland”

JOE COULTER AND JOE DUFFY

INTRODUCTION

2023 is an important year in Northern Ireland, marking twenty-five years since the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement¹. Northern Ireland, at one point referred to as a *place apart*, such was the egregious impact of ongoing violence, is also a place where people tried to live life as normally as possible. This article opens a window into the experiences of living and working in a troubled Northern Ireland through the reflective and reflexive lens of a father and son, one whose life has been dedicated to peacebuilding through academic research, the other, born in 1991 as a ‘child of peace’ and educated in the integrated school sector. The article takes the reader on a pathway through the challenges and opportunities encountered through these two diverse but connected biographies.

BACKGROUND

‘The Troubles’ is an anodyne and euphemistic moniker to describe a violent period of political conflict in Northern Ireland between 1969–1998. Some observers trace the historical roots of Northern Ireland’s conflict to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (English 2007; Campbell,

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¹Referred to also as: The Belfast Agreement, The Agreement, The Peace Agreement

Ioakimidis, and Maglajlic 2019) and others go back even further to 1107 when King Henry II of England secured control of Ireland (Darby 1995). Northern Ireland was established on 3 May 1921 following the Government of Ireland Act 1920, which separated Ireland into two jurisdictions, Northern Ireland, which would be part of the United Kingdom (UK), and an independent Republic of Ireland. ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland were arguably set against a backdrop whereby a Catholic/Nationalist minority, of a majority Protestant/Unionist population, felt aggrieved by decades of inequality, oppression and discrimination in regard to housing, employment, education and electoral practices. These grievances were expressed in a Civil Rights campaign in the 1960s, mirroring similar protests in the United States (Darby 1995), when campaigners took to the streets to campaign for liberal reforms and equal treatment. These protests culminated in a series of clashes with the authorities, causing an increase in violence and civil disturbance, resulting in the deployment of the British Army by the British Government in order to restore peace and stability to Northern Ireland. Although initially welcomed by the Catholic/Nationalist community, serious tensions and violence escalated to the point where in 1969, the period now referred to as ‘The Troubles’, would continue unabated until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. This period of violent, political conflict had an insidious and porous impact on every fabric of civilian life in Northern Ireland. More than 3,500 people would lose their lives and thousands more were injured, bereaved and traumatized (Fay, Morrissey, and Smyth 1999). To this day, Northern Ireland still suffers from the adverse sequelae of this epoch, manifested by mental health distress, addictions, inter-generational trauma (O’Neill et al. 2015), separatism and segregation in key aspects of daily life (Grattan 2007; Feeney 2020).

ON THE FENCE: WORKING THROUGH ‘THE TROUBLES’ (A FATHER’S PERSPECTIVE)

I was born in the summer of 1963 into what would soon be known as a troubled Northern Ireland. I grew up in a small rural community and was educated at Catholic primary and grammar schools. Peripherally I was aware of ‘The Troubles’ from daily coverage on the limited news outlets we then had. In 1985, I qualified as a social worker after spending four years at university near Belfast. I still recall the fear I had as a student in contrast to the tranquility of my childhood. Meeting a friend at university who lost both legs in a bomb attack was a stark reminder of how dangerous and devastating these times were. Working as a social worker in Northern Ireland, whilst ‘The Troubles’ were very much part of a chaotic background, my main priority, like that of my co-workers, was focused on helping people who were in need. In 1994, I changed

career direction, entering the world of higher education. In 2003, I commenced my first academic position as a university lecturer and since then, have undertaken research related to ‘The Troubles’ and the impact on social work practice and education. In 2019, I led the first study of its kind examining social workers’ experiences of working through ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. (Duffy, Campbell and Tosone 2019). The social workers involved in the research consistently stated that, while aware of the context of violent political conflict and the concomitant risks of this on a daily basis, the professional aspects of ‘doing the job’ took priority. However, as social workers we were impartial and ‘on the fence’ when it came to acknowledging issues of contention. Smyth and Campbell (1996) describe this as ‘benign detachment’, also found in other countries affected by conflict where social workers similarly adopt a distant, apolitical stance as a way of coping and to avoid engaging in the issues directly associated with ubiquitous conflict (Mmatli 2008). The advent of peace in 1998 through the Good Friday Agreement marked a more promising zeitgeist in the commitments of the UK and Irish Governments to “dedicating ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all” (Governments of UK and Ireland 1998). Social work practice and education policy in Northern Ireland also responded by examining ways in which this new positive atmosphere could be embraced. The UK Central Council for Education and Social Work published its aptly named ‘Getting Off The Fence’ as a guide for social workers and social work educators in Northern Ireland to think differently about engaging with those types of challenging issues from which they were hitherto ‘benignly detached’ (CCETSW 1999). The newly established Northern Ireland Social Care Council, the regulator for social work education in Northern Ireland, also required social work students to be taught directly in the social work curriculum about the ‘Northern Ireland Context’ (DHSSPS 2003). Aware that this was a time of great change, hope and possibility, in 2006 I published guidance about creative ways in which those personally affected by violence through bereavement, injury and trauma, could play a part in the education of social work students (Duffy 2006).

NEW UNDERSTANDINGS: STUDENTS SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Since 2006, I have worked closely alongside people with lived experience of ‘The Troubles’ who openly share their personal stories with students in the classroom setting. This type of pedagogy is fraught with tension and controversy so must be approached sensitively and carefully. Bolter refers to this as a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (1999), in recognition

of not just the discomfort involved, but also the view that this type of learning experience can generate opportunities for positive growth in the learner. This is the spirit in which I approached this work, but also mindful of the ‘ethic of care’ necessary to ensure this was a considered and measured process for everyone involved (Hugman 2005). The majority of students receiving this teaching were very young or not even born at the time of the Peace Agreement. This, of itself, raises an ethical question in a society that is trying to move on – why expose students to such a troubling narrative? Over many years of evaluating this pedagogy, there is, nonetheless, evidence of its benefits as can be seen from the following student observations:

“Very informative, though great sensitivity is required during tutorial sessions as these can be very exposing personally... .. We will more than likely come across victims/survivors in our practice. Awareness of issues they face are important in our society that is trying to forget them” (Coulter et al. 2013, 7).

Students have, therefore, been ready to learn and acquire new understandings and insights equipping them to meaningfully engage in helping others in a post conflict society. I hope that this will result in a new cadre of social workers willing to engage in a more open and direct way with the contentious and divisive issues they may encounter in practice.

LEARNING AND UNLEARNING (A SON’S PERSPECTIVE)

I was born in the summer of 1991 into what would soon be known as a peaceful Northern Ireland. One of my earliest memories, as a four-year-old, was walking between my mother and grandfather to a peace march in the City of Armagh. It was the winter of 1995 and I was unaware of the significance of events such as these. 1996 was the year I took my first steps into integrated education in Northern Ireland. For the next fourteen years, I would be in full time education at both integrated primary and secondary schools, where I would learn first-hand about integrated education’s role in promoting better relations between children from differing cultural and religious backgrounds (Donnelly and Hughes 2006). Consistent with ‘Contact Hypothesis’ (Allport 1954), I soon learned how pivotal this type of education experience would be in shaping my own sense of identity (Erikson 1968; Tajfel 1978; McGlynn 2001). I was one of only 5% of Northern Ireland’s children who would have this type of educational experience (McGlynn et al. 2004), yet considered so

important in reducing inter-communal conflict (Gallagher 1995; Niens and Cairns 2005).

During my early primary school years, I became aware I was attending an integrated school and knew the definition of the word on a superficial level, however, had no comprehension of its consequence in relation to Northern Ireland. As far as I was concerned, everyone was at an integrated school. I was seven years old in 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, an age when children in Northern Ireland have already formed views about ‘the other’ (Connolly, Smith, and Kelly 2002). It was around this time that I began making friends outside of school and realized not everyone did in fact go to integrated schools. The significance of Northern Ireland’s past was subliminally beginning to seep into my consciousness but at this point in my young life, I had little to no understanding of this history. However, I felt an inexplicable presence of a *shadow* in the background of life in Northern Ireland, sometimes heightened whenever I would be in a particular area, if something significant was on the news, or if a public event was happening. This feeling was perfectly articulated in the lyrics from the song “Yesterday” ‘There’s a shadow hanging over me’ (McCartney and Lennon 1965 cited from McCartney 2021, 836). I would get a clearer understanding of what this shadow was in transitioning to secondary level integrated education, a place where I was going to learn and unlearn simultaneously.

NEW FRIENDSHIPS

In 2003, at the age of twelve, I began my secondary school education. Here *sitting on the fence* was not an option. Either you assigned a religion yourself or it was given to you by a peer, based on your surname, the friends you had, the bus you took home, the sports you played, the football teams you supported, even the words used to greet one another. Symbolism seemed to be intrinsic to how expressions of culture were being conveyed by us as young people, as if we were ‘symbolic beings’ (Tajuddin 2018, 21). Arguably, this was a space where such questions of ‘self-categorisation’ were omnipresent (Turner 1991). Relatedly, Asgarally (2003, 3) notes, “Construction of identity is a dynamic process... not a question of defending affiliations but of multiplying them to enrich identity” (in McGlynn et al. 2004, 156).

McGlynn (2004) discusses how integrated education can be a space for young people from different traditions and backgrounds to learn about each other’s identity. Ostensively, I was in fertile ground within which ‘peace education’ could grow (Harris 2010). Religious affiliation, however,

was not something I thought about, yet it was taking center stage in school as a question for me to answer if I wanted to be part of a group. When I asked my parents the question “what religion am I?” I still remember their look of perplexity. Their past experiences taught them to avoid this highly contentious subject, they had learned to circumvent this question and not to speak openly about religion. The Irish poet and Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, in his poem about ‘The Troubles’, provided them with their response “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing” (Heaney 2022).

Exploring an identity in Northern Ireland, five years after The Good Friday Agreement, was a unique experience. As young people, we had a residue of *rumble* and *debris* from ‘The Troubles’, left behind in our society, which we could choose to pick up or discard. These are complex decisions for young people entering their teenage years. However, being part of the integrated education space offered us an avenue to positively contribute to peace (Darby et al. 1977; McGlynn et al. 2004). Here, we, as children from differing cultural backgrounds, could develop improved relations and friendships (Donnelly and Hughes 2006). In parallel however, the political instability of Northern Ireland in 2003 could also heighten the political temperature in the school playground (Feeney 2020).

ROLLING THE BALL

I clearly remember an event, which would transform my school experience. A few months in to my first year at secondary school, it was announced there would be trials for the school football team. I was pleased to be selected as a substitute player on the team but was also conscious that I was from a different religious background to most of the other players. Match day arrived, and on the bus journey to the game, I sat on the front seat alone, feeling separated, something I never before experienced, especially not on a bus to a football match. Micro-ecology research examines inter-group behavior as it occurs naturally among individuals, described by Dixon, Tredoux, and Clack (2005, 395) as “situations of bodily co-presence” (in McKeown et al. 2012, 341). The micro-ecological approach has also been applied to a diverse range of settings such as race relations, particularly in bus seating choices (Davis, Seibert, and Breed 1966), where it was found that individuals chose to stay separate and segregated even though the wider context was one of integration (McKeown et al. 2012). Koen and Durrheim (2010) also observed from their research on seating behavior in a South African University, that choosing to sit apart indicated an absence of friendship with the other group. This was how it felt for me. Amongst the general

chatter, I could hear songs, chants and divisive language from the back of the bus. One pupil in particular, (pseudonym Peter) who was seated there with the rest of the team, clearly was the leader of the group. When we reached our destination, I exited the bus alone. Like myself, Peter was a substitute player, however, trying to initiate conversation with him on the side-line, was met with a blank stare although that day we both shared the same hope, to play in the match. That opportunity arrived when after half time, with the scores level, we both joined the team on the pitch.

In the next five or so minutes I got a few touches of the ball and made some passes. Suddenly, one of our defenders kicked the ball up field and it landed about 5 yards in front of me, all that was now between me and scoring a goal, was one defender and the goalkeeper. I could see a clear gap and knew exactly where I was going to place the ball, I had practised this many times and was ready to score the winning goal. I heard Peter scream loudly as he ran up the right side of the pitch, “Joe, Joe, Joe!”. I instinctively turned to my right, rolled the ball to him and he smashed it into the net. Our team erupted in cheers, Peter hugged me, put his head against mine and we ran off together with our arms around each other’s shoulders toward the rest of the team who were ecstatic. In that moment, I felt a weight lift from both of us, a weight we could not articulate. The final whistle blew; we had won the game and returned to the bus. I went from sitting on my own at the front of the bus to sitting in the center of the back seats with the rest of the team. It immediately felt that there had been attitudinal change in this moment, wherein the separatism I experienced on the bus to the game had now been counteracted and overturned (Campbell, Kruskal, and Wallace 1966). This powerfully underscored the importance of being educated with other children from differing cultural backgrounds in concurrence with Mc Keown et al.’s (2012, 356) research findings observing that “... increased contact facilitates friendship formation and more positive outgroup attitudes”. Peter and I stayed very good friends for our remaining years at this school, all from this one micro gesture of ‘rolling the ball’. The contribution of sport has been recognized as positively influencing peace-building efforts in divided societies (Giulianotti and Armstrong 2011; Cardenas 2016), a feeling I certainly experienced because of this particular game of football and also observed in other sporting activities. There were many more such micro gestures to follow throughout my school life.

GOING FORWARD TOGETHER

The football match was a turning point in my life. I felt accepted, understood and no longer ‘othered’. It felt, as noted by Donnelly and Hughes (2006) that we had directly witnessed better relations because of

the educational space we inhabited. McKeown et al. (2012, 356) also state “intergroup contact...can lead to positive changes in ...micro-level behavior”. On a daily basis many such micro behaviors unfolded and as the internet began to play an ever-increasing part in our young lives with the emergence of group chats on our home computers and on our mobile phones, I noticed we were challenging openly any inference or tendency toward disrespectful or judgmental behavior toward peers. These were the positive types of ‘micro-level behaviors’ that were occurring in a context of the integrated setting providing the safe space to do so. Cairns and Hewstone (2002) note the importance of intercommunity group contact in the integrated school environment in terms of positively influencing attitudes toward the ‘other’. The internet was also used widely in school to access information for group projects, when together we would learn about ‘The Troubles’. At times, I found this frightening, we all did, and this prompted many times the question ‘Could this happen again? However, there was a widespread belief among my peers that we would never see the past repeated alongside an intense gratitude that this was no longer occurring. The shadow I referred to had diminished. McGlynn (2001) emphasizes how important integrated education is in shaping social identity. What we proudly felt as young people was a commitment to peacebuilding, to a future that would be free from the *rumble* of the past. Looking back to my school years through the lens of ‘living after it’ as a child of peace in Northern Ireland, research evidence such as that of McGlynn et al (2007, 157), outlines the positive impact of integrated education in the reduction of sectarianism among children and young people and the accompanying development of a more moderate political identity (Hayes, McAllister, and Dowds 2007). I am an example of this and, for that, will always be grateful.

CONCLUSION

This paper coalesces two lived experiential standpoints on the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ from the connected perspectives of a father and son, both facing their own issues and challenges in living through and after a period of violent political conflict. The experience has been shrouded with many points of growth and learning which have had and will continue to have, what we can only call, enduring impacts. To conclude, we turn to a twentieth century peacemaker, President John F. Kennedy, in whose memory the ‘Profile in Courage Award’ was established in 1989. On December 7, 1998, this award was presented to eight

of Northern Ireland’s political leaders and the American chairperson of the Good Friday Agreement, Senator George John Mitchell, in recognition of the extraordinary political courage these peacemakers demonstrated in negotiating the historic Good Friday Agreement on April 10, 1998. It was during his inauguration speech on January 20, 1961, when President Kennedy used the words ‘from this time and place’ as he looked toward his hopes for the future. It is appropriate that we also include these words at this important juncture in Northern Ireland’s history, when we too look toward our hopes for the future ‘from this time and place’.

From a parent’s perspective, I now look forward to continuing peace in Northern Ireland where future generations of young people will not be burdened with the past but can look forward with confidence toward a peaceful future together.

In sharing my father’s aspirations, I am now in my early thirties, working in the vibrant culture and arts sector in Northern Ireland where I have had some of my richest artistic experiences. I look forward ‘from this time and place’ to having children of my own who will have a chance to ‘live beyond it’ and, for whom, peace is a way of life.

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