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Engaging young people with the conflict and its legacy: findings from an evaluation of the 'Prison to Peace' educational programme

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'Prison to Peace' is an educational programme that aims to encourage young people to engage critically with the conflict and its legacy. It involves a series of classroom-based interactive lessons (over the course of 8-10 weeks), built on the narratives of republican and loyalist ex-prisoners, and finishes with a panel discussion amongst the pupils and the ex-prisoners involved in the project.

Research Methods

The study, funded by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister, involved a cluster randomised controlled trial (hereafter, 'trial') to measure the impact of the programme on young people in relation to: increase in awareness of the complexity of conflict, processes of transition and conflict transformation; reduction in sectarian prejudice and increase in respect for political diversity; reduction in support for the use of violence to deal with conflict and increase in intention to be politically engaged.

This entailed recruiting schools to deliver the programme and randomly allocating them to either a 'control' or an 'intervention' group. The intervention schools delivered the programme; the control schools did not. Young people completed a 'pre-test' survey before the programme was delivered and then the same survey 'post-test' when the programme was finished. Results from the pre and post- test surveys in the intervention schools could then be compared to see if the programme had an impact on young people; comparison with the control school results meant that any effect could be deemed to be as a result of the 'Prison to Peace' programme. The trial involved 864 young people (with 497 young people matched across pre- and post- test) aged 14-17 years, from 14 post-primary school settings across Northern Ireland (7 intervention schools, 7 control schools).

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In addition, in depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with school leaders, teachers, pupils and parents from the schools participating in the programme; classroom lessons and panel discussions were observed. Interviews were also conducted with a range of educational stakeholders.

Findings – from the trial

The results from the trial show clear evidence of the positive effects of Prison to Peace on young peoples' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours¹. Specifically, the results demonstrate that the programme had the following statistically significant effects² (see Table 1):

- increased knowledge of the conflict, processes of transition and conflict transformation;
- increased support for using non-violent means to deal with conflict;
- reduction in sectarian prejudice;
- increased likeliness of young people becoming politically engaged, (as measured by several indicators: talking to others more about politics; showing more interest in participating in school related activities; seeking more information related to politics (via newspapers, the internet etc.)³).

While measures for direct participation in politics and respect for political differences increased, the increase was not statistically significant.

The results from the trial also indicate that young people who participate in the programme develop a more nuanced understanding of the conflict. For example, following the programme, participants were more likely to locate the 'Troubles' within socio-political and historical contexts and were less likely to simply blame the 'other side' for its origin (see Table 2).

Further, the programme appears to have potential to maintain trust in social, civic and political institutions and to encourage young people's optimism in relation to permanent peace. In relation to the latter, prior to the programme around a quarter of young people were hopeful of permanent peace (in both control and intervention schools). After the programme 37% of young people in intervention schools were optimistic about permanent peace, while the control group's optimism did not change. In terms of trust of police, politicians, NI government and political parties, whilst the mean values across the control group decreased from pre-test to post-test, levels increased across the intervention group.

Table 1: Main Effects of Prison to Peace

Outcome	Post-test Scores (standard deviations)*	Mean	Sig.	Hedges' g [95% CI]
Knowledge of the conflict, processes of transition and conflict transformation	3.459 (.846)	3.140 (.923)	.003	+ .361 [+.122,

¹ Effect sizes were sizeable, with effects ranging from .17-.42.

² This means that the increases did not just occur randomly

³ Note that exploratory analyses revealed no consistent pattern of differences in terms of gender, religion, deprivation, or political background. The programme therefore works equally well for all groups of young people.

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				+ .599]
Talking to others about politics	2.933 (.914)	2.548 (.915)	<.001	+ .420 [+.226, +.615]
Participation (Politics)	3.065 (.665)	2.989 (.617)	.299	+ .117 [-.104, +.338]
Participation (School)	3.314 (.761)	3.160 (.766)	.011	+ .202 [+.046, +.357]
Information Seeking	2.504 (.848)	2.361 (.883)	.033	+ .165 [+.014, +.316]
Support for non-violence	3.686 (.764)	3.497 (.733)	.007	+ .252 [+.069, +.434]
Respect for political differences	3.866 (.739)	3.744 (.796)	.201	+ .159 [-.085, +.403]
Sectarian prejudice (blatant scale)	2.493 (.908)	2.739 (.900)	.003	- .272 [-.448, -.096]
Sectarian prejudice (subtle scale)	3.022 (.564)	3.126 (.541)	.006	- .189 [-.325, -.054]

Table 2: Causes of the Troubles

Young people's understanding of the causes of the 'Troubles'	Intervention		Control	
	Pre %	Post %	Pre %	Post %
Individuals (no motivation other than doing wrong)	7.4	7.9	3.6	6.9
Individuals (influenced by revenge and/or peer pressure)	0	2.5	0	0
Blaming the 'other' side (total)	15.3	7.1	8.9	10.1
- blaming the 'other' religion	7.4	3.8	4.9	3.7
- blaming the 'other' political grouping	2.1	2.5	1.3	1.8
- blaming the 'other' national identity	5.8	0.8	2.7	4.6
Two communities disagreeing (total)	57.1	58.0	58.6	58.6
- two communities disagreeing (no reason offered)	31.0	24.2	30.9	32.3
- two communities disagreeing over religion	14.5	11.3	17.0	16.6
- two communities disagreeing over politics/national identity	11.6	22.5	10.7	9.7
Historical reasons (from plantation to partition)	6.6	6.7	5.8	4.6
Historical reasons (related to the context of civil rights)	3.3	10.0	6.3	4.6
Current reasons (related to current context)	0.8	1.7	3.6	2.3

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Don't know	9.5	3.8	13.0	12.9
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Findings – young people's views

Focus groups conducted with young people in the intervention schools indicated that they feel ready to learn about issues relating to the past and its legacy and see value in doing so. This 'readiness' is coupled by a mature appreciation of the sensitivities surrounding the programme, for example, in relation to the impact it might have on people who had lost family members during 'The Troubles' and in relation to the potential tension it might create between views at home and views they were being exposed to in school. However, notwithstanding these sensitivities, they saw value in engaging with controversial issues. As one young person stated:

I think that if you do believe it is a sensitive topic [and avoid it] you're not going to learn from the mistakes.... So it's almost like the sensitive topics are the ones you need to pay attention to most.

The young people enjoyed engaging with the narratives of the ex-prisoners, valuing these first-hand accounts which they saw as grounded in reality. They also appreciated learning about the impact of being involved in violence, in terms of imprisonment and the effect it had on families.

It brings sort of like, reality to it...because they're (referring to ex-prisoners) telling us about it from their views

You get to find out what it's really like in prison

It makes you recognise about what actually happened and what happened to the families and stuff like that, the aftermath of it.

They also acknowledged the benefits it holds, for example, in relation to how the programme increased their knowledge and awareness of the reality and complexity of the conflict, helped them make sense of their current socio-political context and helped them see how society could 'move forward'. As the young people stated:

Prison to Peace describes how there's no need for violence anymore

You can't really move on unless you know about it [the 'Troubles']. Because if you're just going into it like not knowing about it and just being like blind from it, then how do you expect to move on if you don't know what happened and how to change it.

I think it's [the programme] important because it gets rid of the prejudices we have against certain groups of people and the stories that we've heard from the Troubles, but with the Prison to Peace, that programme, you were able to see both sides of the story so you could see what actually happened.

Finally, the pupils were very clear across all intervention schools that they trusted their teachers to present a balanced, non-biased account of the conflict, and to provide a framework in which they could locate and understand the perspectives they were picking up from home and from their community.

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The majority of young people (64%) who participate in the programme enjoyed it 'a lot' or 'quite a lot', with only 5% of young people not liking it at all. 93% of young people felt that it would be beneficial for their peers in other schools to do the programme.

Findings - school leader, teacher and parent perspectives

School leaders and teachers in the intervention schools recognized the educational benefits of engaging with 'Prison to Peace'. They saw the programme as providing opportunities to challenge the myths associated with the conflict and to help young people make sense of their socio-political context. Further, they felt strongly that the programme assisted young people in developing their own perspectives.

However, it is important to note that the schools involved in this study were clearly 'ready' to engage with controversial and sensitive issues related to the conflict. Analysis of the interviews suggests a number of features associated with this 'readiness':

- a school ethos committed to the holistic development of young people;
- a school connected to its community where there is awareness of and sensitivity towards the perspectives of parents and the wider community;
- school leaders demonstrating trust in the teachers delivering the programme, and teachers feeling supported by senior management;
- commitment to a whole school approach to dealing with the conflict and its legacy.

The parents interviewed, though to a certain extent apprehensive initially about the programme⁴, were supportive of their school engaging with the programme. They recognized the value of their children learning about their socio-historical context from engaging with ex-prisoners and trusted their school to do this sensitively.

Additionally, they identified several benefits that they felt emerged from the programme including the encouragement of dialogue between them and their children about the 'Troubles' and the current nature of Northern Irish society. This idea of inter-generational learning was also recognised by the young people:

It's stuff that our like mummies and daddies and grannies and all went through...we should learn about it

Educational stakeholders saw a strong connection between the 'Prison to Peace' programme and both the history and citizenship curricula at KS3 and at KS4. While they acknowledged that the Key Stage 3 curriculum provided more scope for delivering the programme, Key Stage 4 (or possibly post- 16) was seen to be more age-appropriate in terms of the content covered. In order to maximise the potential of 'Prison to Peace' (and other similar) programmes, the education stakeholders argued that there was need for specific teacher training on dealing with the conflict, its legacy and associated controversies in the classroom. They also suggested that there was a need for a co-ordinated approach to addressing the past in the curriculum, to ensure that the range of educational initiatives dealing with related issues could work together to maximise impact. Finally, interviewees agreed that the Department of Education's 'Community Relation Equality and

⁴ It was only possible to carry out a parent focus group in one school; therefore the views of these parents may not be indicative of the parents in all intervention schools. However, only a few parents across all the intervention schools raised concerns regarding the programme and that once the nature of the programme was explained these parents were happy for their children to participate in it.

Diversity' (CRED) policy provided the most appropriate framework for schools to locate this type of curriculum initiative and that schools should seek CRED funding to develop further their practice in this area.

Conclusions and recommendations

The evaluation of the 'Prison to Peace' programme demonstrates that young people are not only *interested* in learning about the past, but are *ready* to engage with its controversies. Moreover, they value how addressing the past through educational programmes assists them in making sense of their current socio-political context. The 'Prison to Peace' programme has had a significant positive impact on the young people involved, specifically in terms of their knowledge of the complexity of conflict, their attitudes towards those from the 'other' community, and on their intended behaviours in relation to support for violence and intention to be politically engaged.

In relation to the contribution of 'Prison to Peace' to policy priorities, consideration should be given to ensuring that:

- anti-sectarianism modules for young people (to be developed as part of the 'Together Building a United Community' strategy) not only address issues of diversity within society, but also attend to the past conflict, its impact and legacy;
- 'Prison to Peace' should be considered as an exemplar module;
- schools are encouraged to work through the CRED policy and CRED enhancement scheme to seek resources to deliver the 'Prison to Peace' programme on a single identity or shared/cross-community basis;
- existing training for teachers (in pre-service and in continual professional development) not only addresses the teaching of controversial issues in general but provides teachers with specific practical support in addressing the controversies associated with the conflict and processes of transition;
- structured support mechanisms, such as a dedicated educational support officer and resource 'hub', are provided to assist schools in selecting from and coordinating the range of available initiatives which seek to address the conflict and its legacy;
- such coordination needs to ensure joint up approaches within and between schools and within and between the formal education and youth sector.

For more information regarding the research project or to request a copy of the full research report, contact Lesley Emerson, l.emerson@qub.ac.uk

