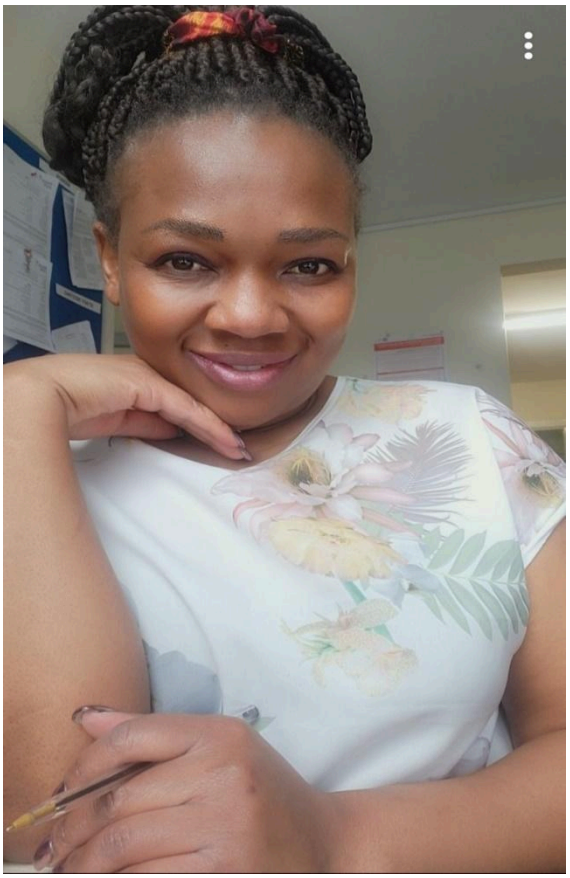
Is Northern Ireland “Home” to young ethnic minorities? By Sipho Sibanda

I carried out my research in February 2022 with migrant young people aged between 13 and 19 - https://www.socialchangeinitiative.com/through-the-eyes-of-young-migrants. By migrant, I am referring to first and second-generation migrant children and those that were born outside Northern Ireland and came as little children with their families. The migration varied from families that came to NI seeking refuge to those that moved due to employment opportunities. The research was undertaken on a weekend residential that saw all these young people in Newcastle away from home. The residential was financed by the Social Change Initiative as part of a leadership fellowship that I was part of. The young people came from different backgrounds and their parents “country homes” were also different.

The young people directed the conversation and wanted to talk about their experiences of racism they have encountered and how they continue to deal with this on a daily basis without their parents. These young people felt their parents already had so much to deal with in their “New home country” (Northern Ireland), without the children adding onto the stress.



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Northern Ireland has evolved and looks different from what it did 30 years ago in terms of demographics. One just needs to look at the last census figures and they will surely tell you a story about the so-called “New Community”.

The history of NI and the inheritance of The Troubles by the younger generation cannot be ignored as we embrace the “Newcomer” community. This term I choose to use very loosely as the “Newcomer” community is not so “New” after all and one must ask, ‘how long will they be labelled as Newcomers?’ Maybe we need to consider one community. We are after all one people. Or should be. We should eliminate all forms of discrimination at every opportunity we get.

It is a journey of course and will not be done overnight. While the wheels are set in motion, youth workers have a massive role to play in building the capacities of these young people. Working with ethnic minorities in NI presents unique challenges and opportunities for youth workers. Northern Ireland’s sectarian history and political conflict have contributed to the marginalization and discrimination of certain ethnic groups. Youth workers must always be sensitive and attuned to the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the young people they have within their spaces.

There have been concerns that working with ethnic minority young people is a challenge. This might be a space or opportunity to include ethnic minorities in Youth work to help shape and share the cultures and ensure that there is an understanding of different cultures that will help create/promote social cohesion. This would also encourage ethnic young people to feel a part of whatever youth activities may be created. Young people need to see themselves in jobs that society has to offer including youth work and young people should have youth workers that look like them, that can relate to issues the same way as they do, be it culturally or any other way.

There are significant opportunities for youth workers to promote social cohesion and foster understanding between different communities and inclusive communities. Youth workers should continue to collaborate with organizations such as Diverse Youth which is run by ethnic minorities and the likes of community groups such as the Somali community and Zimbabwe community as all these communities have children and young people. There is a need to continue to design inclusive programs and create spaces for ethnic minority youth workers. There should also be spaces created for ethnic minority young people to be able to embrace their cultures and learn more about them, so they don’t lose their identities. Funding for such programs should not be created in a way that those that support ethnic young people find almost impossible to access. Funding may be an issue overall for all young people but this should not be turned into an excuse for underfinancing or turned into a lottery type of funding.

Ethnic minority children have voiced feeling left out and not feeling part of NI in a few spaces including my research and an extensive report was also written by The National Youth Council of Ireland (https://www.youth.ie/documents/makeminorityapriority-complete-research-final-0/). Although this research is six years old, it still resonates with my findings in 2022. This needs to be investigated and measures put in place to ensure that these young people feel the sense of belonging that every young person should feel in their home and should not be a tick box exercise.