EXPLORING THE ‘READINESS’ OF SCHOOLS TO ENGAGE WITH CONTESTED POLITICAL IDENTITIES

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This paper draws on findings from the evaluation of an educational programme designed to engage young people with contentious issues surrounding political identity. The programme, ‘From Prison to Peace’, invites young people to learn about the complexity of conflict, its legacy and the processes of transition from conflict to peace through an exploration of the narratives of former combatants in the Northern Irish conflict. As part of the program, young people are provided with opportunities to engage directly with former combatants in question and answer sessions in their school context. One aspect of the evaluation was a series of in depth qualitative case studies in seven of the schools implementing the programme. These involved interviews with teachers and school leaders, focus groups with participating young people and classroom observations. Drawing on the literature surrounding the theory and practice of pedagogical approaches to controversial issues, the paper delineates a range of factors which the authors contend contribute to the schools' ‘readiness for controversy’. These include factors surrounding young people's expressed need to understand the politically complex contours of the society in which they live, their recognition that this can contribute to the next generation not ‘repeating history’ and their trust in teachers to present balanced and nuanced views. Moreover, the paper explores the ways in which young people negotiate the tensions surrounding the narratives of the conflict with which they have been raised in their homes and in their communities and the alternative, potentially confusing and contradictory, narratives they encounter as part of the programme. Further it explores the motivations of adults to take risks in addressing controversy in the classroom which include ensuring young people are given the space and opportunity to develop their own political identities in a deeply divided society emerging from conflict and moreover that their capacity for ‘political generosity’ (Emerson, 2012) is built.