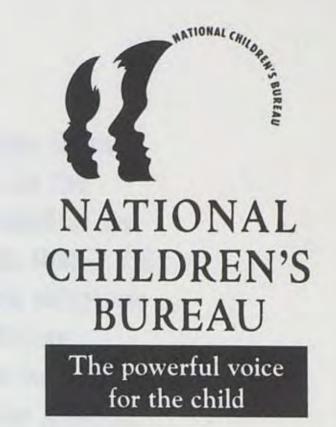# Children from Cross-Community Families in Public Care in Northern Ireland

A research proposal

Introduction

For the first time in child care law, the Children (NI) Order 1996 placed a statutory duty on Health and Social Services Boards and trusts in Northern Ireland when making decisions about a looked after child to 'give due consideration...to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background' [Article 26 (3)(c)]. Article 52(6)(a) further requires that where a care order is in force, the trust shall not 'cause the child to be brought up in any religious persuasion other than that in which he would have been brought up if the order had not been made'.

The National Children's Bureau study on planning for children in care in Northern Ireland gathered some significant information relating to the requirements of these Articles (Horgan and Sinclair, 1997). The study drew upon a representative sample of 131 children in care across the four Health and Social Services Boards and 35 children resident in the Training Schools. In undertaking that research, we found that:

- it was difficult to find information on case files about the full community background of children and their families and, in particular, about the cross-community nature of some families

- social workers had assigned a religious denomination to some children even where it was clear that they were not being brought up by their families with any religion

- there was an over-representation in the sample of children from a Catholic background: this was most marked for children under 4 where 63.6% of the children were Catholics, compared to 45.4% in the general population, and in the 16 and over age group where 84% came from a Catholic background, compared to 44.2% in the general population. This is not a particularly unexpected finding since there is evidence to suggest that some of this is related to poverty and unemployment (DH, 1991)

- there was an even greater over-representation of children who had parents from different community backgrounds. This applied to 24% of the children in the sample. The proportion of cross-community marriages in Northern Ireland is low (Robinson, 1992; Morgan and others, 1996). The 1991 Census suggests that 3.7% of marriages and 12% of cohabiting couples involve partners of different religions or origin, whether practicing or not. Since the overall number of cohabiting couples is also low, these figures suggest that the proportion of children in care from cross-community relationships is very disproportionate to that in the general population (Compton, 1995)

This paper sets out a proposal from the National Children's Bureau for a research project to examine this apparent over-representation of children within the care system from cross-community families. The findings of the proposed study will assist in meeting the needs of these children and their families in the community in general, as well as the specific needs of cross-community children within the care system. While focussing on children from cross-community families in particular, the study's findings will also assist in the implementation of Article 26(3)(c) for all looked after children.

National Children's Bureau

The National Children's Bureau is a registered charity established in 1963. The Bureau identifies and promotes the interests of children and young people and aims to raise their status in our diverse society. We work with policy-makers and professionals across all sectors -- including education, health and social work -- to spread knowledge and share good practice in creating services which are truly child-centred.

This research will benefit from highly relevant previous and current work undertaken by staff in the Bureau, including a recently published study on how social services departments in England have responded to Section 22(5)(c) of the Children Act 1989 in relation to children from diverse ethnic backgrounds and a 1994 study on black perspectives on services for children and young people in need and their families (Barn, Sinclair and Ferdinand, 1997; Caesar et al, 1994).

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Background

All families made on the basis of cross-community relationships present a concrete and unequivocal challenge to sectarian hatred, at the heart of which is the idea that 'the other side' is less than fully human. As with mixed race families, whether they realise it or not, cross-community families 'testify to the fundamental moral vision of a common humanity' (Richards, 1987). Of themselves they cannot bring about a significant decrease in sectarianism, but their very existence in a divided society can be seen as a beacon of hope in the struggle against sectarianism.

Perhaps partly because of this, cross-community families often face intimidation, sectarian attack, even murder of one or both of the couple concerned -- the most recent example being the murder of Bernadette Martin in the village of Aghalee in August this year (Sunday Tribune, 10.8.97). In the early 1990s, Gillian Robinson undertook one of the few studies into cross-community marriages in Northern Ireland. She relates that in the early stages of her study the general impression revealed was that

> marriage is difficult enough at the best of times but in Northern Ireland the extra dimension of being from two different religious backgrounds, and to some extent cultural backgrounds, may put extra pressures on a couple from time to time, either between themselves or on them from outside. (p.10)

Marriage guidance counsellors who were interviewed in the course of her study, however, suggested that mixed marriages may, by their very nature, be all the stronger. After overcoming so many barriers to marry, 'they may gain a strength which comes less readily to marriages which are not mixed' (Robinson, 1992, p.10).

The 1991 Census figures suggest that many couples in cross-community relationships choose not to marry; we cannot know whether this is due to family or community pressure -- although there is some evidence, in Robinson's study, of couples deciding to delay marriage and cohabit instead, because of paramilitary intimidation. It should be noted that most of the parents of children in the *Planning for Children in Care in Northern Ireland* study, whether they had married or cohabited, were separated when the children were taken into care. This was the case for endogamous and cross-community families alike.

The segregated nature of public housing in Northern Ireland is well documented (Poole and Doherty, 1996). Morgan and others (1996) report that this puts particular pressures on cross-community couples. Those who can afford the cost prefer to buy a house in a better-off, relatively mixed area; those who have to rely on public housing are usually forced to 'choose' in which community they will live. Whether they opt for public or private housing, cross-community couples may have to move away from areas where they have family support networks, if those networks were in segregated areas. Morgan and others (1996) comment that cross-community couples seeking public housing

> ...face a difficult series of choices. They run the risk of intimidation of themselves or their relatives if they go to live in segregated areas. The choice for some couples may be between breaking with family ties in segregated areas in order to live in a mixed area where they may be more acceptable as a mixed couple, or choosing to remain living in a segregated area, risking intimidation and having to manage information about one partner's identity in order to maintain family and neighbourhood ties. (p.43)

The *Planning for Children in Care in Northern Ireland* study identified some mothers and social workers who pointed to the lack of family or community support network as problems associated with the cross-community nature of the relationship with the child(ren)'s father as contributing to the reasons why the children were eventually taken into care. The particular difficulties of isolation and lack of family support faced when the woman left her own community and 'went over to his' was commented upon by a few social workers and managers. Such views need to be documented and tested more systematically.

The situation of cross-community children in Northern Ireland may be analogous with that of mixed race children in England. Several studies of children in care in Britain found that children of mixed parentage were disproportionately represented in admissions to care (Rowe and others, 1989; Bebbington and Miles, 1989; Sinclair and others, 1995; Barn and others, 1997). There is little systematic account of why there is this over-representation, but explanations range from socio-economic deprivation, to family background, to institutional and individual racism on the part of social services.

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It is clear, however, that children of mixed parentage have specific identity needs which require particular thought in order to work to meet them (Barn and others, 1997). The issues are not simply about the race of the family caring for the mixed race child, but about the school he or she attends and the makeup of the community in which he or she lives. Tizard and Phoenix (1993), for example, found that whether young people of mixed race identified mainly with the black or the white community -- or whether they had both black and white friends -- was related not to the colour of their care-givers 'but to the racial composition of the schools and neighbourhood'.

Prevalence

As with children of mixed origin in England, the lack of information about the community backgrounds of children in the care system in Northern Ireland might be described equally as 'serious and startling' (Rowe and others, 1989). While the new SOSCARE recording procedures will probably improve the quality of information about the community backgrounds of most children, lack of information about children from cross-community families is still likely to be a problem. As with mixed race children in England, this is because social services do not collect information on the backgrounds of both parents, resulting in poor information about children who have mixed backgrounds. Thus, Ravinder Barn's study of black children in the English care system conducted in 1987 found little information about fathers although interviews with mothers 'revealed that there were fathers who were in touch with their children and yet social workers knew very little of their existence' (Barn, 1993).

Social work managers in trusts across the four HSS Boards contacted during the development of this research proposal indicated that they would be able to provide a breakdown of the perceived community background of the children and young people they look after, although they were not sure about their ability to provide such information for children on the Child Protection Register. Such information will be more accurate after March 1998, when they will have completed six months of recording the religious background of all referrals. Only one trust said it would, with some work, be able to provide information about the community background of the *parents* of looked after

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children. The rest were confident they would be *unable* to provide this information without trawling through all their case files.

The *Planning for Children in Care in Northern Ireland* study found that -- as with the experience of tracing the ethnic origins of children in Britain -- tracing information about the full background of children in the study 'proved to be quite a challenge' (Barn, 1993). As in England, it was sometimes necessary to read through a whole file to determine this information. In several cases, there was no reference at all in some children's files and the information only discovered in a sibling's file. In other cases, there were oblique references only on file to the family being cross-community, and the information had to be confirmed verbally with the social worker. This is illustrated by an example from that study.

Case Nos. 104, 105, 119 and 120 were children in long-term foster care with two Catholic foster families. None of their files indicated that their family background was anything other than Catholic, although they were in contact with both parents (now divorced). Examination of the case file of 'E' (Case No. 106), an older sibling who was Home on Trial with her mother, however indicated that there had been a perceived problem about placing 'E' with her birth mother. The problem was that the mother was Church of Ireland and 'E' needed to be brought to Mass on Sundays. In interviews recorded on 'E's file, the mother said she was happy to ensure the 'E' continued to be brought up in the Catholic faith, although her new family is Protestant.

On 'E's file, the social worker recorded the mother as saying that she had married because she was pregnant, both families had been 'set against' the union, 'only his father gave it his blessing'. The marriage broke down when the fifth child was born. She had 'no support from any side' which was, she said, why the children had ended up in care.

If the true prevalence within the care system of children from cross-community backgrounds is to be discovered, it demands a relatively large-scale census study which examines the full community backgrounds and characteristics of looked after children and

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their families.

Identity

In Northern Ireland, the question of identity is most often seen as political or cultural. For children, identity is a question of knowing 'who they are and where they have come from' (Parker and others, 1991). Helping children to develop a positive self-image happens naturally in most families; some cross-community families, however, report difficulties in helping their children develop a positive concept of themselves 'who they are and where they come from' in contradiction to sectarian attitudes which they encounter on the streets and in school (Robinson, 1992; Morgan and others, 1992 and 1996).

The Children Order recognises that the development of a positive self-image needs much more thought when children are in need, or within the care system. For example, if they are to develop a positive self-image, children need to understand, as far as their age allows, why they are being looked after away from home (Parker and others, 1991). For looked after children from a cross-community background, or from the community which is the minority within a particular area (eg a child from a Catholic background in Ballymena, or from a Protestant background in Derry) the process of developing a positive view of his- or herself can require special help from carers and social workers. Thoburn (1988) suggests that in order for a young person to develop self-esteem (the capacity to grow and make new and satisfying relationships as an adult), they need to experience not only the love and security we call 'permanence', but also a secure sense of identity. She includes, as part of that sense of identity: knowing about one's birth family and past relationships; fitting the present with the past; appropriate contact with important people from the past; and being valued as the person you are.

In the *Planning for Children in Care in Northern Ireland* sample, there were several examples of specific problems faced by children from cross-community backgrounds. Case No.004 for example, was the child of a Protestant father and a Catholic mother cohabiting on a working-class housing estate in a large, mainly Protestant town. Although the mother reported that the family did not observe any religious practices, the young person attended

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a Catholic school and was bullied by children on the estate because of the school uniform, etc. Behavioural problems, some of which were clearly related to the bullying (including burning down the family home in order to be transferred to a Catholic area) led to this young person being taken into care. Within the residential unit where the young person was placed, workers reported that the young person was obsessive about formal religious practice, although failing to show any real interest in the service once actually in church.

Case No.147 was that of a young man from a cross-community marriage in Belfast, whose parents had divorced. The young man, who was being brought up a Protestant, lived with his father but saw his mother regularly. When his father remarried, the teenager had difficulties relating to his new step-mother and started to act out his unhappiness. His father's eagerness to have his son taken into care, together with his unwillingness to change his social routines at weekends in order to work towards his son returning home was commented on by social workers and did not go unnoticed by the young man. Going to live with his mother, with whom he had a good relationship, seemed like an obvious solution but was rejected by the young man 'because she is a Catholic'.

Such views within cross-community families are not confined to young people within the care system. Robinson (1992) reported that parents were often horrified to discover their children had decided for themselves the 'side' to which they belonged:

> but you know they learn things in school…I mean she made my hair stand on end one day when she said something about Fenians

> then we realised that Patrick had in fact adopted the Protestant culture by the time he was seven and I was quite shocked…he said all Catholics are in the IRA (p.41)

As Cairns (1989) shows, such stereotyping of the 'other side' does not come naturally, but is learnt. This suggests that a different way of seeing oneself and others can also be learnt. Studies of cross-community marriages in Northern Ireland indicate that there is a great thirst for ideas as to how a positive self-image might be developed for the children of these families, an identity which is positive about both 'sides' (Robinson, 1992; Morgan and

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others, 1996). In studies of integrated schools carried out by the Centre for the Study of Conflict, parents said that they wanted their children at a school which 'fostered tolerance and openness, awareness of the culture and traditions of the other community and also a pride in their own background' (Morgan and others, 1992). These studies suggested that for many parents this 'hidden curriculum' was the most important feature of the school.

Policy and practice relevance

The Children (NI) Order was implemented at a time when huge steps towards peace and reconciliation were being taken in Northern Ireland. As part of that process, a re-examination is taking place of the whole question of cultural and political identity and of elements of identity in both communities which promote sectarianism. As noted above, Article 26(93)(c) requires HSS Boards and trusts to give due consideration when making decisions to 'the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background'. While there has been some theoretical work on anti-discrimination practice for social workers in the Northern Ireland context (Smyth and Campbell, 1996; Diamond and Godfrey, 1997), there is little guidance available on how considerations such as those in Article 26(3)(c) might be satisfied in practice by social workers and their managers in Northern Ireland.

It is clear that the spirit of the Order is anti-discriminatory. Yet, even those parents who have worked very hard to bring up their children to respect the culture from which both their parents come find that children do learn discriminatory ideas all too quickly. There is clearly a need for social services departments in Boards and trusts to develop policies and practices which work against this trend. Research into how to work to meet the identity needs of cross-community children is also one way of learning how the identity needs of children from endogamous families can be met in a way which challenges sectarianism. To date, the only guides to good practice in relation to bringing up children in a non-sectarian manner have been in relation to the early years, particularly play (PlayBoard, 1990 and 1997). Yet the question of how to counteract the sectarianism which children encounter everyday is one which is raised frequently by mothers in women's groups and on parenting courses (McShane, 1992; Hinds and others, 1997).

The research study would examine if the Children Order has made a difference in how children and young people are encouraged to view themselves. It would explore how social workers are working to implement Article 26(3)(c), establish what issues have been thrown up by such work and determine what support and resources social workers need in order to implement the Article.

Aims of proposed research

- to identify the exact prevalence across Northern Ireland of children from cross-community relationships within the looked after population

- if the over-representation found in the earlier study is confirmed, to explore why this is the case. What is the view of children and young people, their parents and social workers?

- to examine how the identity needs of looked after cross-community children can be met, in line with the requirements of Article 26(3)(c)

It ought to be stressed here that while the focus of the study is on children with cross-community backgrounds, discussions with social workers and social work managers will illuminate how the Article is being implemented in relation to all children. Further, we hope that the development of practice which meets the identity needs of cross-community children would contribute much to meeting the identity needs of all children in a manner which is anti-sectarian.

Research Questions

To meet these aims, a series of research questions need to be addressed. These include questions about precise data on the numbers of looked after children from cross-community families; about whether the needs of cross-community children in need differ from those of the general population of children in need; whether the needs of looked after cross-community children differ from those of the general population of looked after children; about the perspectives of parents and of children; and about the policy and practice in meeting the needs of these children.

Prevalence: How many looked after children in Northern Ireland come from cross-community backgrounds? Is information about the community background of both parents (where both are involved in the child's life) be routinely recorded by social services? Could/should this happen?

Family and community support: What is the experience of families living in disadvantaged areas where the parents are from different community backgrounds in terms of family and community support? What support services do social services offer them and are these appropriate? What support could other agencies (for example, housing and education agencies) offer to help families through times when they are in particular need? Could more be done by social services to support cross-community families? Why do cross-community children become looked after -- Is this different from the rest of the looked after population? How soon do they return home?

Identity needs of cross-community children: What is the experience of children and young people growing up in cross-community families? Do they see themselves as part of the one community or as straddling both? In what way do they see their experiences as different to other children and young people in the community in which they live? What schools do they attend? What is the experience of looked after cross-community children and young people? Do they see themselves as part of one community or as straddling both? In what way are their experiences different to other looked after children and young people? What schools do they attend? Are the services offered to these children and their families addressing their needs in respect of their particular backgrounds? What impact has Article 26(3)(c) had on policy and practice? How is it being applied in respect of children whose parents are from different communities?

Policy Implications: Are there enough appropriate services for cross-community families in need? Is there sufficient diversity in the placements available to meet the needs of looked after children from both communities, different cultural backgrounds within each community (eg Irish speaking families; families from the range of Protestant denominations) and from cross-community backgrounds? If not, how might this be

addressed? Are there anti-discrimination policies and procedures to meet the needs and ensure the physical safety of looked after children and young people?

Methodology

To answer the research questions identified above, data will be gathered using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The study will have four main components:

Interviews with senior managers: To set the context for the collection of data, the research team will carry out background interviews with senior managers within each of the Boards and trusts about the policy issues raised by Article 26(3)(c) and how they see practice around that Article developing;

Focus groups to identify issues and themes: In order to have some idea of the experience of young people growing up in cross-community families whose socio-economic circumstances are similar to those of looked after children, at least four focus groups will be set up with the help of youth and community groups. These will include two groups of 10-14 year olds and two groups of 15-18 year olds, all from cross-community families. Interviews with a number of such children and their parents will be carried out also to establish the experience of such families and the issues they see as important;

Census and file study of children looked after: In order to gain the baseline data needed about the prevalence of children from cross-community families in the looked after population, a census study of two trust areas is necessary, ideally one in the Belfast area and one in the West. This would involved collecting information about the community backgrounds of all of the looked after children within the trusts' area. We estimate that this would involve around 500 looked after children and young people. From these, we will take as a sample ALL the children from cross-community families and gather information from the case files about their family background, support services received and care careers. While such a study is time-consuming, it involves no exclusions and greatly reduces any possibility of sampling error. Thus, empirical generalisations can be

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made with greater confidence and accuracy. Information of the case file study will be obtained from social work case files using research instruments which have already been used in the planning for children in care study and can be appropriately adopted to meet the needs of this study;

Indepth case studies: From the case file study, we would develop a sample of up to 40 children over the age of ten. With the permission of parents and social workers, we will then seek to interview all of these children, their parents, carers and social workers.

Research Ethics

This study relates to an area of great sensitivity. Sectarian violence and intimidation forces many cross-community families go to great lengths to disguise the nature of their relationship. The Bureau is very aware of these issues. However the proposers are confident that they will be able to reassure families of their complete discretion and confidentiality. It has been our experience that, even in highly sensitive situations, families can appreciate that the purpose of the research is to improve experiences of other children and their families, and are generous in their willingness to help.

The ethics of interviewing children -- especially in relation to such sensitive issues -- is also recognised by the Bureau, and our research is bound by a detailed set of published Research Guidelines, based on the British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice* and augmented by the Bureau's long experience in helping children to have their voices heard.

Timetable

As this is a large scale, in-depth study of an area about which there is very little information, two years is the minimum period in which it could be carried out.

The research study will have the following five phases:

1.	Gaining access to trust offices; contacting and interviewing children and families; living in the community	3 months
2.	Collection of quantitative data	6 months
3.	Collection of qualitative data	9 months
4.	Analysis of data	3 months
5.	Preparation of research report	3 months

It should be noted that dissemination of the research findings has not been included in this timetable.

Costs

The total cost of this 2 year project is £119,260.   A detailed budget is attached.

The research team

This proposal is submitted by **Dr Ruth Sinclair**, Director of Research, and **Goretti Horgan**, Senior Research Officer at the National Children's Bureau. Dr Sinclair and Ms Horgan have recently completed a major research project on children in care in Northern Ireland, which has been well received and felt to be very useful to policy-makers, managers, practitioners and young people. Further details about the proposers are contained in the attached brief CVs.

Ruth Sinclair   September 1997
Goretti Horgan

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