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Workshop 3
"Conflicting identities? The role of identities in conflicts and in citizenship education"

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In this part of the workshop, citizenship education was explored in the context of various evaluations of specific citizenship education initiatives and projects in the formal education system. Using Northern Ireland as a case study of a country emerging from decades of violent socio-political conflict, the potential of local and global citizenship education to overcome locally entrenched identities and to build positive intergroup attitudes and community relations was considered.

Since the Belfast Agreement in 1998, Northern Ireland has become a more peaceful society, which however remains characterised by community division and political tension. Northern Ireland has also seen a growth in ethnic minorities since the peace process, whereby racism has been an increasingly noted issue on the public agenda. Despite the peace process, Northern Ireland remains a society characterised by political tensions and community division, which is still evident in many aspects of public life such as housing and education (Nolan 2014). Today, over 90% of pupils still attend schools, that are either Catholic or de facto Protestant (Department of Education 2011). Northern Ireland has a long-standing tradition of structural and curricular educational initiatives aimed at promoting peaceful community relations (Gallagher 2005).

Structural initiatives include the establishment of "integrated schools" in the early 1980s and more recently "shared education". The integrated education movement has been a bottom up process, led by parents and educators, and it aims to bring together Catholic, Protestant and "other" pupils and staff within the school (NICIE 2008). Today it caters for about 7% of the total pupil population in Northern Ireland (Nolan 2014). However, it has often been viewed with suspicion by the Catholic and Protestant communities who are concerned that it may erode community identities and heritage. In the wake of falling population numbers and the financial need to close schools, competition between school sectors remains strong. Shared education has therefore been seen as a less threatening and more economically viable alternative as it operates within the separate school system but aims to bring together pupils from different schools and sectors for shared lessons. While more rigorous research evidence is needed, studies indicate a positive impact of these structural initiatives on pupils' attitudes to community relations and peace (Blaylock & Hughes 2013, McGlynn et al. 2004).

Curricular initiatives comprise the introduction of a common curriculum into all schools since the late 1980s as well as specific subjects aimed at promoting community relations, such as Education for "Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage" or more recently "Local and Global Citizenship" education. Northern Ireland offers a common curriculum for all schools, including History and Religious Education which are subject areas often considered highly controversial in (post-)conflict societies. While the cross-curricular theme of Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage had been ambitious in its aims to promote positive community relations at a time when the political violence in Northern Ireland was still at its strength, its impact was considered to have been limited due to lack of political commitment, teacher training and curricular space (Smith & Robinson, 1996). It has thus been superseded by Local and Global Citizenship education, which has been introduced into all schools in Northern Ireland since 2007. It aims to promote diversity, inclusion, equality, social justice, human rights, responsibility and active democratic participation (Niens, O'Connor & Smith 2013). While the exploration of individual identities is part of the curriculum, it does not advocate a shared vision of a common super-ordinate identity (such as a European or global identity) or a particular version of a shared future for Northern Ireland, both of which are considered highly divisive in the Northern Ireland context (Smith 2003).

After a synthesis of our recent research findings relating to local and global citizenship education in Northern Ireland (McMurray & Niens 2012; Niens & Chastenay 2008; Niens & MIlrath 2008; Niens, Kerr & Connolly 2013; Niens, O'Connor & Smith 2013; Niens & Reilly 2012; Reilly & Niens 2014), the potential value of such structural or curricular strategies aimed at slowly changing institutions rather than revolutionising the system was discussed in this workshop.

Evidence from our evaluations involving surveys, interviews and focus groups with teachers and pupils consistently shows goodwill and enthusiasm as well as some concerns about the new local and global citizenship initiatives in participating schools. We found that the active teaching methods transcended citizenship lessons and were incorporated into other subjects, which was considered a benefit of the additional teacher training. Teachers and pupils expressed cautious optimism about the potential for Local and global Citizenship to contribute to improved attitudes towards community relations in Northern Ireland but also a realistic scepticism relating to its potential to change society as a whole whereby the segregated education system was often mentioned as an impediment to change. Research findings indicated that some attitudes were challenged. Pupils reported an increasing interest in local and global politics and community relations as a result of their learning. They acknowledged and appreciated other views and reflected more critically on their "own" and "the other" community's perspectives on conflict related issues. There was no evidence in the various evaluations that local and global identities changed systematically. This may appease concerns that such teaching and learning erodes community identities and heritage, though it may also limit the potential for such learning to bridge community divisions given the central role that identities play in (post-)conflict as was highlighted by Lynn Davies in this workshop.

While some of the key concerns emerging from our evaluations echo those prominent in relatively peaceful societies, others are characteristic for conflict societies (see also Quaynor 2012). Issues frequently raised by teachers focused on resources and tensions between competing educational goals, such as academic achievement, personal development and social transformation. Many teachers lamented a lack of time to critically engage with the issues themselves and to discuss them in the classroom. A lack of training, self-confidence in tackling controversial issues and of clarity about expectations also posed concerns, which resonate with other countries and societies (Davies, Harber & Yamashita 2005). However, the conflict itself posed its own challenges. Some teachers were worried about possible

community retributions (in more violent political times) and/or alienation (in more peaceful times). At times, teachers also had to deal with parental resistance and suspicion towards citizenship education as a means to "brainwash" pupils and alienate them from their communities and families; an issues that some pupils also picked up. As the conflict has left its mark on many families in Northern Ireland, concerns were expressed about the possibility of re-traumatising pupils affected by the political violence through discussions about controversial issues and events. Such considerations do not only relate to citizenship but also other subject areas such as history education and have high relevance in societies struggling with ongoing conflict and violence.

The segregated school structures emerged frequently as a factor imposing restrictions on citizenship education. Given that staff and pupils in most schools belonged to the same community, teachers faced difficulties in representing "the other community's side" in order to enable pupils to develop an appreciation of a diversity of perspectives. The research also indicated that community divisions further imposed difficulties in extending the impact of citizenship education beyond the school gates. Reaching out to the community, for example through parental involvement or non-governmental organisations, was often built on established allegiances and thereby reiterated the existing intra-community relationships (McMurray & Niens 2012).

One of the key challenges emerging from our research for teaching citizenship education in a (post-conflict) society characterised by community division centred on identities. There was a lot of ambiguity about the role of identities in citizenship education and whether or not it should attempt to promote a common sense of belongingness or a shared vision – notable is the lack of reference to national citizenship in Local & Global Citizenship in Northern Ireland. The need to directly discuss controversial issues in the classroom in order to critically reflect on their meaning and to act for the benefit of the individual and society is relatively undisputed (Barton & McCully 2012; Davies 2005; Zembylas & Kambani 2012). Given that young people are likely to be socialised into their understanding of such issues by their respective communities' prevailing narratives of the conflict, citizenship education may be a tool to represent "the other community's side". However, such dual representations of society may in fact reproduce societal divisions and perpetuate the exclusion of other groups, such as ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland (Niens, O'Connor & Smith 2013). Indeed, Bekerman and Zembylas (2012) warned educators about essentialising identities and introducing or reinforcing difference through well-meant educational initiatives aimed at promoting positive attitudes towards the "other community". Seeking a balance between directly tackling controversial issues in the context of post-conflict societies without reinforcing identity divisions or marginalising other minority groups therefore remains a challenge as well as how to develop interconnections between past, present, local, national and global issues.

The workshop discussion, with participants from a range of social, political and educational context highlighted the particularities of Northern Ireland as well as its similarities with other (post-)conflict, non-democratic and transitional societies. While varying degrees of socio-political violence were seen as imposing restrictions with regards to how citizenship education can be taught and expected from teachers, it was seen as a tool to address conflict and societal division through continued long-term efforts for sustainable impact in the long-run. The absence of a shared identity and/or a shared future vision of society in the context of societal division were flagged up as main impediments to citizenship education affecting societal change in the long term although they could represent a temporary situation.

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