

YOUTH
CONTINUITY
AND CHANGE

Belfast

Briefing Paper 3

Youth, Continuity and Change:

How young people experience contested cities and each other

Rather than beginning and ending cleanly, conflicts are inherited and either perpetuated or transformed by successive generations. In important ways, then, movement away from conflict is firmly in the hands of young people. Conflict in Cities (CinC) research offers fresh insight into how young people see and use their cities, develop attitudes towards each other, and understand the legacy of conflict.

Evidence shows that boundaries between young people continue to be important to them, but that such attitudes can shift according to context. It also highlights a risk that formal education can perpetuate segregation and inequalities. Whilst it can be hard to reintegrate educational institutions, there is potential for the healing of divisions in less formal contexts.

Inherited conflict and the physical environment

Cessation of hostilities, and even the transformation of the signs of conflict, may not be sufficient to break the

meanings that young people attach to physical features of the city – both actual and remembered – as they struggle to make sense of the present.

In Belfast, the legacy of the Troubles still has an impact on the lives of many young people and their understanding of divisions within the city. They see that Belfast has changed physically from when their parents were growing up – not least through urban regeneration – although for many this is coupled with feelings of suspicion, unease and fear, and the assertion of sectarian identities. How young people perceive the city in terms of continuity and change is thus both complex and contradictory.

The legacy of conflict is similarly powerful in Beirut, where the physical traces of war have become commonplace; they affect social encounters, and how young people understand themselves and others. Students use these to both justify and challenge postwar realities, massacres and militia battles, sniper

Key findings for policy

- Policy makers tend to focus on official measures where children, youth and education are concerned. Informal provision of shared space can help to redress problems, but needs careful monitoring.
- Efforts should be made to understand the potential roles of local groups, spaces that allow informal activity to happen, and especially young people's perspectives and voices.
- Biased political systems may manipulate schools and educational systems, including the location of schools, resource provision and curricula. It is important that international policy makers give careful consideration to the partnerships they form, funding criteria and the destination of funds.
- Access to higher education and employment often depends upon young people learning the language of the dominant group, but in divided cities this can be a problem for some. The teaching and learning of English may have potential for easing these situations.

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strongholds and checkpoints, and tales of betrayal and loss are used to explain continuing confrontations as well as everyday struggles of segregation, prejudice, and mistrust. Again there is evidence of contradictory attitudes; while students are critical of Lebanon's culture of impunity and untried war criminals, they believe that truth and forgiveness are beyond their reach.

The majority of young Cypriots in Nicosia, like their parents, tend to avoid areas located along the Green Line. These are most closely associated with the conflict that occurred before they were born. Again, certain parts of the city are linked to insecurity and fear in the imaginations of young people.

Boundaries and space

In cities, boundary areas are often where clashes have taken place, but they also can be where diverse groups of people mix. More fundamentally, cities developed *because* of these interactive places, and so are physically structured around them. If young people shy away from them, much of the future potential of cities is lost.

For young people in Beirut, urban boundaries can be associated with feelings of familiarity and safety. Whereas their parents' generation lived in a city that for some had greater fluidity between religious and political differences, the sharp segregation of the city after the war made young people wish for strict boundaries.

Similarly, in Belfast many young people continue to navigate their local spaces in ways that allow no



A playground in Jerusalem that attracted young Israeli children and older Palestinian boys became too rough and was dismantled by municipal authorities. Might local NGOs and community volunteers have found a less heavy-handed approach to the problem?

engagement with youth from adjoining places; they often use city centre spaces with their peers, and transfer their local understandings and concerns to these more shared locations. Perhaps more optimistically, Belfast city centre is generally regarded as a place for everyone. For young people, it is a place for the expression of teen rather than ethno-national identities. Whilst attempts by Belfast youth to mingle may be tentative and fragile, they are crucial if this generation is to regain the possibility of sharing space.

Education

Education has clear potential with regard to the reintegration of cities. It can also impede the amelioration of conflict through the segregation of young people, overly subjective curricula, the language used and through the location of schools. If history curricula do not address conflict, or it is pursued through ethnically- and religiously-specific accounts, then open debate and dialogue is stifled. Lebanese schools and universities have evaded a critical examination of the war and subsequent tensions, with a failure to agree on a unified history textbook or create suitable educational environments. In Nicosia, history textbooks do address the recent past, but the narrative diverges greatly in the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot versions. While these dynamics are quite different, they both exhibit the troubling policy of official amnesia and the 'forgetting' of certain pasts. Similarly, in Belfast, there is no agreement on a shared history and schools remain segregated along religious lines. Provision of a history syllabus in Kirkuk is complicated by the variety of conflicting ethnic histories, and is interpreted within increasingly ethnically-homogenous schools. In Vukovar, the (now expired) moratorium on teaching the history of the wars of the 1990s, the introduction of segregated religious classes, and the teaching of Serb and Croat children in different alphabets, languages and ethnically-discreet groups has resulted in the permanence of 'temporary' segregation. This has long-term implications for youth understandings and can be seen as contributing to youth radicalisation. This enforced segregation is particularly difficult for children from mixed marriages.

“The first time I noticed the difference between Croats and Serbs was when they introduced into school the subject of religion which you had to choose.”

- Croatian high school student

Language, location and segregation

The language of instruction in schools is particularly important; it can become an expression of power by competing factions, and can disadvantage young people who lack fluency in the dominant tongue – not least in terms of their future employability.

In Kirkuk, there are calls for mother tongue education from all communities. Some children enter mother tongue instruction schools because of ethnic affiliation rather than fluency in the language, which can have negative effects on their education and future prospects. In Vukovar, a lack of further and higher education in minority languages has led many Serbs to either forgo it or to seek it in Serbia. Similarly in Kirkuk, pupils now educated in Turkish will need to leave to pursue university studies due to lack of local onward education options in that tongue. In Jerusalem, Palestinian youth may learn Hebrew (although usually not in school) in order to increase their employability; in contrast, Jewish children rarely learn Arabic.

The location of schools can aid young people mixing, although this is context-specific. In Beirut, such location often determines the student population. A traditionally Protestant school, in a predominantly Sunni area, such as the Beirut Baptist School, will have a large number of Sunni students; this is quite different from the situation with schools in Kirkuk, where growing ethnic segregation reaffirms cultural identity. This has resulted in taught curricula that conflict with exam curricula, the unregulated use of donated religious and cultural teaching resources, and the unequal distribution of educational resources. Similarly, even though Palestinians in Jerusalem pay the municipal property tax, their state educational provision is meagre compared to their Israeli counterparts.

In Belfast, many young people did not believe that integrated schooling would address issues of sectarianism to any great extent, although some felt the chances of success would be improved if integration began at the primary level. Many thought that teenagers would mix in the classroom because they had to, but that there would still be trouble between groups because people continue to live on segregated estates.

Alternatives

CinC research suggests that there may be potential outside formal school curricula for young people from segregated communities to mix to good effect. In Jerusalem, the few mixed schools that exist are over-subscribed. In one sense this is encouraging in that it suggests potential for authorities to fashion integrated education. Generally, however, even in the very few cases where Israeli and Palestinian children live in close proximity, they will travel some distance to attend their own schools, thus lessening the possibilities for mixing outside the classroom.

In Belfast there are initiatives in schools for mixing, and some young people are members of youth clubs that engage in cross-community work. More of such activity was proposed by a number of young people, although they also suggested that cross-community activities might struggle to promote long-term change. More generally, in many divided cities, museums of national struggle are the destination of school visits. Some are very partisan whilst others are sanitised of most controversial content. Joint ethnic, religious and national programmes must be developed if such places are to promote understanding.

Elsewhere, NGOs and community organisations have pushed for change. In Nicosia, the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR) – an NGO run by Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot historians and educators – has developed its own curriculum and educational materials and distributed it to classrooms on both sides of the city. Meanwhile, in Vukovar, 1,000 citizens signed a petition to support the establishment of the New School with a multiethnic curriculum and student body. The school has yet to be built, but since 2008 the Nansen Dialogue Centre has run a programme promoting intercultural learning in kindergartens and schools.



A restored Austro-Hungarian building hosts the 'two schools under one roof' gymnasium. Due to the coexistence of two different curricula in Mostar, students study either according to the Croat or Bosnian systems. This school creates a place where students have the possibility to meet students from other communities during recreational activities.

Further reading

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'Conflict in Cities and the Contested State' explores how divided cities in Europe and the Middle East have been shaped by ethnic, religious and national conflicts, with particular reference to architecture and the urban as a setting for everyday activities and events. It is concerned with how cities can absorb, resist and potentially play a role in transforming such conflict. The main research sites are Belfast and Jerusalem, with supplementary enquiry into other divided cities including Berlin, Beirut, Brussels, Kirkuk, Mostar, Nicosia, Tripoli (Lebanon) and Vukovar. This multi-disciplinary project is led by three UK universities - Cambridge, Exeter and Queen's Belfast, with an international network of partners. It is funded by the Large Grant Programme of the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (RES-060-25-0015). © Conflict in Cities, November 2012; updated by © Centre for Urban Conflicts Research, 2019; www.urbanconflicts.arct.cam.ac.uk. Grateful acknowledgement is made to ARUP London for their support.

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