

Executive Summary

Connolly, P., Smith, A. & Kelly, B. (2002) Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

This report presents the findings of a large scale survey of a representative sample of 352 children aged 3 to 6 drawn from across Northern Ireland. It is the first report of its kind to provide a detailed insight into the cultural and political awareness of young children.

The children were shown a range of objects and photographs representing some of the most common events and symbols associated with the Protestant and Catholic communities in the region and were asked what they knew about each one. The children's responses were then coded and statistically analysed.

Main Findings

The report identifies four main levels of awareness among children of this age range and organises its findings in relation to these:

1. Preference for particular cultural events and symbols

From the age of three, Catholic and Protestant children were found to show small but significant differences in their preferences for particular people's names, flags and in terms of their attitudes towards Orange marches and the police. Five and six year olds also showed differences in terms of their preferences for particular combinations of colours and football shirts.

2. Awareness of particular cultural events and symbols

Differences between Protestant and Catholic children in relation to their preferences for specific events and symbols does not necessarily mean that they are actually aware of their cultural and/or political significance. The report therefore analysed the children's comments to assess their levels of awareness of each of these events and symbols.

Just over half (51%) of all three years olds were able to demonstrate some awareness of the cultural/political significance of at least one event or symbol. This rose to 90% of six year olds. The children demonstrated the greatest awareness of the cultural/political significance of parades (49% of the sample), flags (38%) and Irish dancing (31%). One in five (21%) were able to demonstrate awareness of football shirts and of the violence associated with the conflict more generally.

3. Tendency to identify with a particular community

Such levels of awareness cannot, in themselves, be taken to imply that the children see themselves explicitly as a member of either the Catholic or Protestant communities. The children's responses were therefore analysed further to identify any instances where the children directly made reference to their membership of one of these two groups.

Overall, while only small numbers of three and four year old children demonstrated some identification with either the Protestant or Catholic communities (5% and 7% respectively), 13% of five year olds did, rising sharply to just over one in three six year olds (34%).

4. Tendency to make sectarian statements

Finally, the fact that some children may see themselves as being part of one of these two communities does not mean that they are necessarily prejudiced or hold sectarian attitudes. The children's responses were therefore analysed to identify any explicitly sectarian and/or prejudiced comments that they may have made about the other main religious tradition.

While such comments were rare among three and four year olds (only 1% and 3% being found to make such statements respectively), the tendency to express sectarian statements appeared to increase quite significantly for the older children with 7% of five year olds being found to do so and 15% (just under one in six) of all six year olds.

Influences on Children's Attitudes

In analysing the responses of the children, three particular factors appeared to be influential in increasing children's awareness and attitudes in relation to these matters. These were: the family, the local community and the school.

In some ways, the fact that the family and local community have an influence on the attitudes of young children is a rather obvious point. However it does highlight the limitations of strategies aimed at addressing prejudices and discriminatory behaviour among children that are not oriented towards the family and local community.

As regards the role and influence of the school, the most significant finding from the study is the rapid rate of increase in the proportions of children beginning to identify themselves with one particular community and also to make sectarian comments at the ages of five and six. The fact that these represent the first few years of compulsory schooling is unlikely to be a coincidence. Further research is required to help us understand the precise ways in which schools contribute towards children's increasing awareness and attitudes at this early age. However it certainly seems reasonable to suggest that one explanation is likely to be the de facto segregated nature of the school system itself. It remains the case in

Northern Ireland that only a handful of children (4%) attend integrated schools. The vast majority (96%) continue to attend schools that are either Protestant or Catholic (Smith 1995).

For any child, entering school for the first time represents a significant milestone in their lives. It is likely to be the first time that many will begin to interact with much larger numbers of other children and also to come under the influence of their older peers. When such environments are overwhelmingly Catholic or Protestant in their ethos, then it is not surprising to find that they can represent a fertile learning ground within which children's awareness about cultural and political events and symbols as well as the attitudes and prejudices that often accompany these increase rapidly.

Implications

The report concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for community relations work with young children. It reaches three broad conclusions:

1. Children, from the age of three, should be encouraged to explore and experience a range of different cultural practices, events and symbols and to appreciate and respect difference and cultural diversity.
2. From about the age of five onwards, children should be encouraged to understand the negative effects of sectarian stereotypes and prejudices and to be able to identify them in their own attitudes, where appropriate.
3. For such strategies to be successful, nurseries and schools need to find ways of engaging and working closely with parents and the local community and, where appropriate, connecting with community relations and cultural diversity initiatives in the wider community.