

Conference Review: Symposium on ‘Peacebuilding, the Arts and the Participation of Children and Young People’, Queen’s University Belfast, 2024

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Abstract

In March 2024 the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen's University Belfast hosted a symposium on 'Peacebuilding, the Arts and the Participation of Children and Young People'. The event, which ran in conjunction with Young at Art's Belfast Children's Festival, brought together practitioners and researchers to explore the role of the arts in facilitating the expression of children and young people and the contribution this can make to peacebuilding, historically, now and in the future. This review outlines the key themes that emerged during the symposium, which include the rights of children and young people, the significance of the creative arts as a mode of expression, the conditions for children and young people's contribution to peacebuilding and the challenges for collaboration: both intergenerational and inter-sectoral.

Keywords: peacebuilding; arts; children and young people; co-creation; rights; storytelling.

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Introduction

On Tuesday 12 March 2024 approximately 40 delegates attended the multidisciplinary symposium 'Peacebuilding, the Arts and the Participation of Children and Young People' organised by Edel Lamb and Fiona Magowan at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, Queen's University Belfast (QUB). A new initiative emerging from the Mitchell Institute's research strand in 'Religion, Arts and Peacebuilding', the symposium was supported by QUB's Faculty Research Initiatives Fund and ran as an Industry event at Young at Art's Belfast Children's Festival 2024. Several key themes and shared questions transpired through this bringing together of practitioners and researchers to explore the contribution of children and young people's participation in the creative arts to peacebuilding. This review offers an overview of the day and reflects on these themes, which include the rights of children and young people, the significance of the creative arts as a mode of expression, the conditions for children and young people's contribution to peacebuilding – especially the importance of listening, and the challenges for collaboration, intergenerational and inter-sectoral.

Background and Aims

The crucial role that can be played by the creative arts (including literature, film, theatre, dance, visual arts, music) in building peaceful and just societies is now firmly established (Kim et al., 2015;

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Mitchell et al., 2020). As Theodora Hawksley and Jolyon Mitchell point out, they offer a 'range of contributions to the processes and practices of peacebuilding' as through their 'capacity to engage us on a visceral level' they enable the 'long term process of transforming relationships, healing wounds, seeking justice and fostering human flourishing' (Mitchell et al., 2020, p.12-13). The arts also play a significant role in facilitating the voices and embodied expression of children and young people, evidenced in research (Mand, 2012; Maguire, 2021), policy (eg. Creative Ireland, 2017 and 2023) and widespread practice and organisations dedicated to providing the young with opportunities for creative engagement. Yet while the significant contribution that children and youth can make to societies as activists and agents of change is receiving increasing attention (Taft, 2019; Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021) and the 'importance of engaging youth in post-conflict peace processes' (MacFarlane, 2021, p.268) is widely recognised (see also Berents, 2018; Berents, Bolten and McEvoy-Levy, 2024; Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015; McEvoy-Levy, 2018; Taylor et al., 2024), the distinct and meaningful contribution of youthful creative expression and participation in the arts to peacebuilding has not yet received enough sustained attention. 'Peacebuilding, the Arts, and the Participation of Children and Young People' sought to explore the ways in which the participation of children and young people in the arts can support peacebuilding by engaging with a series of key questions. These included how the creative arts can facilitate the expression of children's and young people's experiences of conflict and post-conflict societies; how the arts might empower them to participate in processes of social justice, transformation and commemoration; how the arts can enable children and youth as creators and co-creators of new stories and perspectives; and how listening to children's creative productions across diverse cultural contexts might help us better understand the contribution they have made and can make to peacebuilding: historically, now and in the future. It brought together a range of disciplinary and practical expertise spanning historical and national contexts to explore these issues, including those involved in working with children and young people and the arts from organisations across Ireland and the UK, including Young at Art, YouthAction NI, English Heritage, DU Dance, Oh Yeah Music Centre, Ards Friary and Arts Council NI, Ark, Beyond Skin and eduSoil, and researchers from across the disciplines of literature, history, anthropology, arts management, dance, sociology and social work, education and psychology.

Rights and Opportunity: Reflections on Current Practice

The afternoon began with four presentations on recent and ongoing work with children and young people in relation to the creative arts and peacebuilding. Children's rights to art, the diversity of opportunities available for artistic engagement, the need to think innovatively about engagement through the arts and the benefits of participation in the arts, for young people and for society, culture and heritage more broadly, were recurring topics in this session. Aideen Howard, Director of The Ark Cultural Centre for Children in Temple Bar, Dublin, reflected on developments in the Centre's work, specifically on the shift from making art for children between the ages of four and fourteen to art for, by, and about children. Noting that in developing a series of child participation practices, including the establishment of children's council, the Centre engaged with the Lundy model for child participation (Lundy, 2007) and worked in the context of Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015 – 2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015), she drew attention to the advantages of its new focus on children's rights to the arts and to participation, including the first address by children to government in 2021. But she also

highlighted the challenges of realising the Centre's aspirations and the need for further work in developing new methodologies for adult and child co-creation.

Eliz McArdle, Lecturer in Community Youth Work at Ulster University (UU), also highlighted the need to think innovatively to facilitate young people's contribution to peacebuilding. Her presentation covered two examples of programmes for young people aged between fourteen and twenty-five in Northern Ireland, including the 'Fitted and Tailored' project (YouthAction NI, 2012) in which 100 young women produced sculptures of torsos following workshops exploring their experiences of living in Northern Ireland, and the 'Youth Peace and Security Seminar series' (Centre for Youth Research and Dialogue, UU, 2024) through which young people had the opportunity to meet with global peacebuilders nationally and internationally (see Centre for Youth Research and Dialogue, 2024). Stressing that creativity is productive for enabling young people to find their own voice, she highlighted the necessity of bridging voice and audience by ensuring there are opportunities for influence.

Kirsty McCarrison, Senior Youth Engagement Manager for English Heritage, then offered an insight into the ways the creative work of youth groups, such as *Shout Out Loud*, can directly influence audiences, specifically of heritage. Sharing the work undertaken by this programme (which offers a platform for young people between the ages of eleven and twenty-five to uncover untold stories from the past) around commemorating historic wars through imagining the voices of those often excluded from history, she presented heritage as a source of creative inspiration, argued for the importance of young people's participation in commemoration, and signalled the ways in which this can shape heritage (see, for example, *Shout Out Loud*, 2019).

Finally, representatives from YouthAction NI, including Martin McMullan (CEO), Mark Clegg (Senior Leader), Sheila Morris (Senior Leader), Chloe Moreland (Young Person) and Rachel Hasson (Young Intern), demonstrated the legacy of peace investment in young people through creative arts approaches by putting into practice the methodology of their Radio Youth Network for Peace, in which Moreland interviewed the representatives in the style of a radio programme. The lively, youth-led discussion offered an overview of YouthAction NI's diverse programmes, including Radio YNP, the Rainbow Factory School of Performing Arts, Hunger for Peace Games (Boyd, Toner and McMullan, 2021), and the Amplify project (YouthAction NI, 2022). This advanced the session's emphasis on how children and young people can hold important roles in telling previously untold stories, with a focus on the programmes' commitment to inclusive peacebuilding. The final discussion between Moreland and Hasson drove home the benefits of participation in such programmes for individuals such as themselves, but also drew attention to the wider benefits through reflection on the contribution this can make to reconciliation through facilitating fresh perspectives.

This opening session established beyond a doubt that children and young people today are participating in diverse arts, from using Padlet and devising games to creating visual arts, performance pieces and heritage videos, across Ireland and the UK. The speakers indicated that through these creative programmes children and young people are making a critical contribution to peacebuilding by engaging with leaders, by reflecting on their own understanding of and experiences of living in post-conflict societies, and by transforming the ways in which the past is remembered (see also McMullan, 2021). The presentations attested to the benefits of engagement with spoken,

written, visual and aural arts for children and young people, particularly in sites of deprivation. The speakers acknowledged the positive impact on confidence and wellbeing (see Bungay and Vella-Burrows, 2013) and the potential contribution that young people might make to society through peacebuilding (see McKeown and Taylor, 2017) as their case studies demonstrated how diverse creative modes facilitate young people to reflect on and share their perspectives. The role that the creative arts can play as a means of articulating experiences and imagining alternative futures became clear through the examples presented. The involvement of children and young people in recovering untold stories through creative interactions with the past and present evidenced in this opening session signalled their potential important contribution to social justice, legacy and commemoration. As the Young Producers from English Heritage's *Shout Out Loud* programme concluded, the session established that 'Young people have the desire for peace and are actively leading the movement for change' (Shout Out Loud, 2024) through their participation in the activities and programmes covered by the presentations.

Discussion: Creating the Conditions for Effective Contribution

However, as signalled above, a number of key challenges around fully realising effective contributions of children and young people through the arts began to emerge through the presentations. The second session explored these further in its roundtable discussion on the topic of the impact of children and young people's participation in creative arts on peacebuilding. The panel members were Laura Dunne (Reader in QUB's School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work and Deputy Director of QUB's Innovation Zones), Darren Ferguson (founder and Director of Beyond Skin), Tom Maguire (Professor of Contemporary Drama and Performance in UU's School of Arts and Humanities), and Juanita Rea (founder of eduSOIL and of Design for Change). The roundtable discussion was followed by concluding reflections and open discussion chaired by Liam O'Hare (Principal Research Fellow in QUB's School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work and Director of QUB's Innovation Zones). The roundtable panel took the previous session's attention to co-creation and to the range of platforms and programmes that create opportunities for youthful engagement with the arts as a point of departure for a new question: should children and young people have responsibility for contributing to peacebuilding and under what conditions should they do so? Drawing attention to the problematic adult-centric approach that might be seen to underpin the symposium's focus, this led to an animated conversation about what conditions are needed for young people's contribution through the arts if it is to be effective and attentive to the rights of the child, and not simply serving an adult-focused end. There was broad agreement that the projects, policies and initiatives aiming to amplify the young person's voice through the arts, some of which had been represented in the first session, are effective at enabling youthful perspectives, are widespread and are now – for the most part – attentive to children's participation and rights. However, the roundtable emphasised, with a return to the Lundy model and to McArdle's presentation, that there is still a 'gap' that needed to be bridged between voice and audience, or more specifically influence. Discussion around what the conditions required to achieve this might be included an emphasis on attention to situationality. The speakers highlighted that the contribution of children and young people to peacebuilding is not equivalent and varies according to social background and funding as well as according to the different needs and opportunities of specific communities, locations and conflict contexts. The acknowledgement that not all children and young

people are accorded their rights or have opportunities for creative expression was critical in focusing the conversation and in highlighting the important contribution that can be made by support, individual or institutional, at a global level for creating opportunities for the arts of the young. Examples of the work of Beyond Skin, including support for Afghan girls' art, served as model of what can be achieved by supporting those marginalised by both gender and age in certain cultural contexts. The need to direct further attention, and resources, to intercultural and intergenerational arts was also highlighted.

The key message of the discussion, however, was that the cultures of young people have, often in spite of restrictions, led to expression and action. The panel affirmed that the arts enable youthful expression and noted that given the extensive opportunities available in Ireland and the UK, young people do have a voice. But they stressed that the outstanding issue is that this voice is often still not influential because the (adult) audience are not listening. The discussion then shifted to call for and to consider the ways in which we might attend to the various forms of embodied expression of young people facilitated by participation in the arts. With this attention to listening, mutual relationships and co-creation were highlighted as useful concepts and the need for innovation in these creative relationships emphasised again. Yet, the panel and the open discussion also engaged with the crucial issues of resources and funding models. It was noted that one of the key challenges is the demands of funding bodies to articulate the links between creativity and peacebuilding, and to specify measurable outcomes and benefits and how to balance this with a child-centric focus and an attention to the children's rights to culture and the arts and to have their expression not only facilitated but heard. Ultimately, a key challenge to anyone working in this area, whether practitioner or academic, was identified as an economic one. Yet, at the same time, this varied, and the different representatives at the symposium reflected on what was possible and what limitations remained depending on the resources available.

Next steps

The key question at the end of the day was: what next? In face of these challenges, especially economic ones, a shared question was how to continue the productive work being done and how to innovate and develop this to meet the challenges of not only amplifying the expression of children and young people through the arts but ensuring this expression has influence. Attendees agreed that more sharing of good practice and effective partnerships would be a helpful next step in the face of challenges of collaboration across sectors and the resources available to support this. Across the event's presentations and discussions, it emerged that some more specialised topics would merit further cross-sectoral discussion and innovation. This included new methodologies for children and young people as co-creators of arts for peacebuilding; the models that might be used to articulate the links between creativity and peacebuilding and how the right of children and young people to access the arts fit into this; enabling young people's participation in innovative ways in implementing the arts as a tool for peacebuilding; ensuring that children and young people's creativity has an impact in peacebuilding; models of effective collaboration between researchers and practitioners; and direct engagement with the challenges of funding the participation of children and young people in the arts by evaluating the role of past or current work in this area to support future practice and research in this area.

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