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Conflict, transition and education for ‘political generosity’: learning from the experience of ex-combatants in Northern Ireland

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This article suggests that opportunities exist to harness the potential of history and citizenship education with the processes of transition in developing programmes, which support young people in exploring conflict and the challenges associated with attending to its legacy. Drawing on the experience of Northern Ireland, it is suggested that the narratives of those who have been involved directly as both combatants in conflict and latterly as agents of change in their communities provide unique opportunities for young people to reflect on these issues. By way of illustration, an account of one such initiative is presented: From Prison to Peace: Learning From the Experience of Political Ex-Prisoners; a structured programme which invites young people to engage directly with loyalist and republican ex-combatants in the Northern Ireland conflict. The article suggests that such programmes have the potential to assist young people in exploring the complexity of conflict and the intricacies of transition. Furthermore, it is suggested that the relationships which exist between these ex-combatants arguably can challenge sectarian perspectives and foster capacity for ‘political generosity’ towards those with opposing political aspirations.

Keywords: conflict transformation; curriculum; transitional justice

The paradoxical role of education in conflict affected societies is well accepted, with education framed both as part of the problem as well as a key element of peaceful solutions (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Smith and Vaux 2003). In terms of the latter, it is argued that education should seek not only to address the impact of conflict on children’s lives (Machel 1996), but also to develop understanding of the nature of conflict and to assist in its resolution (Tawil and Harley 2004). Moreover, in transitional contexts where processes which seek to misrepresent the past can result in conflict reappearing in future generations (Cohen 2001), education has a crucial role to play in ‘narrowing the space for permissible lies’ (Ignatieff 2003, 78) and ensuring that past grievances are addressed (McEvoy 2007). However, education cannot act in isolation. Conflict transformation requires concurrent processes of elite level political negotiations (Bell 2003a), peacemaking efforts at civil society level, as well as a range of practical and symbolic measures designed to deal with issues such as the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of combatants (Berdal 2005) or assistance to victims affected by

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violence. These latter interventions are increasingly analysed and understood through the theory and practice of transitional justice (Teitel 2000).

Discourses surrounding transitional justice usually coalesce around the intersection between *justice* and *reconciliation*. Inevitably, there are conceptual and practical tensions between the impetus towards justice and the urge to reconcile (Sarkin 2001). That tension is particularly acute if reconciliation is understood simply as an individual act of moral compromise associated with forgiveness and justice is understood strictly as prosecutorial and retributive. However, if justice is seen as both restorative and retributive (Braithwaite 2002) and reconciliation is seen as both a collective and individual process, aligned to concepts of truth, justice, mercy and peace (Lederach 1997), a broader conceptual framework emerges in which to locate an exploration of the multifaceted goals of transitional justice. These include *inter alia*: restoring the rule of law and reforming institutions; providing justice for victims and holding perpetrators to account; creating an accurate historical record for society; ensuring that human rights violations are not repeated and promoting coexistence and sustainable peace. The methods selected to achieve these goals are complex and context dependent. From its genesis at the ‘Nuremberg Trials’ to its association with post-Cold War democratic transitions and more recently to intrastate conflict resolution (Teitel 2003), a range of components of the machinery of transitional justice have emerged. These can operate at an international or increasingly national level and include: criminal prosecutions; truth seeking initiatives, such as truth commissions; reparations to victims and more controversially, amnesties for perpetrators (McGregor 2008).

While historically transitional justice has viewed itself as primarily a ‘victim-centred discourse’ (Robbins 2011) increasingly the framework has been broadened to encompass an understanding that the fate of ex-combatants and ex-prisoners is at least as important in securing the durability of long-term peace (Patel, de Grieff, and Waldorf 2010); in particular, the process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR). As the United Nations (2007) has observed, the failure of DDR to ‘get the guns out of the hands of the fighters’ and the need to ensure that people who have military skills and a fluency in violence are successfully reintegrated back into society has become ‘a familiar element of the post-conflict reconstruction template’ (McEvoy and Shirlow 2009, 35). However, as McEvoy and Shirlow argue, such a largely instrumental view – which regards ex-combatants as security problems to be managed rather than as significant peacemaking agents – fails to capture both the role and potential of ex-combatants in broader processes of transitional justice. Truth recovery mechanisms, indigenous healing and reintegration ceremonies, storytelling and commemoration, mediations between victims and perpetrators, efforts to recover those ‘disappeared’ during conflicts – these and other efforts to deal with the past which are increasingly grouped under the rubric of transitional justice, cannot be achieved without the involvement and cooperation of ex-combatants. In short, effective delivery of transitional justice, and by extension conflict transformation, requires ex-combatant agency (McEvoy and McGregor 2008). Likewise, it could be inferred that the effectiveness of educational initiatives seeking to address the past could be enhanced by involving the perspectives of ex-combatants on their role in conflict and in the ‘bottom-up’ processes of transition.

Links between education and transitional justice, however, are made predominantly in the context of nationally centralised mechanisms for truth recovery, e.g. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs). As Paulson (2006, 335) explains:
In various phases of the truth commission process – in research into conflict and its causes, in testimony from victims and perpetrators of human rights violations, and in recommendations made for post-conflict reform – the educational sector is increasingly being mentioned.

Although TRCs have suggested their findings are integrated into curricula, little progress has been made in making this a reality, prompting Paulson (2006, 335) to contend that if TRCs are to continue making recommendations for educational reform then they should also ‘play a key role in informing long-term educational planning that is sensitive to the complex interrelationships between education and conflict’. Notwithstanding the lack of implementation in policy and practice, the recommendations from TRCs have at the very least stimulated debate concerning the relationship between transitional justice and education, in particular the underutilised role of history and social studies (Cole and Barsalou 2006).

The purpose of this article is to contribute to this emerging debate, through an analysis of the role of curricula in engaging young people with conflict and the practices of conflict transformation. The article proposes that opportunities exist to harness the potential of history and citizenship education with the processes of transition in developing programmes, which support young people in exploring conflict and the challenges associated with attending to its legacy. Drawing on the experience of Northern Ireland, it is suggested that the narratives of those who have been involved directly as both combatants in conflict and latterly as agents of change in their communities provide unique opportunities for young people to reflect on these issues. By way of illustration, an account of one such initiative is presented: From Prison to Peace: Learning From the Experience of Political Ex-Prisoners; a structured programme which invites young people to engage directly with loyalist and republican ex-combatants in the Northern Ireland conflict.¹ The article suggests that, notwithstanding obvious sensitivities, such programmes have the potential to assist young people in exploring the complexity of conflict and the intricacies of transition. Furthermore, it is suggested that the relationships which exist between these ex-combatants arguably can challenge sectarian perspectives and foster capacity for ‘political generosity’ towards those with opposing political aspirations. The article concludes by suggesting that for societies emerging from conflict educational processes should be more closely aligned to both the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ processes of transition, in order to encourage critical engagement with multiple perspectives on conflict.

Before exploring these issues, however, it may be useful to provide an inevitably simplified overview of the Northern Ireland context.

**Northern Ireland: conflict and transition**

While the origins of conflict in Ireland can be traced through centuries of history and filtered through a range of opposing perspectives, it is accepted that the partition of Ireland in 1921 and the creation of a new ‘Northern Ireland’ jurisdiction within the UK had a lasting legacy on the island. In simple terms, it created in the north an in-built Protestant ruling majority aligned to a largely Unionist/Loyalist political agenda (i.e. those whose political motivation was to maintain the union with Britain) and a small Catholic minority aligned to a largely Nationalist/Republican agenda (i.e. those whose political aspirations were the reunification of Ireland) (Walker 2012).²
decades following partition saw sporadic campaigns of violence from the Irish Republican Army and a permanent state of emergency from the inception of the state. However, in 1968/1969 against a backdrop of heavy-handed state force reaction to civil rights protests and civil unrest a more sustained conflict began (colloquially, ‘The Troubles’) which was to last for over three decades (Dixon and O’Kane 2011). Unsurprisingly, a range of views exist as to the origin of this conflict and the reasons for its protraction: exogenous explanations focusing variously on the role of the British Government, the Irish Government or the role of capitalism in instigating and sustaining the conflict; more common endogenous explanations emphasising the nature of internal communal division, primarily between the two main communities with differing religious and cultural identities and competing national aspirations (McGarry and O’Leary 1995). Notwithstanding these differing opinions, the outworking of the resultant political violence (from both state and non-state actors) had a significant impact on a small population of just over 1.6 million people: over 3700 people killed and 47,000 people injured in 16,200 bombing and 37,000 shooting incidents; an estimated 7000 people (mostly Catholic) internally displaced, forced to flee their homes as the violence began to tear communities apart in the early 1970s (Consultative Group on the Past 2009); over 2000 people interned without trial and, figures suggest, over 30,000 people imprisoned due to conflict related convictions (McEvoy and Shirlow 2008). The legacy of this, and less quantifiable products of the conflict such as deepening community division and high levels of social disadvantage created the societal milieu for a prolonged peace process, the negotiations which resulted in the Belfast/‘Good Friday Agreement’ of 1998 and the ongoing processes of transition.

In addition to the formation of a locally devolved administration, this transition has involved engagement with the processes of transitional justice and DDR discussed above. At a macro political level this has included the early release of prisoners, reform of policing and the criminal justice system, demilitarisation and the decommissioning of ‘paramilitary’ weapons (Dixon and O’Kane 2011). In terms of ex-combatants, the reintegrative model has been essentially a ‘self-help’ approach with former prisoners managing their own reintegration programmes (Roulston 2007; McEvoy and Shirlow 2009). As in other contexts, this has not been without its controversies with the position of ex-combatants being juxtaposed against the treatment of victims (McEvoy and Shirlow 2008). In terms of victims, a Commission has been established but debate continues as to how best to progress this and other aspects of the legacy of the conflict (Duffy 2010). Therefore, distinct from other transitional societies, no truth commission or any other comprehensive mechanism for addressing the past has been established (Lundy 2011). Instead what has emerged is a programme of decentralised transitional justice involving extensive community-based reconciliation programmes with a more piecemeal approach from governmental actors (Bell 2003b; McEvoy 2012).

This piecemeal approach extends into educational engagement with the legacy of the conflict. Despite numerous references in government policy to the role of education in addressing the complexity of the past and nurturing mutual respect (e.g. Office of the First and deputy First Minister 2010; Department of Education 2011) no systemic approach has emerged to link education to the processes of transition. However, as discussed below, opportunities exist to harness the potential of the statutory citizenship education and history curricula with ‘bottom-up’ transitional initiatives to provide young people with a comprehensive picture of the past.
and a more holistic understanding of the factors involved in building and sustaining peace.

The role curriculum in transitional societies
Organisation of educational structures and choice of knowledge transmitted in the curriculum have consequences for how education is positioned as either a factor in creating or exacerbating conflict or as a transformative component of peace-building (McEvoy and Lundy 2007). Educational responses to conflict and societal division fall typically within three strands: structural reform of education systems to ensure equal opportunity (e.g. Smith 2010); the development of a range of ‘contact’ initiatives aimed at reducing prejudice through engaging young people with their peers from different ethnic groups or the ‘opposing side’ (e.g. Salomon 2006) and curriculum responses designed to address societal division (e.g. Paulson 2011). While acknowledging their interrelatedness, this article is primarily concerned with the role of the latter.

Curriculum reform is a common feature of post-conflit situations. The nature of reform, though context specific, in general requires the revision, replacement or (re) introduction of a number subjects including, e.g. geography, history, languages and religious education (Tawil and Harley 2004). Reform also involves the development of bespoke curricular programmes designed to attend to the specific needs of the transitional society, e.g. citizenship education and peace education programmes (Smith 2010). In the context of Northern Ireland, major curricular reform occurred during the conflict (Education Reform Order (Northern Ireland) 1989) and in more recent years with the introduction of a ‘revised’ curriculum (Education Order 2007). The conflict-related aspects of these reforms focused primarily on the statutory history curriculum, the development of programmes for mutual understanding and latterly citizenship education (McEvoy 2007), outlined briefly below within a discussion on the role of history and citizenship education in societies emerging from conflict.

History education in transitional societies
The potential political manipulation of history curricula (Smith and Vaux 2003) and the susceptibility of history teaching to simplification and bias (Cole and Barsalou 2006) undoubtedly have implications for conflict-affected societies. The selective transmission of historical narratives to the next generation can instigate or perpetuate conflict as well as hinder conflict transformation. Moreover, in transitional societies, the partial teaching of history could undermine outcomes from tribunals and truth commissions (Cole and Barsalou 2006) and as such disrupt the pursuit of one objective of transitional justice, noted above: the creation of an accurate historical record of the conflict.

In some societies, the perpetuation of historical myth is so closely aligned to the causes of conflict that the teaching of history is temporarily suspended in the interests of political stability. For example, in Rwanda a moratorium placed on the teaching of history in the aftermath of the genocide remained in place for 10 years until a single historical narrative was established (Kearney 2011). In spite of these concerns, history education in transitional contexts is laden with political and societal hopes, with the ‘re-teaching of history’ expected to ‘lay the foundation for social
reconstruction, a better future, and a lasting peace’ (Freedman et al. 2008, 663). Often, this results in the construction of an official historical narrative. However the quest for a single history in deeply divided societies is self-evidently problematic, particularly when ‘official’ histories clash with narratives and unofficial histories from home or the community (Bird 2007; Freedman et al. 2008) or when separate school systems for different ethnic groups each promote their own distinct historical narrative (Jones 2011). In other contexts, Israel, e.g. attempts have been made to engage young people in exploring historical disputes through materials which delineate opposing narratives. Some of these materials eventually became integrated into official text books but were considered highly controversial, and again an official history favoured (Porat 2006).

In Northern Ireland, an inquiry-based approach towards history, designed to assist young people in recognising different interpretations of key historical events, is encouraged in curriculum policy (Barton and McCully 2005; McCully 2010). However, teachers remain reluctant to address more sensitive aspects of history, particularly relating to contemporary views and beliefs (Conway 2004). Further, a review of history textbooks indicated a largely balanced presentation of Irish history but suggested that the materials ‘stop short of asking more challenging questions’ and contained virtually no explicit links between the past and the present (Kitson 2007, 146). While the ‘revised’ history curriculum requires an exploration of the impact of history on identity and the ‘causes and consequences of the partition of Ireland’ (Education Order 2007), there is no statutory requirement to study the more recent phase of the conflict. The net effect is that young people are engaging superficially with ‘bland’ presentations of the past and for the most part have serious gaps in their knowledge and understanding of the recent conflict (Barton and McCully 2010). Resonating with other contexts, the concern in Northern Ireland is that if young people do not learn explicitly about the conflict and its implications, ‘there is a danger that as [they] get older they selectively assimilate aspects of formal learning into the dominant popular narrative in their respective communities’ (McCully 2010, 167) and as such perpetuate the myths and partial understandings of the historical antecedents to conflict.

For history education to contribute effectively to conflict transformation it would appear that young people should be assisted in exploring the nature of the conflict from which their society is emerging. Moreover, as Freedman et al. (2008, 665) suggest, rather than presenting a single official narrative, space needs to be created for ‘productive conflict’ in relation to the past. This requires not only support for teachers in promoting the critical enquiry needed to challenge entrenched views (Cole and Barsalou 2006), but also more nuanced history resources (Freedman et al. 2008). As noted above, the ‘compelling material’ (Enslin 2000, 86) produced from national TRCs could act as a source for such resources. However a wealth of resources also exist at the local level, through which an understanding of conflict and transition can be conveyed, such as the use of the oral tradition to convey cognitively and emotionally engaging personal narratives (Bird 2007). By strengthening the relationship between history education and both the ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ processes of transitional justice, perhaps a more complex picture of the nature of conflict and its legacy could emerge, challenging both homogenised official historical narratives and partial unofficial histories generated at home.
Citizenship education in transitional societies

McLaughlin (1992) characterises ‘citizenship’ on a continuum from minimal to maximal interpretations. Minimal interpretations align with a ‘thin’ definition of citizenship based on legal status (Faulks 2000), resulting in passive approaches to citizenship education which focus on the transmission of knowledge about the systems and processes of government. Maximal interpretations on the other hand align with a ‘thick’ notion of citizenship, which is moral, active and interdependent (Faulks 2000). Under this interpretation, citizenship education is process led and participative and, though it includes the content and knowledge components of minimal interpretations, seeks to assist young people in using this information to enhance their participation and capacity to engage critically with society. Within maximal approaches, participation is conjoined with a range of other democratic concepts: human rights, equality and justice. Moreover, in conflict-affected societies maximal citizenship curricula also include concepts associated with peace education, including inter alia, identity, multiculturalism and coexistence (see Bush and Saltarelli 2000). Pertinent to this article, however, is the clear alignment of the goals of citizenship (and peace) education to the objectives of transitional justice suggesting that effective citizenship education has a substantial contribution to make to the process of transition.

Recent research suggests that in transitional societies, citizenship education is shifting from minimal to more maximal ‘enquiry based’ approaches (Smith 2010). This is not to say that ‘thin’ and patriotic models of citizenship education are no longer part of educational responses in transitional societies. For example, Doolan and Domazet (2007) contend that while subjects explicitly transferring Marxist ideology in Croatia were replaced with subjects promoting democratic ideals, the concept of citizenship underpinning the curriculum remained passive and nationalistic. Further, research suggests that the threat of international terrorism or involvement in international conflict tends to result in teachers constraining critical debate (Porath 2006) Such passive approaches to citizenship education cannot provide young people with the range of skills required to examine critically the complex nature of citizenship in contested societies nor to engage with or understand the dynamics of transitional justice.

In Northern Ireland, attempts were made during the conflict to introduce elements of peace education into the statutory curriculum. This was in the form of a cross-curricular theme: education for mutual understanding (EMU) (Education Reform Order (Northern Ireland) 1989). Notwithstanding its laudable objectives and the praise it received on the international stage (see Bush and Saltarelli 2000), it is generally accepted in the Northern Ireland context that EMU failed; in no small part due to its refusal to engage with the political nature of the conflict, its weakness in handling issues of social justice and its lack of reference to human rights (McEvoy 2007). The revised curriculum contains a bespoke programme for citizenship education: ‘Local and Global Citizenship’. During its development concerted efforts were made to foreground issues central to the transitional nature of Northern Irish society (Arlow 2011). This resulted in a curriculum designed to provide young people with opportunities to explore a range of issues under four core conceptual areas: human rights and social responsibility, diversity and inclusion; equality and social justice and democracy and active participation (Education Order 2007). However, there is no statutory requirement to relate these concepts to the nature of the conflict, in Northern Ireland or elsewhere, nor to the political and democratic processes.
required for transition. It is therefore unsurprising that although young people report increased learning in relation to issues such as ‘community relations’, they also indicate superficial engagement with the more complex and contentious aspects of citizenship in a divided society, such as sectarianism and community conflict (University of Ulster 2010). As discussed above, young people again appear frustrated that the curriculum in general and the citizenship curriculum in particular is not providing them with opportunities to explore the origins and legacy of the ‘Troubles’ (Magill, Smith, and Hamber 2009).

For citizenship education to contribute effectively to conflict transformation young people need to be provided with opportunities to engage critically not only with issues of identity, but also with the legacy of conflict and their own contribution as active citizens to the processes of transition. This requires a repositioning of the concept of ‘conflict’ in the school curriculum. As Davies (2004) observes, conflict is often presented as a ‘contextual issue rather than one which needs to be addressed head on’. To this end, she suggests that the curriculum should overtly address conflict and promote ‘critical respect’ for the principle that justice can be pursued without recourse to violence (Davies 2008). Citizenship education programmes are undoubtedly well placed to rise to this challenge. Moreover, links need to be forged between citizenship education and the mechanisms of transitional justice. While, as noted above, most citizenship education curricula contain content on the democratic systems of government emerging after conflict, Northern Ireland is not unique in failing to educate young people about the political processes involved in transition, specifically those mentioned at the outset of this article. The alignment of the goals of citizenship education, history education and transitional justice discussed above, in conjunction with the claims that peace education programmes are more successful when they engage with deeper issues of identity, historical inequalities and power relations and are linked to wider peace-building initiatives in society (Salomon 2011), provide a compelling argument for curricula in conflict-affected societies to include knowledge and understanding of, and critical engagement with, the processes of transitional justice discussed at the outset of this article.

In sum, this article suggests that by strengthening the relationship between history and citizenship curricula and transitional justice, opportunities can be created for young people to learn not only about but from the past and to develop the skills required to understand and negotiate the political contours of a society emerging from conflict. In particular, as suggested at the outset of this article, it is contended that the effectiveness of educational initiatives seeking to address these issues could be enhanced by engaging with the perspectives of ex-combatants on their role in conflict and in the processes of transition. The remainder of this article explores further the rationale for these assertions through a reflection on an educational programme in Northern Ireland designed to engage young people directly with former combatants.

‘From Prison to Peace’: Learning From the Experience of Political Ex-Prisoners

Background to the development of the programme

As noted above, effective delivery of transitional justice requires the cooperation of ex-combatants. In Northern Ireland ex-combatants have been actively involved in taking forward initiatives linked to DDR (including decommissioning and the trans-
formation and ‘civilianization’ of their own paramilitary organisations) and approaches to dealing with the past (including building relationships with various victims organisations, former soldiers and members of the security forces). This has necessitated the building of relationships between former enemies who were not only involved in political violence against ‘the other side’ but also in intra-factional violence (McEvoy and Shirlow 2011). More recently, this work has coalesced into a unique partnership: Prison to Peace Partnership Consortium, administered by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI). The ex-prisoner organisations involved in the partnership were: Coiste na n-Iarchimí, An Eochair, Teach na Fáilte (representing republican former prisoners from the Provisional IRA, the Official IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army, [INLA])⁴ and Ex-Prisoners Interpretive Centre and Charter (representing loyalist former prisoners from the Ulster Volunteer Force [UVF] and Ulster Defence Association [UDA] and affiliated groups⁵). In addition to providing financial support for the individual work of the ex-prisoner support groups, this project also contained provisions for work on collective themes including ‘Conflict Transformation and Peace-building’, ‘Social Change in the Community’ and ‘Youth Development and Citizenship’.

As part of the latter, a ‘Citizenship Working Group’ was established to explore ways in which the narratives and community leadership skills of ex-combatants could be used to deter young people from engagement in sectarian violence and prevent them from being recruited into residual dissident paramilitary organisations: genuine concerns within the community (see McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon 2011; Reilly 2011). Given my personal involvement in the development of the citizenship curriculum for Northern Ireland, my familiarity with the ex-prisoner organisations and their work and my previous assertions that the curriculum needed to engage with the past and ‘tap into’ the transitional endeavours of ex-combatants (see McEvoy, McEvoy and McConnachie 2006; McEvoy 2007), I was co-opted onto this group to help steer and support the progress of this initiative. This resulted in the development of an educational programme aimed at 14–16-year-olds: From Prison to Peace: Learning From the Experience of Political Ex-Prisoners. The programme seeks to present young people with ‘bottom-up’ perspectives on the conflict through a comprehensive and complex picture of the political ex-prisoner experience. It also seeks to provide young people with an opportunity to engage directly with those who were involved in the conflict. In doing so, it aims to prevent young people from getting involved in sectarian behaviour and/or returning to violence, to demonstrate alternative ways of dealing with conflict and to encourage young people to contribute positively to their community (CFNI 2011).

The structured 12 week programme consists of an educational manual containing teachers’ notes, resources based on the narratives of 15 former prisoners who consented to be interviewed for the project and a DVD featuring filmed interviews with representatives from each of constituencies involved in the initiative. Through a range of participatory classroom activities, teachers are asked to first orientate young people around the key features of conflict in Northern Ireland and the processes involved in transition before guiding them through aspects of the ex-combatant experience: the circumstances that influenced them to become involved in the conflict; the prison experience and its impact; the positive contribution they make to conflict transformation and community development initiatives. The sessions are designed to raise debate about how conflict-affected societies deal with the past and with continued inter-communal tensions. Throughout the taught
component of the programme, young people are made aware that they will be engaging directly with republican and loyalist ex-prisoners and are encouraged to generate questions for the panel discussion, which is the penultimate aspect of the 12 week programme. The programme concludes with a reflective session where participants discuss ways in which Northern Ireland, and other conflict-affected societies, could combine the principles of justice and reconciliation in the pursuit of peace and political stability.

Resonating with themes emerging from the review of literature above, the programme is designed to assist young people in exploring their own transitional context by exposing the reality of conflict, uncovering the intricacies of transition and engendering notions of political generosity, outlined below.

**Exposing the reality of conflict**

In exploring the stories of ex-combatants, it is hoped that young people will develop a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances which led to involvement in political violence. By way of example, in one session of the programme, young people are presented with a set of short extracts from the narratives and asked to cluster these according to self-generating themes. This allows a complex picture of the nature of society at the time of the conflict to surface and provides a vehicle for discussing ways in which this may have influenced individuals to join ‘paramilitary’ organisations. An emerging theme in this activity is the *political nature of the conflict* including the militarised context in which the individuals interviewed grew up, illustrated by the following extracts:

You’d hear the armoured cars coming into the street and the screaming and you’d think: ‘What’s that, that’s my neighbour, that’s my community’.

It’s to do with passion. You’re probably more passionate about things than your friends. Passionate about politics and history.

However, other extracts challenge the orthodoxy that individuals became involved for political reasons, pointing rather to a gradual involvement and the appeal of the status associated with paramilitarism:

I’d no political bone in my body at the time. But it was a natural progression from throwing stones, to carrying weapons to eventually using weapons. There was a pride thing with it. Like a badge of honour to be asked to join in the area I came from.

The extracts also assist an exploration of *familial and peer influence* for some combatants key to their involvement:

My father had been interned in the 1940s and two uncles had been in the war of independence. Cousins were involved. It was just like a family tradition. It was like a ‘religious duty’ to be honest. As a kid I was rioting and then when I was 14 or 15 joined. Every one of my friends at that time joined the IRA or INLA.

Other extracts explain that those in similar circumstances did not get involved in violence, raising questions about the role played by *individual choice*:
Most of my childhood friends didn’t get involved so you can’t really blame the environment.

Further extracts are used to draw out the influence of the media, the impact of specific events and the overall sense of frustration and anger generated as a result of the conflict, creating a complex web of the influences on an individual’s decision to become involved in violence. These interrelated themes are then used to help young people reflect on the influences on their own lives particularly those which would encourage them towards sectarian behaviour or violence.

Early sessions also aim to *de-mythologise involvement in violence conflict*, again using extracts from ex-combatants’ narratives, such as the one below:

> If they just knew what it’s actually like being involved in killing someone. It’s not like the movies. If they see the result they leave on the family left behind and the result on their own family and their own mind. I did it a few times and it felt worse each time. It was something you felt had to be done but you didn’t like doing it.

This *impact of conflict* is a recurring theme in the programme. Young people may be familiar with the impact political violence had on its victims, however, given the discussion above it is unlikely they will have any understanding of the impact on the families of those directly involved. The narratives chart, *inter alia*, the impact of imprisonment on family relationships, the problems associated with reintegration and the ongoing legacy of conflict for those who chose to become involved, illustrated compellingly by these two quotes:

> You’re always an ‘ex-’something, you can never be just ‘something’.

> Even now it still has an effect on your life. I found my wee boy googling my name the other day. He doesn’t know about my past, why I was in prison.

This vignette illustrates, first, how the personal accounts of those directly involved in conflict can help young people develop ‘an informed appreciation of the past’ (Enslin 2000, 89). Resonating with Thompson’s (1963) case for ‘writing history from below’, this approach seeks to create an understanding of the macro-historical narrative by ‘feeling outwards’ from micro-historical, grounded experiences of those who lived through it, exposing young people to the reality of conflict, including its complexities (Davies 2004). Secondly, in providing space for personal reflection on the realities of involvement in violence the programme aims to deter young people from association with residual ‘paramilitary groups’ and from involvement in sectarian behaviour. Thirdly, the programme raises questions concerning how societies deal with the reintegration of ex-combatants, thus providing a vehicle for young people to reflect critically on some of the transitional processes, elaborated on below.

**Uncovering the intricacies of transition**

The post-conflict experiences of ex-combatants involved in the ‘Prison to Peace’ programme provide practical examples of their engagement in peace-building. First, the narratives indicate the central role the prison experience had in *developing alternatives to violence for progressing political goals*. In particular, they reveal ways in
which individuals were challenged to rethink the need for political violence through a renewed understanding of history, a desire to prevent conflict embedding itself in the next generation and an acknowledgement that changed political conditions obviated continued justification for ‘armed struggle’:

I hadn’t done Irish history in school. I thought Northern Ireland had existed from biblical times. When I did some history in prison I was really surprised to find out Northern Ireland had only existed since 1920!

When you’ve lost your freedom your family is denied your presence and your role in the family, you obviously say you wouldn’t want this to be visited upon the next generation. It focuses your mind on looking at ways of coming out of conflict.

You could argue there was never justification for violence. But now there’s [sic] the political structures in place as a way of furthering aspirations by purely political means. If there ever was a case for violence there certainly isn’t now.

Secondly, the programme explains the role played by ex-combatants in community-based transitional justice initiatives. Practical examples are presented of the work of ex-combatants within their own communities, e.g. supporting those affected by the conflict, developing community restorative programmes and social economy initiatives across the ‘community divide’, e.g. working with young people at interface areas to reduce sectarian tension, engaging in encounters with victims and dialogue programmes to develop an understanding of each other’s histories and political perspectives.

Thirdly, the narratives of former combatants can raise questions concerning the needs of victims. As in other transitional societies, the concept of victimhood in Northern Ireland is deeply contested (Brewer and Hayes 2011) and the processes required to acknowledge and attend to their suffering are bound up in the tensions between justice and reconciliation discussed at the outset of this article. Extracts from the narratives, such as those below, are used to prompt reflection and challenge perspectives on how the term ‘victim’ is defined, notions of ‘a hierarchy of victimhood’ and the relationship between personal and societal reconciliation:

Victimhood isn’t just the victim of an activity. It’s also the victims of the prisoner’s family

I met the brother of one of my victims once – didn’t know at the time. I don’t know what I would have said, could have said. I don’t think it would be a nice thing for me to be anywhere near his family. That’s on a personal level. On a more wider [sic] victim-survivor thing – don’t think I’d have a problem speaking about those general things. But the personal thing I find difficult.

The experiences of ex-combatants can thus serve as an entry point into discussing the broader goals of transitional justice, the challenges of achieving these and the efforts required for post-conflict (re)construction of inter-(and intra) community relations. In doing so the programme seeks to introduce young people to the processes involved in conflict transformation: a concept central to the work of these ex-combatants (McEvoy and Shirlow 2008). Notably, this concept is absent from the citizenship curriculum in Northern Ireland; the term used is ‘managing conflict’ concurrent with references to ‘promoting community relations and reconciliation’
(Education Order 2007). However, these terms have limited utility in helping young people understand the reality of transitional processes in Northern Ireland, due largely to their association with apolitical analyses of the conflict (McEvoy, McEvoy and McConnachie 2006; McEvoy 2007). Alternatively, an emphasis on conflict transformation provides a more secure conceptual basis from which to explore transitional contexts. As Lederach (1995, 1997) suggests conflict transformation recognises the structural injustices and inequalities at the heart of conflict and attends to transforming these alongside ‘the relationships, interests and discourses which support the continuation of violence’ (McEvoy and Shirlow 2008, 15). Further it does not seek merely to ‘manage’ or contain conflict, nor to ‘resolve’ it (particularly pertinent in contexts of intractable conflict like Northern Ireland). Rather it seeks to change the nature of conflict from violence to dialogue and political engagement (Lederach 1995, 1997). Exploring transition from the perspective of ex-combatants engaged in the day-to-day ‘business’ of conflict transformation provides a unique opportunity for young people to reflect critically on how a society moves from conflict to sustainable peace.

**Engendering notions of political generosity**

One of the unique features of ‘Prison to Peace’ is that it has been developed not merely by former enemies, but by former enemies who still hold strongly to their politically convictions. As such the very existence of the programme speaks to the process of conflict transformation discussed above. Throughout the classroom-based sessions extracts from the narratives and case studies assist the young people in understanding how relationships between loyalist and republican ex-combatants have evolved. For example, as one explains:

> Armed struggle divided Protestants and Catholics. We need to develop different tactics. We need to build up relationships with loyalists for example. We are doing that now. 10 years ago we were killing each other. But we have a lot more in common with each other. We all came from deprived areas, we’re working class people.

However while acknowledging the commonality of experience, in particular in relation to material inequalities, the extracts also point to confidence in one’s own cultural identity as a basis for developing these relationships:

> Nobody needs to go through all that. There’s other ways now. We need to educate them and teach them about communication, negotiation and compromise. If they can be helped to be confident and proud of their own history and culture they don’t need to be afraid of anyone else’s.

This relationship is perhaps articulated more powerfully in the penultimate session of the programme, when young people engage directly with ex-combatants in a ‘question-and-answer’ session and in informal discussion. Again, the very existence of a panel of republicans and loyalists sitting together provides a tangible example of how differing cultural identities do not need to act as a barrier to engaging with ‘the other’, and as a result may challenge the stereotypes and sectarian attitudes that may be held by some young people. Moreover it may challenge the orthodoxy within other school-based reconciliation programmes that tend to de-legitimise republican and loyalist perspectives crudely characterising any expression of these
identities as ‘sectarian’, rather than as a legitimate political perspective on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. As a result, these programmes tend to seek a shift in political identity towards some undefined ‘neutral/non-sectarian’ middle ground – a world away from the lived reality of many young people (see McEvoy 2007). The ex-combatants involved in this programme do not inhabit this ‘neutral’ political space – they remain loyalist and republican, demonstrating to young people that conflict transformation does not require the discarding or dilution of political aspirations. This is not to say that the programme seeks to essentialise political identity. Rather it acknowledges its salience and aims to extend the parameters of legitimacy of the political landscape to which the young people are exposed. Moreover it seeks to assist young people in negotiating their own political perspectives and in demonstrating ‘political generosity’ towards those with opposing views – a characteristic demonstrated by ex-combatants in this programme (McEvoy, McEvoy and McConnachie 2006, 99).

As I have suggested elsewhere, capacity for ‘political generosity’ is in essence the ability to legitimise the cultural and political identity of those with opposing views, primarily on the basis of their right to hold them. This necessitates an individual having confidence in their own cultural and political identity and in their right to hold and express it (McEvoy, McEvoy and McConnachie 2006). Further, it both requires and engenders trust. Bar-Tal (2004, 263) suggests that inter-group and inter-personal trust might be achieved through the development of a ‘psychological repertoire that accepts, recognizes, respects, legitimizes, humanizes and personalizes the rival or discriminated group’. While this resonates with the basis upon which republican and loyalist ex-combatants in this programme engage with each other, the trust developed between them is essentially politically pragmatic in nature. It was borne out of a pressing need to stabilise the peace process and prevent return to violence, not out of a desire to (re)concile relationships. This does not mean that former combatants have not constructed friendships. Relationships have clearly developed, but these have occurred as a by-product of their attempts to work collectively to solve real problems in the community (McEvoy, McEvoy and McConnachie 2006).

The analysis of the ‘Prison to Peace’ programme above has sought to demonstrate how the experiences and perspectives of ex-combatants can be employed as a curricular vehicle to explore the nature of conflict, its legacy and the processes involved in developing a sustainable peace. The following conclusion reflects briefly on the lessons which can be drawn from this in relation to the dialectical relationship between education and conflict.

**Conclusion**

As noted at the beginning of this article, there is an emerging debate in relation to the relationship between education and transitional justice, in particular the role of history and citizenship curricula. As suggested above, the alignment of the goals of these subjects in conflict-affected societies with the goals of transitional justice provides a compelling case to critically engage young people with the dynamics of transition through the curriculum. Moreover, there is clearly potential for closer links between the ‘top down’ processes of transition, such as TRCs, and educational policy in developing a systemic approach to addressing the ‘the past’ and its legacy. However, this will require those involved in the delivery of
transitional justice to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the reality of developing such educational programmes, in order to ensure their recommendations are relevant to and will take hold in classroom practices. Further, there is a concurrent need for educationalists to engage with the concepts involved in transition from conflict: the complexity of conflict, the process of conflict transformation, understandings of victimhood the pragmatics of peace-building. This in turn requires a nuanced understanding of both the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ practices of transitional justice.

In particular, this article suggests that the involvement of the perspectives of ex-combatants on their role in the conflict and in conflict transformation has the potential to enhance curriculum initiatives seeking to address these issues, particularly in relation to developing a deeper understanding of the concepts noted above. As Paulson (2011) suggests there is a need for ‘polyvocal histories’ based on the lived experiences of individuals and communities to augment the narrative of conflict as presented by ‘official bodies like truth commissions and governments’. While the sources of these histories could undoubtedly be any person who has lived through the conflict, the narratives of ex-combatants provide a unique starting point from which to ‘feel outwards’ in attempting to grasp the social history of the time. Further, these narratives, arguably by virtue of their controversial nature, force into the open critical questions which need to be asked in a society emerging from conflict: How does society deal with the legacy of conflict? How does it construct an accurate historical record of the past? Can cultures of violence be transformed? Who are the victims of the conflict? Can peace be sustained? In attempting to find answers to such questions, young people will be pressed to develop an awareness of the concepts of justice and reconciliation and the tension that exists when these intersect in transitional contexts.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, there are those who baulk at the suggestion that young people can learn from ex-combatants and contend that this initiative valourises ‘terroristic [sic] narratives over the very real effect of violence on victims’ (Edwards and McGrattan 2011, 367). The arguments presented in this article should, it is hoped, go some way to allay the fears of those who misunderstand (or misrepresent) the rationale for the programme and the educational context in which it is located. However, it does at least point to the sensitivities associated with directly engaging young people with former combatants. To this end, it is crucial that such initiatives are presented as only one component of the overall approach to dealing with the past and that in particular efforts are made to provide young people with access to other voices from the conflict. Moreover, as has been suggested in the context of coexistence programmes, schools do not act in a vacuum. The success of initiatives like ‘Prison to Peace’ is dependent on the development of a supportive societal culture and trans-generational engagement with the issues being explored (Bar-Tal 2004; Schimmel 2009) so that young people exploring these issues in school find receptive ears at home and in their communities.

While the impact of the programme on young people remains to be seen, as the inheritors of the legacy of a conflict that was not of their making and as young citizens growing up in a transitional context in which they are asked to participate, at the very least the programme goes some way to ensuring that are invited to engage with the past – as is their right.
Notes
1. In simple terms, republican combatants characterized their conflict as an armed struggle against the British occupation of Ireland and a repressive Northern state, justifying their actions as legitimate acts of war. Loyalist combatants characterized their role in the conflict as that of defending Northern Ireland’s status within the UK through paramilitary activity targeted at republicans and the Catholic community, who were perceived to be part of a ‘pan-nationalist front’.

2. It is worth noting that whilst religious nomenclature (‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’) is ascribed to the two main identity groups in Northern Ireland, it is ‘unduly simplistic’ to refer to the conflict in Ireland as ‘religious’ (Barnes 2005, 132). Though religion undoubtedly has a historical significance, conflict in Ireland has been essentially political in nature.

3. Clearly, citizenship education and peace education are interrelated overlapping with other adjectival educations such as human rights education or development education. For a full discussion of this, see Harris (2004).

4. In 1970s, the IRA split over ideological issues. The ‘Provisional’ IRA then became the dominant armed republican group and after 1972 was commonly referred to as simply ‘the IRA’. The ‘Official’ IRA is the term used for the remnant from the split. This group announced a ceasefire in 1972. The INLA was an armed republican socialist group formed in 1974 by former members of the ‘Official’ IRA.

5. The UVF was formed in 1966 and named itself after the UVF, a unionist militia formed in 1912/1913 in opposition to ‘Irish Home Rule’. The UDA was the largest loyalist paramilitary group. It was formed in 1971 as a legal organisation, using the name ‘Ulster Freedom Fighters’ when it claimed responsibility for attacks. It was eventually proscribed as a ‘terrorist’ organisation in 1992.

6. The ‘Prison to Peace’ programme has established links with other initiatives exploring similar issues and has been endorsed by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland and the Curriculum Council as appropriate for Northern Ireland curriculum.

7. An evaluation of the programme, including a cluster randomized control trial, is being conducted by the Centre for Effective Education, Queen’s University Belfast.

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