The Research Project

During school years 2015/16 and 2016/17, our research team visited nine secondary schools across Northern Ireland. We would like to sincerely thank the principals, parents, and teaching staff for allowing the pupils to participate in our study across two time points. Special thanks goes to the pupils themselves – without your honest and thoughtful responses, this project would have not been possible.

We are happy to report that 383 pupils completed the survey across both time points. We would like to share some of the exciting work that you have helped us with. The overarching aim of the study was to identify factors, such as empathy and perspective taking, which can promote constructive youth behaviours, such as helping, even across group lines. In this newsletter, we highlight some of the tasks that pupils have completed and the main findings relating to pupils’ prosocial and giving behaviours.

Sharing Valuable Resources

First, participants completed the ‘Casharoo’ game in spring 2016. The aim of this game was to see whether pupils would be likely to help someone who has been previously mistreated. Across a series of different rounds, the pupils had to decide how much of their money to give to an anonymous person (Player B). After watching Player B being treated fairly or unfairly, the pupil was given 50 coins and two options: either to keep the coins for themselves or give some to Player B.

Figure 1 shows that although pupils recognised there was an increasingly unfair distribution toward Player B, this did not affect how many coins students gave to Player B in the subsequent round. The average response was to give 21 out of their 50 coins. Thus, although students can recognise injustice, this does not always lead to greater prosocial behaviour.

Second, in autumn 2017, pupils completed another game that involved giving valuable resources. In this task, pupils were told that they would be playing a game with someone from another school. Pupils were asked to pick how £1 coins should be distributed in a number of scenarios (see Figure 2 for example). There were three rounds to this game, a prosocial round in which pupils had to choose either to (a) keep £1 and give 0 or (b) keep £1 and give £1 to someone from another school. In the sharing round, pupils had to decide whether to (a) keep £2 and give 0 or (b) keep £1 and give £1 to someone from another school. Finally, in the envy round, pupils had to choose if they wanted to (a) keep £1 and give £2 or (b) keep £1 and give £1 to someone from another school.
Overall, pupils were quite generous in the prosocial and sharing rounds. That is, in both rounds 80% of participants chose the more generous option (prosocial: keep £1 and give £1, sharing: keep £1 and give £1). However, in the envy round, the opposite was found – that is, rather than being generous, 80% of pupils opted for keeping £1 and giving £1. In this game, even playing against students from another school, pupils seemed to be guided by a norm of fairness and equality, even when it cost them (the sharing condition) or when they could be generous at no-cost to themselves (prosocial and envy conditions).

Figure 2. Example of prosocial condition

Helping in the Face of the Refugee Crisis

In addition to general giving, including to unknown members of others schools, we also included a series of tasks that asked pupils about their willingness to help a new pupil, who is a refugee that would be joining their school. Participants were asked if they would be willing to help the new pupil during lunch or afterschool each day over the course of one week (see Figure 3). Eighty-five percent of pupils said they would help at least one of the days (at either lunch or after school). A third of pupils indicated that they are available one to three times during the week, with another third were willing to help on up to six occasions. Finally, a fifth of students made most of their schedule available to help an incoming refugee in the school, offering to help between 7-10 times.

Figure 3. Helping a new refugee pupil

Civic Engagement

Across both phases of the project, we asked pupils how often they engage in activities such as volunteering, fundraising, signing a petition or helping at school (see Figure 4). In autumn 2017, over half of students have indicated to at least occasionally help with fundraising, help at school or volunteer their time in any other way. Activities such as signing a petition or campaigning on behalf of a group or a charity were less popular among pupils. We argue that there is a scope in developing young people’s interest in civic engagement with those forms of participation. In line with previous research, we also found that young females were more likely to engage in civic activities than young males.

Peacebuilding Values

Finally, we wanted to establish whether youth in Northern Ireland place importance on peacebuilding initiatives such as the Shared Education Programme or the symbolic markers such as the peace-bridge. A summary of some of the questions we asked can be seen in Figure 5. Most pupils believed that encouraging cross-community activities such as mixed sports teams or integrated and shared education are important for peacebuilding. However, young people were less sure about taking down peace walls as a way of encouraging positive cross-community relations.
Figure 4. Civic engagement

How often in the past year you have done each of the following

- Engaged on social media with political issues
- Boycotted certain products
- Campaigned on behalf of a group
- Signed a petition
- Worked together in your neighbourhood
- Helped with fundraising
- Volunteered your time
- Helped out at a school
- Taken part in a sponsored event

Figure 5. Support for peacebuilding values

- Mixed sports teams of Catholics and Protestants encourage...
- The peace bridge in Derry-Londonderry is a symbol of...
- Integrated and shared education can help bring divided...
- Unionist, Loyalist, Nationalist and Republican political parties...
- Peace walls in Northern Ireland should be taken down to...

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