**Who am I? A discussion on national identity: By Maddie Twamley, Strathern School, Belfast**

Today I want to talk about a fundamental issues, WHO AM I? and although I know most people struggle with this on a deep personal level the majority of Northern Irelands youth struggle with is also on the surface. For example every time we go to the airport and they ask our nationality or when the typical question of are you a catholic or protestant comes up.

Every single person living in the Province has an identity, although you may not know how to define it. Personally, I struggle with identifying my nationality, as someone who owns three passports. Every child born in the six counties has the right to British and Irish nationality yet when you own both people make unfair assumptions - never mind if you were born somewhere else. These issues have been affecting our country for generations, split national identity has caused people to judge unfairly of others and hold prejudice. We need to do better and change to stop the cycle.

A first step to a solution is to admit there’s an issue of lack national identity affecting the children of Ulster. In my research I discovered on the education NI website we have 62 integrated schools in Northern Ireland that makes up seven percent of our secondary schools. This means only seven percent of parents have chosen non-segregated education.

This may be due to lack of integrated options available in Northern Ireland. Since the majority of children are only exposed to one side on the story, or instead are split by their parents differing views on nationality. This makes it difficult to gain understanding of a full picture and where you fit in. We need to start admitting there’s a problem!

Recently at school we have been learning about national identities. During an exercise we had to write down our nationality and decide what defines them, everyone struggled. After class I spoke to my teacher and discussed how even he found it difficult to teach such a controversial subject, but agreed it was important to talk about.

The second step is to start discussing the issues. The inability to have a real and honest discussion about national identity is a leftover from the Troubles. To me, much of this is history. I am a post-Good Friday child. I want to learn and understand the issues with real dialog, historical facts and no stigma. I know for my Dad and Grandparents; this is living a memory that is real and painful.

Many children wonder about where they fit in yet afraid to ask questions due to lack of understanding on this taboo subject. Growing up I always saw things that confused me, such as red, white and blue curb stones, the Orange Order, painted murals of the troubles, many different flags, and the list goes on. I would ask my older cousins about such things and I always got looks of distain as if I should know what these things meant.

But looking back on it I don’t think they really under stood either. No one talks unbiased of the Troubles because it still feels like a fresh wound, yet how are we meant to move on if we can’t learn from our mistakes? The inability to talk about who we are and find a common ground has strongly contributed to the 1000+ days of NO NI Assembly and this unacceptable.

We are rapidly losing our local legislative system as our politicians refuse to have open dialogue about national identity. We all need to respect each other’s different identities in order to form a common culture. Using this forum I hope to start a real conversation about who we are and how everyone, Irish, British, Catholic, Protestant and all the other nationalities and faiths can gain understanding about each other for the better. We need to move to a place where are individual national identities collectively create Northern Ireland’s culture

The third step is the Incorporation of the UNCRC and in particular Article 13 into law. This places national identity on a concrete founding and universal right. This would open the door for children to universally be recognised for any nationality.

In 2016/2017 there were over 300,000 children enrolled in school in NI. As the UNCRC has not yet been put into statute this means there were over 300,000 missed opportunities to cement through education the concept of national identities and have conversations of understanding.

We can and need to do better.

Placing the UNCRC into statue would provide a solid ground for the Education Authority to encourage more integrated education. I would like to build from this summit by holding discussions with the Education Authority and potentially hold a forum of other similar aged groups across the country to discuss nationality. Gaining understanding of common ground and normalising the conversation would create a forum for my generation to ask the harder questions of ourselves, our peers, our community and our legislators.

Northern Ireland is full of different views and identities that tend to clash. The idea of a uniform national identity is long forgotten. It has been modernised so that individual national identities collectively create one culture.

As the next generation I want to stop our out dated cycle and start new concepts of not only understanding each other but respecting each other’s identities and views so that we can form.

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