

Knowing Your Neighbour: Educating in Multi-belief contexts in Northern and
Southern Ireland

Final Project Report



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	1
Overview	2
Introduction and Background	3
A Border in the Mind	3
Demographic Change.....	4
Changing Attitudes.....	5
Religion in Schools.....	6
Structure of Primary Provision in Ireland and Northern Ireland.....	6
Non-confessional RE across Ireland.....	8
Preparing the RE Teaching Profession.....	9
In Summary.....	9
Methodology	10
Aims and Research Questions.....	11
Conferences.....	12
Community Conversations: Knowledge Exchange.....	13
Community Conversations: Initial Discussion.....	17
Faith Formation.....	18
The Role of RE in the Different Sectors.....	20
Community Conversations: Developing Relationships.....	20
Patronage and Religious Observance.....	21
Curriculum Content.....	21
Sector Hopping.....	23
Teacher Education.....	26
Reflecting and Closing Community Conversations.....	27
Reflection on the Community Conversation Approach.....	27

Recommendations in Community Conversations Approach.....	28
Survey Analysis.....	29
Post Knowing Your Neighbour Project Evaluation.....	37
In Summary.....	39
Theoretical and Conceptual Implications and a Model for Progress.....	39
Bibliography.....	42

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Overview

As a result of changing demographics and changing attitudes the role of religion and beliefs in education remains a key issue in how we educate our children in Ireland, North and South. Significant, though quite separate, developments are taking place in both jurisdictions which seek to address issues of diversity in beliefs as well as promote opportunities for sharing, collaboration, and dialogue between those of all faiths and none. These include the development of the subject 'education about religions and beliefs and ethics' (ERBE) in the South and the new government strategy for Sharing Education in the North as well as the long-standing experience of developing inclusive forms of religious education in Integrated and Multi-denominational schools.

Building on a previous SCOTENS project on Sharing Beliefs in which both Dr Hunter and Dr Irwin were involved, this project aimed to focus more specifically on RE teaching and employment in the non-faith formation sectors in both Northern and Southern Ireland. While commentators (Richardson 2014; Coll 2013) look positively at the opportunities presented by a more diverse environment, key questions remain unresolved concerning the nature of facilitating teaching about religion and beliefs (Nelson 2010; O'Toole 2014). The Philosophical direction, aims and pedagogies of these non-faith formation sectors require further attention in both policy and practice.

Aware of these issues this project had three main aims:

1. To facilitate cross-border inter-professional learning for student RE teachers and in-service RE teachers around recent developments in policy and practice of teaching about religion and beliefs in schools.
2. To provide opportunities for specialists in non-faith formation sectors to explore philosophy and direction of their sector.
3. To investigate the use of 'community conversation' dialogue technique for inter-professional comparative education practice in Religious Education.

Introduction and Background

A Border in the Mind

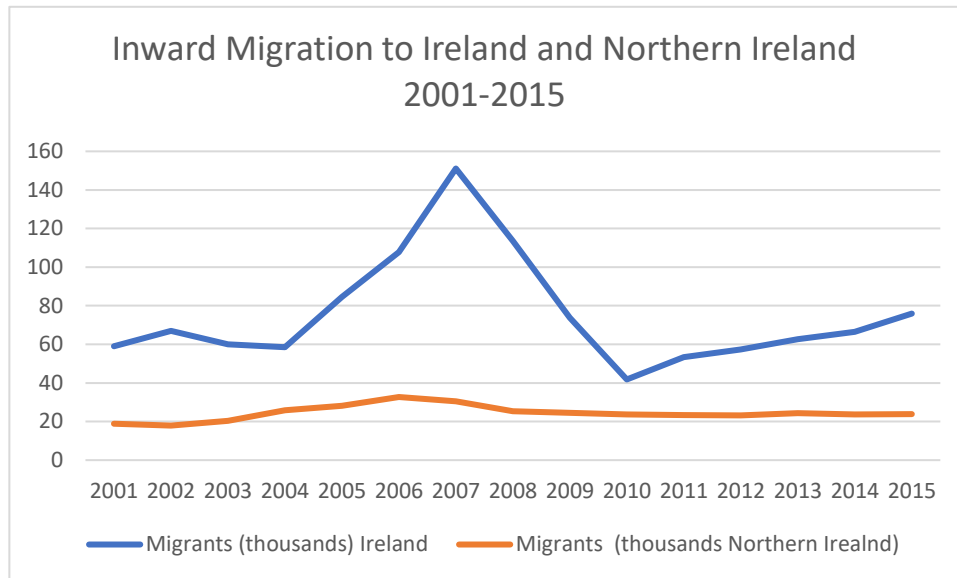
Across Europe from Portugal to Estonia, Finland to Georgia significant national centenaries are being celebrated in this decade. In the main, these mark periods of significant historical conflict and loss of life and the re-forging of nation states. Most precipitated subsequent decades of civil disturbance and have constructed the political landscape of today. In both jurisdictions in Ireland celebrations have been held to celebrate significant remembrances such as the 1916 Easter Rising or the Battle of the Somme 1916. Both of these events, a century later remain bi-partisan and do not form part of a shared historic identity for the people of Ireland. In a landscape where history is contested and powerfully significant, forming both individual and community identity (Barton & McCully 2005), celebrations such as these are imbued simultaneously with anxiety and jubilation. As the centenary date of Partition (1921) in Ireland is marked this year, the influence of external forces on Ireland's future seem once again to dominate political and social discourse. After a century of predestination, Ireland's economic security is once again being influenced by her neighbour the United Kingdom. The joint membership of both nations (Ireland and the United Kingdom) to the European Union has greatly facilitated the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. The open boarder between these two nations along the six Ulster counties (partitioned after the War of Independence), has allowed the free movement of goods and people and a return to the normalisation of society. The removal of security checkpoints along this frontier was a physical manifestation of the end of the Troubles precipitated by the 'Good Friday' 1998 agreement. The threat of a hard boarder or Irish Sea Boarder is likely to precipitate another long-lasting historical imprint on the Island. This uncertainty has caused great unease on either side of the boarder and reagitated questions of identity, constitution, and political allegiance. Gormley-Heenan *et. al.* (2017) refers to these possible impacts of Brexit as the effects of the 'border in the mind'. It is this 'border in the mind' that is of significance in this study.

In the two-decade period of relative peace between 1998 and the invocation of Article 50 (the withdrawal of the UK from the Treaty of the European Union in 2017), considerable cross-border relations had begun to be established. The physical boarder had disappeared and the

mental one for many was also being slowly dismantled. From the spheres of commerce to health care and education, dual jurisdiction access and programmes had begun to develop largely facilitated by funding from the European union (Byrne et. Al. 2013) and the legal statutes in place between the three seats of government -Westminster, The Dial and Stormont. While, not a reunification process such as that experienced in Germany post 1989, these separate nations sharing the same island had been isolated from one another by a physical frontier during the period of the Troubles. The separate jurisdictions had begun from the same historical starting place, yet taken in many cases, radically different pathways in terms of commerce (growth per capita divergence), health service (health insurance/NHS), education (Patronage/state schooling) and society (Gay Marriage and Abortion legalisation). Membership of the European Union and the Good Friday agreement had begun to permit greater comparative learning across jurisdictions in these different fields. Often this was greater than learning from one another and extended to real collaborative working conditions.

Demographic Change

The demography of Ireland and Northern Ireland experienced a great divergence between the two jurisdictions post-Partition. The period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland rendered the Province an undesirable destination for migrants. It remained throughout the latter decades of the 20th century, homogenous in terms of ethnicity and yet deeply divided along cultural-political lines. However, demographic change has occurred particularly post- 1998. Inward migration, particularly from European ascendancy counties, grew in the early decades of the 21st century. However, such inward migration is still comparatively low to other areas within the United Kingdom and significantly smaller than immigration in the Republic of Ireland. The demographic changes and influences on culture and services between the two jurisdictions in Ireland have been radically different. Subsequent educational responses to these demographic changes have likewise been divergent.



Data provided by Central Statistics Office (Ireland) and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

Changing Attitudes

As a result of changing demographics and changing attitudes the role of religion and beliefs in education remains a key issue in how we educate our children in Ireland, North and South (O’Sullivan 2005; Richardson 2014). Significant, though quite separate, developments are taking place in both jurisdictions which seek to address issues of diversity in beliefs as well as promote opportunities for sharing, collaboration, and dialogue between those of all faiths and none. These include the development of a new curricular, area ‘education about religions and beliefs and ethics’ (ERBE) (Irwin 2013), in the South and the new government strategy for Sharing Education in the North (DENI 2015) as well as the long-standing experience of developing inclusive forms of religious education in Integrated (NI) and Multi-denominational schools (RoI) (Mulcahy 2006; Macaulay 2009). Nonetheless, these emergent developments also take place in the context of overarching homogeneous systems of education both North and South, most particularly at primary level, where children are largely separated by religion with the vast majority of schools emphasising Catholic or Protestant (denominational and non-denominational) Religious Education of children (Barnes 2007; Irwin 2013).

Religion in Schools

The complexity of the territory is indicated in the multiple titles used to refer to education when a religious or belief element is involved, from 'religious education' and 'religion' to 'inter-belief education', 'ethical education' and 'education about religions and beliefs and ethics', as well as the question how each of the latter subject domains relate to the domain of values and ethos (each of these latter also having distinct understandings) (Irwin 2013). Added to this, is the difficulty that such labels can mean different things to different people, being contingent on the specificity of context. Various commentators (Richardson 2014; Coll 2013) look positively at the opportunities presented by a more diverse environment, yet, amidst these various initiatives, key questions remain unresolved in relation to the role of beliefs in education (Faas et al. 2015), the teaching of religious education in schools (Byrne & Kieran 2013) and the preparation for teaching about religion and beliefs in teacher education institutions (Nelson 2010; O'Toole 2014). In addition, there are limited opportunities for stakeholders in policy and teacher education contexts to learn about developments on both sides of the border and to consider how they may learn from each other.

Aware of these issues this project had three main aims. First, to facilitate cross-border inter-professional learning for student RE teachers and in-service RE teachers around recent developments in policy and practice of teaching about religion and beliefs in schools. Second, to provide opportunities for specialists in non-faith formation sectors to explore philosophy and direction of their sector. Third, to investigate use of 'community conversation' dialogue technique for inter-professional comparative education practice in Religious Education.

Structure of Primary Provision in Ireland and Northern Ireland

In both jurisdictions, the primary school system is largely divided on religious lines between Catholic and Protestant schools. In the South, 96% of primary schools are church schools, with 90% Catholic and 6% Protestant (Norman 2003). The remaining 4% of schools are for the most part what are termed 'multi-denominational' (although this concept has been recently somewhat contested) schools, run by the private charity Educate Together which emerged as a parent group in the late 1970s with the Dalkey School Project in Dublin (Rowe 2000; Mulcahy 2006). The Community National School is the newest form of multi-denominational

primary school, which is state-run and currently there are 12 such schools. While originally a practical demonstration of communities working together in response to the conflict-divided society in the North, Educate Together have more recently opted for a greater emphasis on the concept of 'equality based' schooling.

In Northern Ireland, 45% of primary schools are Catholic Maintained Schools, 44% are Controlled, 6% are Integrated and 5% are 'Other Maintained' (including two Church of Ireland schools) or 'Voluntary' (DENI 2017). Controlled schools can be described as broadly, 'nondenominational' Protestant schools, catering for a variety of faiths and none (McMenemy 2017). Integrated schools define themselves as a sector with a Christian character which deliberately brings together Catholic and Protestant children, and those of other beliefs and cultures to learn together and build reconciliation (NICIE 2010). As well as variety in school types at Primary level there is significant variety in the resources and syllabi employed for teaching about religion, beliefs and values in the sectors named above. The pedagogical approaches evident in these resources vary from 'faith nurture' to 'inclusive' and 'critical' forms of learning about religion and ethics, although the confessional approaches remain strongest; sacramental preparation, for example, remains a core aspect of the religious education of children in Catholic schools, North and South, and provision for the same is made in Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland and (until recently) in Community National Schools in the South. Arguably, this is in contrast to wider developments in other European contexts. The Swedish educator Berit Askling believes that, across Europe, there has been a significant move away, beginning in the mid twentieth century, from forms of religious confessionalism in education. She talks of the striking similarities despite different national contexts when we identify the tension 'in religious education between the formerly self-evident linkage to Church and confessionalism and the increasing respectfulness to democratic values of pluralism in modern society' (Askling 2000, p.107). There has, however, been one attempt in the South to develop a nationwide form of education about religion and beliefs that explicitly eschews confessional approaches and encourages an inclusive education for religion, beliefs and ethics (ERBE). Despite having had extensive consultation on this curriculum, at the time of writing, there is no clear pathway as yet towards its implementation. Currently, the ERBE process is focused on providing support materials and examples of shared good practice which can be communicated across all types of school.

Some of the key questions pertinent in this project relate to this transitional phase of development in ethics and religious education, North and South. While our focus has been primarily on the ITE sector, we have also sought to contextualise ITE experiences and attitudes in terms of the wider dynamics of systems change. In a 2017 SCOTENS report on related issues, Irwin and Nelson refer to the theme of a *'reluctant state'* in both Northern and Southern Ireland as a central problem in a lack of forward movement regarding the development of more pluralist and democratic approaches in education (Irwin and Nelson 2017). In the South, this reluctance has a long history with its roots traceable in the wording of the 1937 Constitution which refers to the state 'providing for' education. This latter phrase introduces a system of patronage where the state tends to support patrons in providing education rather than providing education itself. While this aspect is beginning to change more recently with the introduction of state multi-denominational schools at primary level (the Community National School model) and a greater preponderance of state post-primary schools, nonetheless, the Constitutional provision remains a key lever in the debate. Thus, more recent discussion of new schools as well as so called school 'transfer' continue to be based on a model of parental choice and a framework where the new schools must be tendered for by competing patrons. While the situation in the North is in part different (especially with regard to the Controlled School sector), there are direct parallels between the Maintained sector of Catholic schooling in the North and Catholic patronage schools in the South.

Non-confessional RE across Ireland

Unlike schools with a Catholic patronage or management structure, those non-confessional sectors either side of the border, have had little contact, commonality, or relationship. This is not surprising as the political and cultural links with the controlled sector in Northern Ireland is primarily towards the United Kingdom due to the mainly Unionist populations they have historically served. This historical link towards Unionism in this sector has created a cultural barrier in north-south co-operation between controlled schools in the North and Protestant patronage or non-confessional schools in the South. Moreover, the diversity of Protestant denominations within the 'non-Catholic sector' has a diluting effect on influencing policy and practice within these schools. Armstrong (2016, p.89) notes that the Protestant churches have a weakened position in the controlled sector compared to the 'success-story'

of Catholic based education. This is hardly surprising, however, as the Protestant denominations relinquished control to the state in the early years of the formation of Northern Ireland. This lack of unity (each of the large Protestant Churches have their own Education organizations) within the Northern controlled sector and dispersed patronage in the south has left this sector without the commonality of objectives, educational philosophy or governance enjoyed by the Catholic Maintained/patronaged schools. As a result of this and the political tensions mentioned earlier, there have been very few opportunities for RE teachers from non-Catholic settings across Ireland to meet, share and cross-pollinate good practice. Moreover, as Ireland (North and South) becomes more ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse, how do we accommodate teacher development, learning and sharing of good practice outside of the usual discussion of multiculturalism referring to diversity within Christian denominations. This project attempts to explore RE teaching in non-confessional contexts, providing a space for professional dialogue, knowledge exchange and comparative education critical reflection.

Preparing the RE teaching profession

The Initial Teacher Education (ITE) sector which is responsible for preparing students for Primary teaching follows a broadly similar pattern to the above school system. ITE in the South was, until very recently, 100% denominational but following *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism* (Coolahan et al. 2012) and the introduction of a new four year B.Ed in the colleges of education in 2013 (as well as significant changes at governance level), room has been made for a more pluralist approach to ITE (Waldron & Ruane 2013). Nonetheless, two of the main colleges of education in the Republic remain Catholic in ethos while although there has been an amalgamation of several other colleges in Dublin under a secular ethos for teacher education, faith based religious education is still taken by the vast majority of teacher students.

In the North, ITE provision has been more varied than in the South (Nelson 2010) although the separation by religion of the majority of students preparing for Primary teaching has been a dominant feature (Nelson 2008). The teaching colleges have been mainly denominationally

divided (although some diversity is growing within these) and the University based courses are mixed in their denominational intake and the schools they serve.

This project aims at bridging these professional communities and bringing together student teachers, in-service teachers, and academics from across these denominational divides. These contacts will be focused around continued professional development events and Community Conversation focus groups.

In Summary

In this year of centenary of Partition, Ireland, North and South is once again a cat's-paw of political events not of its making. Demographic changes across these jurisdictions in the past 100 years have been significant and divergent. The model of religious education across the Island for non-confessional teaching needs closer examination, in light of this changing demography. Those teaching in non-confessional settings across Ireland have had little contact or collaboration to date. This project attempts to provide opportunities for inter-institution and cross-border dialogue. It attempts to use comparative education as a lens for professional critical reflective practice. Moreover, through three conferences, it provides shared continued professional development in religious education across Ireland. The next section outlines the methodology and data collected in this project.

Methodology

This section describes the procedures and activities used in the project and research. It discusses why the data collection tools and approaches were chosen and how these were implemented.

It is imperative to place any research within the confines of a logical and structured investigative procedure to ensure that the relevant data is collected in the most thorough and feasible way. It is also on the grounds of sound methodological process that credibility is given to the findings of the research (Opie, 2004). It is equally important that the procedures are suitable to the study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.315), to ensure '*fitness for purpose*' as a means of collecting the appropriate data to address the research aims and questions. In addition to these two fundamental points, any investigative work is also bordered by physical and logistical constraints. Further limitations are the timeframe within which data collection and analysis can be conducted and, of course, the fiscal limitations placed upon the study. It is within this framework that the following research procedure has been designed.

Aims and Research Questions

Project Aims:

To facilitate cross-border inter-professional learning for student RE teachers and in-service RE teachers around recent developments in policy and practice of teaching about religion and beliefs in schools.

To provide opportunities for specialists in non-faith formation sectors to explore philosophy and direction of their sector.

To investigate in particular the potential use of 'community conversation' dialogue technique for inter-professional comparative education reflective practice on Religious Education.

Research Questions

1. What knowledge of the other jurisdiction in Ireland do RE Teachers have?
2. What commonality is there between the non-confessional RE sectors across Ireland?
3. Can a Community Conversation approach be effective in developing knowledge exchange in a comparative education setting?

The key activities associated with the project were:

- Three conferences on *Inspiring High Quality RE* aimed at ITE practitioners, in-service teachers and RE student teachers across the four colleges in Northern Ireland and DCU.
- Two residential exchanges between practicing teachers and ITE students (8 teachers in total – four from each jurisdiction)
- Three Knowledge Exchange Community Conversations - building collegial relationships and unpacking understanding of the different education systems.
- One Survey on teacher perceptions of multiculturalism in their RE classrooms.
- One post Community Conversation survey

Conferences

2019 The Core of RE: Vision, Concepts, Rigour, Entitlement

2020 Every Learner Entitled to Great RE

2021 Religious Education 2021: Inspiration, Knowledge, Disciplines (online)

McWilliams et al. (2007, p73) note that the professional development of the teaching profession in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of three institutions *‘to be delivered by three stakeholders, namely higher education institutions, the Education and Library Boards through their Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) and schools’*. In the intervening years since this publication, school budgets have shrunk further, curriculum time and teacher release has become even less available and what is now the Education Authority CASS service has all but disappeared.

As noted above, ITE in the South was, until very recently, one hundred percent denominational but following The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism (Coolahan et al. 2012) and the introduction of a new four year BEd in the colleges of education in 2013 (as well as significant changes at governance level), room has been made for a more pluralist approach

to ITE (Waldron & Ruane 2013). Nonetheless, the practice of RE and its relation to ethical education continues to vary significantly across different ITE contexts and there remains a very strong faith-based influence on teacher education. This is reinforced by the legal protection in the Employment Equality Act which allows schools to protect their faith-based ethos and to set qualifications in faith-based education as prerequisites for employment in faith schools. Given the near monopoly of schooling by faith-based approaches at primary level (i.e. 96% of schools currently) this legal protection ensures the ongoing hegemony of faith based approaches to ITE and school staff profiles.

The opportunities, therefore, for professional development, continued informed pedagogical practice across subjects is very limited. As RE in Northern Ireland sits outside of the Education and Training Inspectorate's remit, little oversight into quality assurance or guidance exists post-qualification in this subject. Teachers and student teachers welcomed the RE professional development opportunity the three conferences provided through this project. The popularity of these events grew over the time scale from 45 participants in year one to 85 in year three. Furthermore, the draw of participants expanded to include a larger geographical spread across Ireland, including participants from the four Northern teacher education institutions, DCU, Limerick and Cork. Likewise, the distribution of in-service teachers grew across Ireland.

Each conference was facilitated by Lat Blaylock the editor of RE: Today, UK National RE Advisor and creator of BBC Bitesize content on RE. Academic papers were also presented by academics from QUB, Ulster and DCU universities. Teachers were provided with opportunities to gain experiences of new pedagogical practices which they could implement in their classrooms, opportunities for professional dialogue across jurisdictions and cross-community learning, as well as an exposure to contemporary research in the area of Religious Education.

Community Conversations: Knowledge Exchange in Knowing your Neighbour

Community Conversations is a data collection method which has gained traction over the past decade. Originally gaining popularity in work with adolescents with disabilities, it has been

exported into many other fields of study to inform policy formation and influence change makers. Bates and O'Connor (2021, p.45) note that this method is *'detailed as a specific approach, enabling a powerful dialogue that can establish an evidential base for policy stakeholders and ensuring policy decisions are informed by the people and lives they will affect'*. Trainor (2018, p.1) one of the most prolific academics in employing this approach, notes that this technique is both a method of informing policy makers and empowering the communities they impact, as well as a data collection tool: *'harnessing the expertise and motivation of key stakeholders, surfaces important information that can also be used as a method of inquiry'* Trainor (2018, p.1). This method has been utilised to attempt to build a knowledge exchange programme and develop collegial relationships between the RE practitioners from the two cross-border cohorts. This method attempts to develop meaningful dialogue and understanding on potentially sensitive issues on the function of RE in the different jurisdictions and the policy and pedagogy surrounding these separate systems of delivery.

The Community Conversation methodology is purposefully responsive to the unique circumstance of the community under review. As a result of this tailoring approach the literature lacks a clear descriptive universal methodology. In response to this, Bates and O'Connor (2018) developed a *Tool Kit* for Community Conversations (see below).

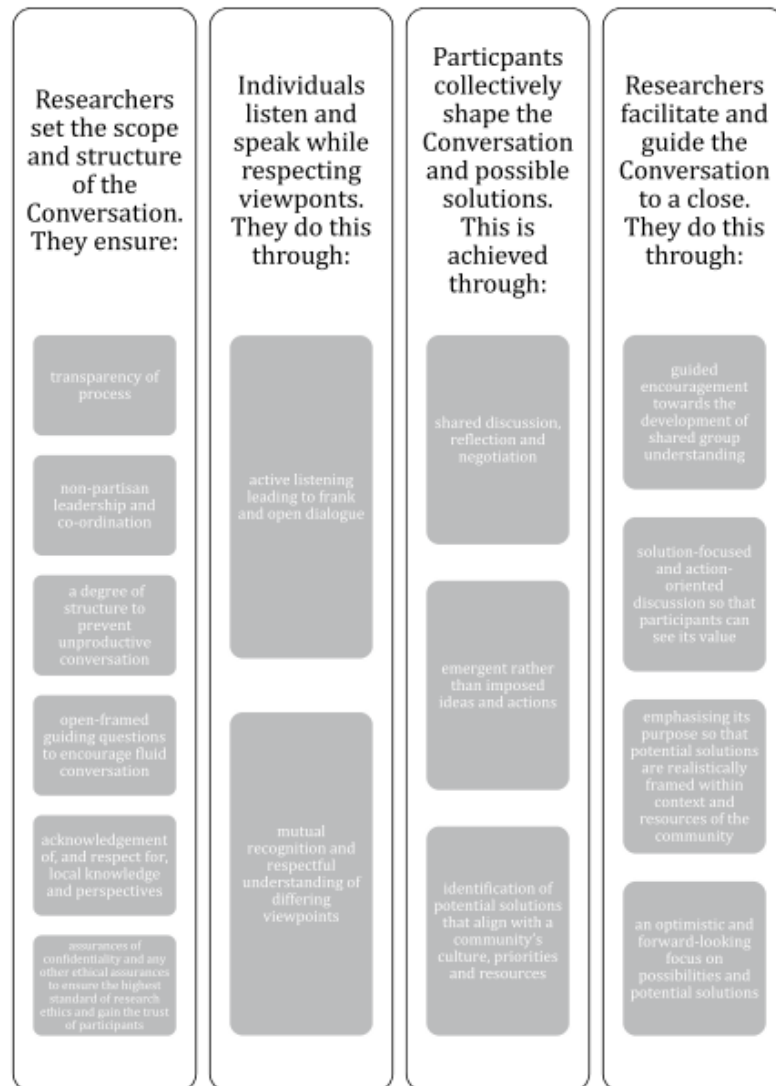


Figure 1 depicting Bates and O'Connor's (2018) Community Conversations Tool Kit which was employed to evaluate Professional Practice in cross-border RE discussions.

Bates *et. al.* interprets this as a four phased process as follows:

Phase 1: Preparing the ground and developing trust.

Phase 2: Logistics.

Phase 3: The Conversation.

Phase 4: Follow-up.

Phase 1 Preparing the ground

The first conference held in 2019 began the process of 'preparing the group and developing trust' between the four controlled school RE teachers from NI and the four Educate Together RE teachers for the Republic of Ireland. This was a continued professional development event which showcased good practice, inspiring pedagogies and active learning approaches delivered by the Editor of RE:Today, the professional magazine for RE teachers. The conference also shared research papers and over-views of the different approaches to RE and the role religion plays in schools across the different jurisdictions. This created a platform for professional bonding and dialogue in improving individual practitioner's practice. This platform established the initial relationships and built trust between participants which were then further developed in phase 2.

Phase 2 Logistics

The logistics of the community conversations and purpose of the work was further explored with participants. It was important that relationships developed beyond a superficial professional relationship. To this end, a series of probing, deeper relationship building activities took place. Some social events were built into this residential experience such as a meal. As the role of RE in the schooling system in either jurisdiction is controversial, it was vital that these deeper relationships were created to overcome the culture of polite avoidance (Donnelly et. al. 2021) experienced across the Island.

Phase 3 The Conversation

The 'conversation' in this model needs to be participant driven to ensure it authentically addresses the issues and concerns of the participants which are represented in the recommendations. To this end, it imitates a semi-structured focus group where the facilitator introduces prompts and topics for a relatively free flowing and natural discussion between participants. To establish rigor and directionality in this process Bates and O'Connor suggest that the following structure is best followed:

- a. Introducing and informing: providing the participant with information, explaining the context, introducing specific questions/ conversation prompts.

- b. Reflecting: Letting the participant reflect on the information and context and formulate their views
- c. Deciding: Participant should move on to articulate what they see as the best way forward
- d. Closing the conversation

This stepped model was applied to the knowledge exchange community conversations which took place as part of *Knowing Your Neighbour*. Participants were tasked with exploring commonalities and understanding of the two models of RE teaching in non-confessional contexts. In the Northern Ireland system this was in controlled and integrated schools while in the Republic of Ireland teachers were included from the Educate Together movement. The emerging themes from this data is presented below.

Community Conversations – Initial Discussion

As would be expected, the initial discussions began with introductions and explanations of the different schooling sectors participants worked within. This was the first level of knowledge exchange, explaining and exploring the different sectors. Participants quickly expressed how their knowledge of the education systems either side of the border was very limited and they had had little or no opportunity to learn about the other education system inhabiting the same island.

The diversity of schooling systems across the Island can be difficult to understand due to the small, yet highly significant, aspects which mark them as distinct from one another, philosophically and practically. This discussion explored the growth of the Multi-denominational sector, the Educate Together schools, State and Patronage in the South. In the North, the exploration of the distinction between Controlled, Maintained and Integrated schools took place. The impact of the Transfer Test and the Dixon Plan (an area of Junior High schools which do not use academic selection until after key stage 3 – Age 14). The participants shared their understandings in a more meaningful discussion than reading about these sectors and shared knowledge building took place during this process. It was also highlighted that at a period of centenary of the formation of the State of Northern Ireland it was

interesting to explore how Ireland, either side of the boarder had diverged yet still experienced similar issues. Participants explored how the demographic profile of their individual area resulted in educational responses. The diversity within some areas or the homogeneous of other areas was surprising for the participants. One Educate Together teacher reflected how in one school she experienced 47 different belief systems, in these schools the minority population (less than 10%) was Irish Catholic.

Faith Formation

Participants represented the non- faith formation sectors yet discussion in the group often strayed into this sphere. The Northern teachers were surprised that in some parishes sacramental preparation had been taken out of Catholic Patronage and multidenominational schools and become a 'paid for' activity. As all of the Northern teachers were also Sunday School teachers (the faith formation aspects which was retained and provided by the Protestant Transferring Churches) this seemed a surprising move. The renumeration of this process and the removal of it from the schools was met with shock. This cultural difference was further explored, that sacramental preparation unlike the established system of Sunday Schooling was something which had always been handled by the Catholic Parish/ School was not something parents felt empowered to deliver. A participant reflected *'Its going to take a significant culture change to get parents to want to take that, parents themselves don't have the knowledge'*. This was discussed as a significant difference between the cultures of Protestantism and Catholicism. As one participant noted *'that's to do with the structure of Catholicism, the authority of the Church, the authority of the parish priest, that wouldn't empower the congregation to feel they were in a position to inculcate someone into the faith. Whereas the nature of Reformation and power within the Protestant faiths is slightly different it is more dissipated, interpretation and discussion are part of Protestantism.*

On reflection of the conference's sessions (which explored materials to be used to deliver RE). The Educate Together teachers felt this was inappropriate for their sector. Although delivered from the perspective of the English Curriculum, by a National RE advisor, the session explored different world faiths as truth claims and Educate Together teachers felt this still had overtones of Christianity, which could not be delivered in Educate Together schools.

'When we ran into difficulties a few years back it was because parents objected to a Christian bias, and in fairness our teaching population is mainly Irish Catholic in background. This comes from our teacher education and our historical context'.

The role of the teacher had been carefully planned for and defined in the Educate Together schools: *'We have to be very careful because a lot of our teachers come from a Christian background, we are learning not about us and them, we are learning about everybody, teacher as co-participant'.* This co-participant role was discussed as *'flipping the role of the teacher'.* To this end the teacher didn't have to have an expert knowledge or to know all the answers about a faith system, they *'just facilitated dialogue among pupils'.*

However, from the Northern teacher's perspective the multifaith exploration of issues presented in the conference was too radically pluralist compared to their experiences of the education system in the North. This dichotomy excellently illustrated the difference in philosophical goals and delivery of non-faith formation Religious Education in the two jurisdictions. It must be noted, however, that both groups of teachers found the sessions extremely informative, challenging and useful:

'Yet on reflection of this morning sessions coming from the English context, the level of religious literacy you have to have to deliver those sessions is remarkable. The diversity that must exist in some English schools we don't have that in Ireland'.

The discussion continued to explore the nature of RE in controlled schools. One participant reflected *'So, in controlled schools you are not fostering faith, but you are being sympathetic to Christianity. You are bringing pupils to the threshold of faith and its up to them if they want to develop their faith beyond that. Most schools have a Scripture Union which would allow pupils to do this at lunch time or after school'.* This was met with surprise from the Southern Teachers *'That's a very difficult line to walk'.* All the Northern teachers agreed they found this ambiguity hard to manage. There was also reflection that the Northern teachers knew of many RE teachers who did deliver RE in the controlled sector in a *'Sunday School way'.* Another reflects *'In my school all the teachers in the department are committed Christians and they teach RE from a very Christian perspective'.*

The role of RE in the different sectors

In the Educate Together schools, the role of RE had gained a lot of attention and government interest due to the emergency response these schools provided to the changing demographic. The interpretation of how RE should be approached in the South differs widely across the sectors.

‘Although we have 90 % Catholic schools, 6% Protestant schools in a lot of those schools RE is often not even taught. It is meant to be taught for two and a half hours a week (at Primary level) that’s the official time but there will be a lot of Catholic and Protestant schools who won’t teach it so much, so there can be a marginalization of RE and then you can have schools that will be very passionate about RE but that may cause a problem because not every child may be passionate about it’.

This marginalization is likewise echoed in the Northern teacher’s experiences. *‘In my school pupils get an hour and twenty minutes but that compares to two hours forty of Maths or English. Why is RE so less important? It’s not seen as core, even Geography and History get more time, it’s not of equal importance.’* Another teacher discussed her experiences of RE in school which included a lot of external agencies delivering content from religious organisations. This would have an element of faith formation to the content, it was also reflected that *‘I didn’t see any other world faiths represented in the school or content taught but then Other World faiths is still such a small part of our curriculum’*.

Community Conversation- Developing Relationships Second Discussion

Differences in Philosophical Direction

Participants reflected that there seemed to be a greater understanding and articulation of the philosophical objective, aims and rationale for RE in Educate Together schools than in the controlled and integrated sectors in Northern Ireland. One participant reflected *‘We don’t have that unifying vision in the controlled sector’*. It was highlighted that given the relatively small number of schools, and their recent development in the Educate Together sector it was part of their development as a discrete movement to have this vision clearly defined. The influence in Northern Ireland of all schools being of a Christian Character has, as one participant reflected, impacted on *‘the integrated sector fully realising their philosophy as a*

multicultural schooling system, which would more closely align to your Educate Together schools’. The requirement in Northern Ireland for all schools to be of a Christian Character was a surprising revelation to their southern teacher counterparts. While the discussion explored the nature of faith formation in these sectors it was discussed that only the maintained sector took on this role, however sacramental preparation did take place in Integrated schools for those of this faith community. Further discussion explored the demand for change from this model in NI. It was highlighted how the sensitive nature of RE left it rather under explored and under contested by policy makers. While there have been some recent calls (Millikin, *et. al.* 2021) to re-examine the role religion plays in schooling in the North, there does not seem to be the political or public appetite to do so.

Patronage and Religious Observance

The nature of the various sectors North and South, while having originated from the same system 100 years ago on Partition of the North, now have very different out workings of religious influence. Collective Worship and the compulsory Christian Character of schools in Northern Ireland caused some debate amongst the group. Collective Worship it must be noted is rarely referred to, as such, within the profession and more commonly is subsumed under the term ‘Assemblies’. Research conducted by Hunter and Richardson (2018, p.50) noted that *‘All legislation in relation to collective worship and RE in Northern Ireland has been premised on the assumption that it would inevitably be Christian, and even though controlled schools must teach non-denominationally, this has almost certainly been done largely in a confessional Christian context’*. While collective worship should sit outside of the activities of the RE classroom and pedagogical approaches in the Northern controlled and integrated sectors, both policy and practice tends to intertwine these (Hunter, *et al.* 2018).

Curriculum Content

The lack of a prescriptive RE curriculum in the North was an area for examination for the group. The programmes such as *‘Goodness me, Goodness you’* employed in Educate Together Schools, had no direct comparison in the controlled and integrated sectors in the North. While a unified course of study exists for all Catholic Maintained schools either side of the border, no unified course of study exists in NI for the two non-maintained sectors. The

Core Syllabus in Northern Ireland, sets out a common outline of study for all schools, but lacks the prescription of a curriculum. This, as the Northern Teachers reflected, is *'both a blessing and a curse'*. Having freedom can be a creative benefit but can also leave teachers feeling exposed and unsupported in what they are delivering.

On a comparative exploration between controlled/integrated schools curriculum in the North and the Educate Together schools in the South, participants found a wider discrepancy in pedagogical practice. A northern teacher reflected: *'There seems to be a difference in how other faiths are taught, in the schools I've worked in, it is mostly a Christian curriculum and a little bit of study of Other World Faiths. You seem to widen this out much more in Educate Together Schools where there is equal emphasis given to all the religions. I can't see that happening any time soon in the controlled sector'*. There was a feeling that the multi-denominational schools and Educate Together schools didn't map closely to the controlled schools in Northern Ireland which retained the Christian character and Christian focused RE Core Syllabus.

I would love to see in my career more sharing, shared RE between Maintained, Integrated and Controlled schools. Obviously keeping in mind we all have our different values and beliefs, but being able to teach about other religions within that. But with the religious conflict I can't see that happening, how many years on are we now and its still the same?

The group continued to explore how direct parallels between the two systems were difficult because of the different political history experienced in the North, which created a social context very different to how the Southern schooling system emerged. One participant reflected *'that is why there are such significant differences and it's an opportunity for us in the South to learn as there is a complacency in the South which there isn't in the North because it is taken so seriously'*. The educational philosophy of both sectors (Educate Together and Controlled) required more space for examination. An Educate Together teacher commented

'We need to remember our sector didn't get established because we just loved diversity. We found ourselves in a situation where we were caught off guard, and we had to come up with something here to meet these children's needs'.

Sector Hopping

The group explored commonalities between their teacher education programmes and the segregated provision both North and South due to religious division. In Northern Ireland ITE programmes are primarily divided along religious lines at B.Ed level while the postgraduate qualifications offered by the Universities were mixed provision. Although those who qualified to teach RE in the post-graduate programmes (with a jointly Catholic and Protestant endorsed Religious Education Certificate) still questioned if they would gain employment in a school which was not representative of the community they were brought up in. One participant reflected *'If I, as a Protestant, applied for a job in a Catholic grammar school I wouldn't have the same chance of getting it as a Catholic teacher. They would be able to work out from the school I went to, exactly what you are'*. This comment reflects much deeper tensions than that of suitability for a certain job role. The language here indicates that in Northern Ireland, there is still an attempt to veil identities to strangers, to hide community belonging and a fear of being identified. This fear was further explored by another participant:

'this sounds awful coming from me, but I would still feel apprehensive applying for a job in a maintained school because I would be worried that I would be separated as a teacher because obviously you would be in a minority. That's terrible that that's how I think about it and look at it but I think that's how, if you asked the majority of people how they feel'.

This wasn't however limited to the Northern experience. The southern teachers also noted that these were prevalent concerns for non-Catholic teachers. This was also echoed in the discussion from the southern teachers who taught in Catholic Patronage schools but were from Protestant traditions *'who didn't want to teach sacraments, can we change this? But please don't say it's because we are Protestants. If you do, we won't be able to get a job or we will have less chance'*. However, given the small size of this sector in comparison to the North (where it is almost a 50/50 split in Maintained/ Controlled schools), it was not such an established narrative. The southern teachers found stronger parallels with those who come from a non-faith background finding employment more challenging and experiencing the sense of 'otherness or minority status' in Catholic patronage schools. One teacher who came from a non-faith background reflected *'If asked would I support the Catholic ethos of this school, I'd find it very difficult to say yes'*. This was taken up by a Northern counterpart who

commented *'therefore you have ruled yourself out, by having integrity and saying you couldn't support this ethos, obviously they will appoint the candidate who says yes I will support it. As a principal you would take the easy route too'*. It was reflected that many teachers hide their faith/non-faith belief systems and do not enact a conscience clause. The conscience clause in Northern Ireland allows teachers to refrain from collective worship and teaching RE due to moral, religious, ethical or personal reasons. However, few teachers enact this legal freedom as they are concerned it will prevent them gaining employment. Likewise, parents have the right to withdraw their children from both collective worship and RE. Once again, few parents withdraw their children from RE and there is no viable educational alternative in place in Northern Ireland (Richardson, et. al. 2012). In Southern Ireland, this issue of a conscience clause is also complex. On the one hand, the 1937 Constitution protects the 'freedom of conscience' but closer inspection reveals that this refers to parents and children exclusively and not to teachers in schools per se. That is, parents and children have a right to opt out of RE in faith-based schools on conscience grounds, if it is seen to be a teaching content that contravenes the values of the said child, or family. As in the Northern context, the reality of opting out of religious faith schooling is not simply a matter of being able to opt out of RE, insofar as the religious ethos will often be substantially integrated across the school day (with prayers in assembly or in class, for example) or in the very specific environment of the school itself through symbolism and iconography. Moreover, there have been several cases of teachers losing their employment through supposedly contravening the values of the school ethos. One such case was that of teacher and writer John Mc Gahern who lost his employment in a Dublin school, when it became known that he was in a relationship with a divorcee. Such cases have demonstrated that teachers remain very vulnerable professionally under this employment law. The Employment Equality Act (1996) reinforces this vulnerability through enshrining the rights of faith schools to *'do what is reasonably necessary to protect their ethos'*. Participants in this study, reflected that the small number of non-Catholic schools in the Southern context resulted in many teachers working in a context with an ethos they did not support. Such teachers had to hide this lack of support for fear of losing their employment, *'A lot of teachers in our system are uncomfortable with what they are doing but they have to go along with it'*. Another respondent supported this statement by noting *'if your lifestyle choices are in conflict with the ethos of the school, legally you can be fired'*. The discussion continued to explore how through employment legislation in the schooling system

discrimination on religious grounds was a legally permissible barrier in both jurisdictions. This was met with acceptance and understanding of how faith formation schools had a right to do so, yet across the participants from North and South there was a despondency and feeling of otherness, outside of the mainstream. *'Protecting a school's ethos is totally defensible but when 96% of your schools are that way it means a lot of people are excluded and people pretend to be something they are not'*. This extended to the populations within the schools also, *'Parents would get the children Baptised Catholic so that they would get into the best schools because up until last September schools could refuse access for children into their school because they were not Catholic'*.

Due to this situation the conscience clause is rarely enacted by teachers in either jurisdiction and when it is, it is usually not until they have established themselves in their careers. Discussion of the conscience clause and moving between sectors caused a great deal of anxiety amongst the participants: *'It's the sacramental preparation that causes the problem because you have to be a model of faith, it really causes difficulty for those two years, I know a principal who was slowly forced out because of it'*. There was also regional differences in what was acceptable *'I've been warned and I wouldn't disclose my work in Educate Together schools if I was trying to get a job in the West of Ireland, where I am from, in a denominational school, I just wouldn't be hired'*. Another respondent reflected that a friend who worked on the Ethics programme of work *'having that on your CV, you're seen as blacklisted if you go back to work in another area of Ireland'*. This regional diversity was also reflected in the Northern teachers' responses. Depending on the local population the controlled or integrated schools could have very different responses to their inclusion of large populations of non-faith and other world faith pupils. The Educate Together teachers reflected *'Is that not very difficult for those schools to deal with that diversity within your Christian School character?'* The debate continued to explore what was meant by diversity, with some diversities easier to address and accommodate than others. For instance, language study and acquisition was met much more readily and easily by schools as this was an academic study than the more complex and sensitive accommodation of religious observance.

Teacher Education

Much criticism has been levied at the segregated teacher education provision in the North (Hagan, 2020; Nelson, 2008, 2010) . However, the discussion amongst the group felt that there was a more liberal approach in the North than in the Southern jurisdiction.

It was noted that as the Catholic Church is one encompassing global universal body, there was much more commonality between schools across Ireland in this sector. Likewise, this commonality was experienced at teacher educational level with the specifically Catholic teacher education institutions such as St. Mary's College Belfast and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

'I went to Mary I, and when I was training there just was no other option of where I could train to become a teacher but in a Catholic college and there was no other option presented to us in how to teach religion'.

Comparisons between ITE in the North and South suggest that, the North has a more liberal teacher education context. This pluralist approach has been historically driven as a result of a dichotomy in the demographic which was not experienced to the same extent in the South where non-Catholic populations were historically negligible. However, with the advent of greater inward migration and burgeoning multiculturalism in the Southern context the introduction of a new four year BEd in the colleges of education in 2013 was required to meet this change in Ireland's population. In conjunction with this move significant changes at school governance level took place. These moves have created space for a more pluralist approach to ITE (Waldron & Ruane 2013) however, it must be noted that the non-patronage schools are still a small proportion (less than 4%) of the schooling provision in Ireland. Furthermore, in many respects ITE remains subject to the specific nature of the primary school context in the South where the legal protection in the Employment Equality Act allows schools to protect their faith-based ethos and to set qualifications in faith-based education as prerequisites for employment in faith schools. This is mirrored in Northern Ireland where schools can also request that applicants will support faith-based education and deliver RE. Therefore, moves towards a more pluralist and democratic vision of ITE in either sector is substantially hindered by the condition of employment legislation and the job market for graduates.

Reflecting and Closing the Community Conversations

The group had explored a great deal of themes across the Community Conversations. These ranged from employment law, the pedagogical methodology for teaching RE to the diversity within school provision either side of the border. Participants reflected that *'There needs to be more consideration of community dynamics'* when planning on a macro-level for a schooling system. While, participants valued and respected the position of faith based schooling, there was a general feeling that there needed to be a greater diversity of employment opportunities for those who did not endorse or support this particular faith. There were also differences between the non- faith formation sectors in either jurisdiction. It was apparent that the Educate Together schools were much more objectivist in their approach to learning about other world faiths and beliefs, where as their Northern counterparts in controlled and integrated schools still experienced RE with a 'sympathetic insight' with collective worship very much part of school life. It was very apparent that pedagogical approaches would not be interchangeable between these school types. However, both groups expressed a desire to continue to explore and progress the educational philosophy and vision of their sectors. Many of the challenges these sectors faced had commonality, yet their outworking of learning about and from religions were very different. It seemed unlikely from the participants' discourse that either group would feel naturally at home in their other's school. The strongest commonality between these non-faith formation sectors was their feeling of being on the outside of the mainstream provision, with a perceived exclusion from employment in Catholic patronage/Maintained schools. Through the community conversations it also seems apparent that they would not be comfortable teaching in yet another sector, each other's.

Reflection on the Community Conversations Approach

The community conversations approach allowed for greater depth of discovery than a traditional focus group method. Relationships were established amongst the group members in a semi-social and professional context which permitted much deeper sharing, questioning and critical engagement. 100% of participants responded that they found the Community Conversations Approach a useful learning tool. Respondents reflected that it:

‘Was good to break the ice and feel more comfortable in talking about the different teaching approaches in both North and South. Building relationships helping to be more open and forthcoming with opinions and views.’

Participants explored the freedom of the community conversations, in allowing them time and space to explore topics and unpick complex issues:

‘The seminar mode of discussion with a relatively small group of participants allowed for a much deeper and clearer understanding of the main issues to emerge and for any initial misunderstandings to be ironed out without difficulty’.

Again, the theme of natural communication is explored in the next participant’s answer. Here the respondent explores how the genuine interchanges and relationships developed allowed for a deeper and more sensitive interchange.

‘The more relaxed format of these conversations made it much more natural and flowing discussions. I felt that I could ask more probing and sensitive questions than if we had of sat around in a formal group. I liked that we led the discussion and so it went where we needed it to go to gain understanding. Its hard to find out about what happens in the South and I hadn’t had any contact or knowledge of it before this. I think it probably easier for teachers from Catholic Maintained schools to look for jobs either side of the border than it is for us. Not just because of the political divide in our communities but because the non-Catholic schools in Ireland seem to do RE so much more differently to us. As a professional teacher I know I could over-come these issues but it would be a challenge and would take some cultural adjustment. While I know more about the English context and how RE is taught there, I would also find this difficult as it’s a multi-faith curriculum. These discussions have made me realise how much what we do here is NI sits apart from the rest of the UK and Ireland in the non-confessional sector.’

Recommendations in Community Conversation Approach

On reflection of Bates et. al’s toolkit it is recommended from this research and experience that a substage is incorporated into the stepped process. The separate communities of participants involved need time, discreetly amongst themselves, to assess their own understanding of learning from one another, to gain confidence to ask potentially controversial questions or to seek clarity. This ‘think, pair, share’ style approach is required to move into a deeper criticality and relationship development. Therefore, it is necessary that Community Conversations are not singular events but involve the development of a series of

points of contact or prolonged workshop events. For knowledge generation, exchange and meaning making to take place deeper relationships need to form between participants.

Survey Analysis

A survey was employed to gain a larger quantitative data set on participants experiences of both teaching RE and the conferences held. A survey *'allows one to quantify people's observations, interpretations and attitudes'* (Elliott, 1993, p.82.) It also permits a large number of people to be accessed for information economically and quickly. The survey was administered at the close of the conference as a method of reflecting on their experiences.

The teachers surveyed from Northern Ireland schools were representative of the three main sectors across the educational landscape, namely, Maintained (11) Controlled (11) and Integrated (5).



Figure 1 illustrating the sectors in Northern Ireland in which teachers taught.

These schools represented a wide geographical distribution across Northern Ireland with a dominance of practitioners teaching in small town contexts. This may have an impact on the level of multiculturalism experienced by teachers in these schools as typically higher population densities of racial, ethical, and religious minorities are located in the more urban contexts of the larger cities within Northern Ireland.

Urban	7
Rural	4
Small town	16
Other	0



Figure 2 illustrating geographical context of schools teachers were working within.

While the majority of teachers (85 %) had taught religious education in a setting representative of more than one religious background, the level of diversity of these classrooms was relatively little.

Yes	23
No	2
Not sure	2



Figure 3 illustrating teachers' responses to having taught in classrooms which represented more than one religious background.

The largest proportion of teachers (48%) had classes where pupils were from similar backgrounds. A further 40 percent had classes which were a little diverse (a few pupils from different ethno-religious backgrounds) and only one teacher having experienced delivering religious education classes in a very diverse setting (greater than ten percent enrolment of pupils from different ethno-religious backgrounds).

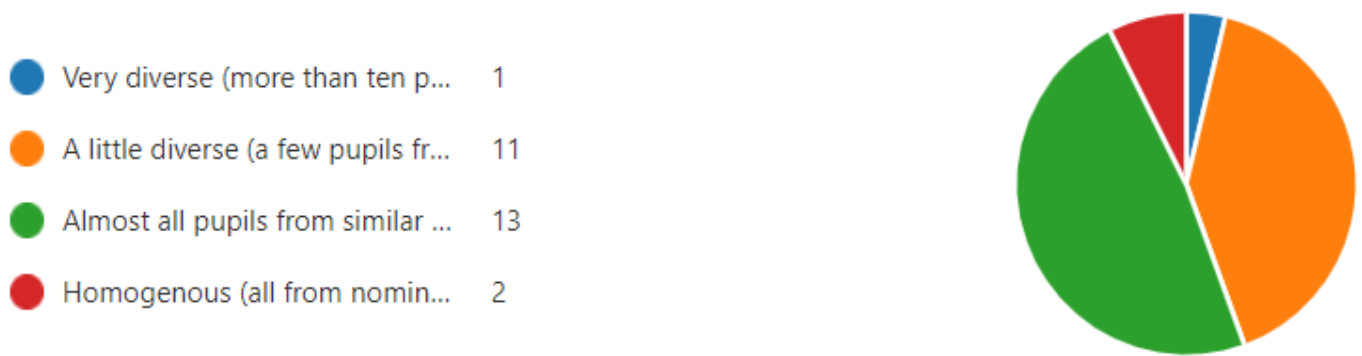


Figure 4 illustrating the ethno-religious diversity of participating teachers' classrooms.

Few of the surveyed teachers had expressed a particular desire for the type of demographic they taught, with 70 percent expressing no preference. However, this was still not a desire to opt for a multicultural setting, and only 19 percent of respondents actively desired a diverse classroom. This tallies exactly with the number of respondents who were from the integrated sector. While not a conclusive correlation this would be a more expected answer from teachers in this sector.

Respondents were given an opportunity to provide some contextualisation for their choices. Those in favour of multicultural classrooms stated a range of reasons for this choice. Three respondents reflected that they wished this experience for their own career development, to learn and develop new skills. Two respondents noted that it was an opportunity for pupils to learn from one another and to have an enriching experience. One participant reflected: '*[I] think it really helps when learning about other religions that pupils can draw on their own experience/ learn from each other*'. Another teacher reflected that it provided a grounding for a more cohesive society which helped to develop the skills required to deal with controversial issues:

'I would like young people to understand they are part of a wider world. I would hope they leave my class knowing about more cultures than just their own. Achieving this goal would be catalysed by having students from many different backgrounds all together in one class. I also firmly believe our society is lacking in the ability to disagree with one another in a respectful and healthy way. We have resorted to avoiding discussion of contentious issues because of legitimate fear and pain. However, to carry

on avoiding difficult topics will handicap our young people in the future. The classroom is the perfect training ground for developing this skill’.

Those who opted for a homogenous teaching environment, likewise, had a range of reasons for their choice. Familiarity and comfort were primary reasons for this choice with participants responding, *‘[I am] more confident teaching what I am familiar with’*. Another respondent reflected that they had concerns exploring other world faiths and including those from other faith backgrounds while delivering a Catholic Ethos which is focused on faith formation.

‘A multicultural classroom could prove difficult in terms of inclusion when teaching RE in a Catholic School with a strong Catholic Ethos’.

One participant felt the need to make a ‘defence’ of homogenous classrooms stating they provided a safe context within which to explore other cultures.

‘Homogeneous classroom may provide an environment where pupils are familiar with basic Christian teaching. Yet other cultures can be evaluated to give a greater understanding of people they may encounter within their life.

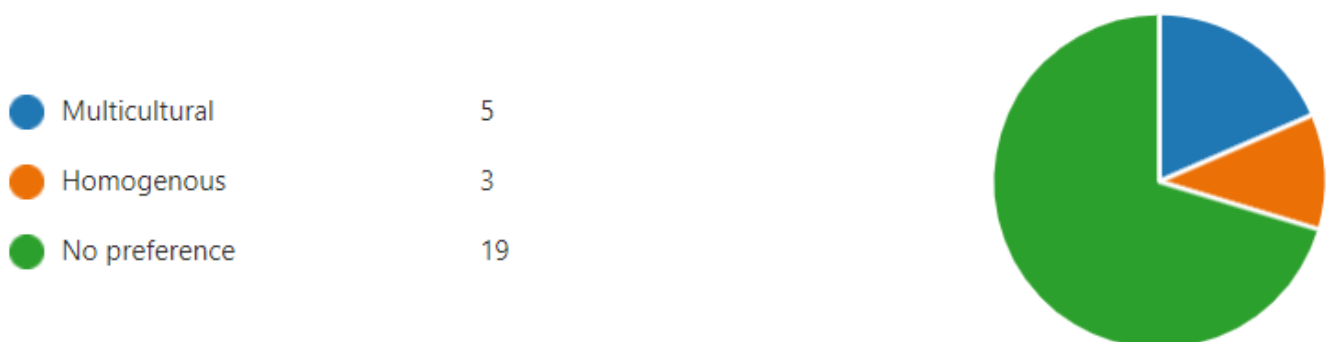


Figure 5 illustrating teacher preference for classroom demographics.

Participants were then asked to explore the content of their curricula in terms of inclusivity. Forty- six percent felt that their curriculum was inclusive while fifty-four percent were either unsure, or felt it was not, inclusive.

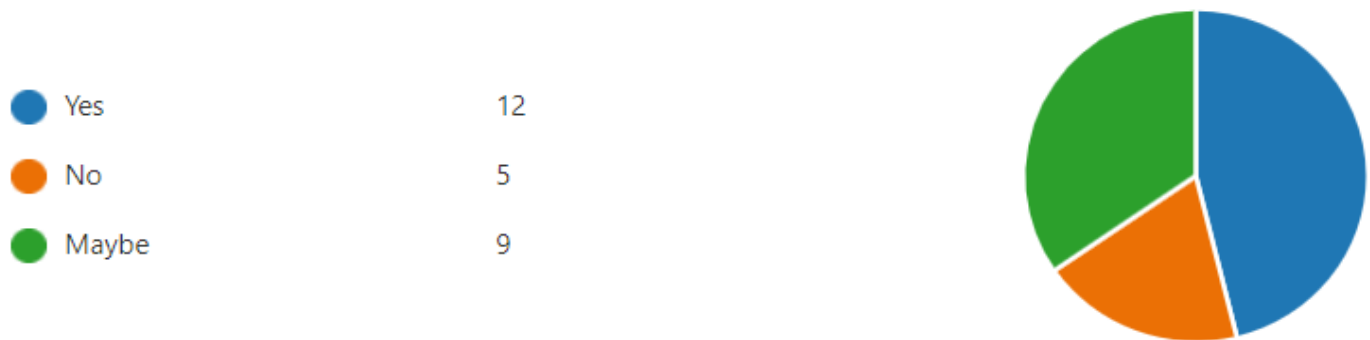


Figure 6 illustrating teacher perceptions of inclusivity in the RE curricula.

Respondents were provided with an opportunity to explore if and how they would change the Northern Ireland RE Core Syllabus. 64 % of respondents reflected that the Core Syllabus required adaptation. One participant commented that *'It needs to be more reflective of the direct spiritual needs of a diverse community'*. 50 % of teachers requested the broadening of the study of other world religions and increased inclusivity of the course of study. One teacher reflected that teacher skills needed to be developed to face controversial issues:

I believe the NIC has plenty of scope to be inclusive however, I would differentiate between the curriculum in policy documents and the curriculum being delivered in the classroom. In class topics are very regimented and dry. The reasons for this could be that there is uncertainty as to what is and is not "OK" to discuss in school and therefore teachers cling to the lessons they know. Fear prevents teachers from opening class discussions wide. There are a lot of 'no go' areas because shutting down painful issues sometimes feels safer. The number of times I've heard the expression "You don't want to open a can of worms". But worms are good for the soil. (stick with me here) ... Yes, they are wriggly and messy and slimy and a bit gross, you certainly can't CONTROL

them, but when they're allowed out of their 'can', they turn over the soil and eat unhelpful bugs and prepare the ground to grow good things in. Strange analogy but it works for me! I would not change the curriculum, but I think work needs to be done to develop teacher confidence so that we are less afraid of unresolved questions and uncertainty and painful history.

Participants were then asked to explore their teacher education programmes in terms of preparedness to manage multicultural environments. Only slightly over half (52%) of teachers felt they had been prepared to deliver learning in a diverse setting. 26 percent of respondents were definitive that they had not been adequately prepared.

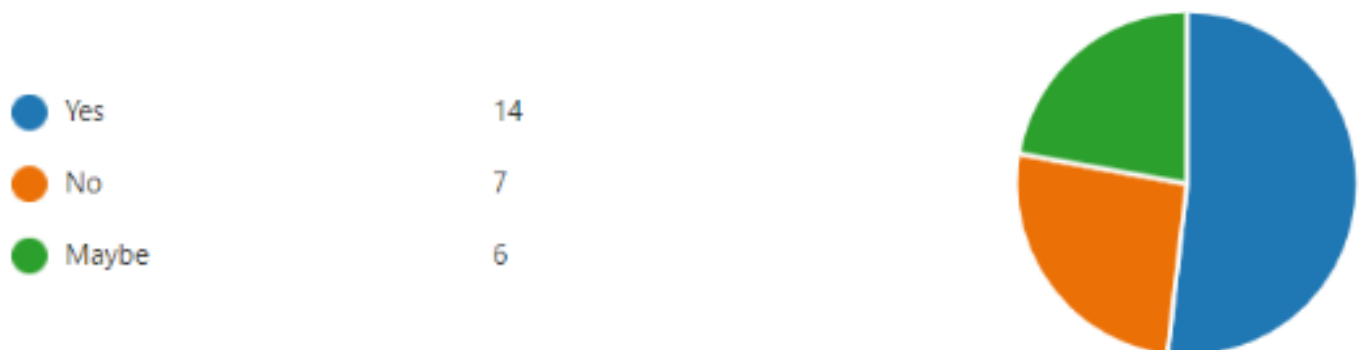


Figure 7 illustrating teacher perceptions of preparedness to teach multicultural populations.

Participants were provided with an opportunity to explore how they would develop their teacher education programmes to help better prepare them for teaching in diverse classroom contexts. These improvements ranged from inclusions of guest speakers from particular World Faiths to more detailed resources to help deliver lessons. However, three participants reflected on the need for greater focus on understanding of the community divide, local to the Northern Ireland context within Christianity.

'Today's event perfectly demonstrated the power of storytelling. Often the best way into contentious issues is to lead with personal experience. It takes us right to the nitty gritty of difficult topics whilst reminding us that we're dealing with people first and foremost, no detached concepts or 'issues. I think hearing from other students

about their stories and backgrounds would open some very rich learning. It would also provide us with first-hand practice for the sorts of discussions I hope to facilitate in my own classroom one day.'

In terms of skills development for facilitating the study of other World Faiths, participants reflected the need for teachers to be open minded and empathetic (33%). The ability to deliver effective and sensitive debate and discussion (28%) was also frequently mentioned. A smaller number of respondents (17%) noted the need to provide opportunities for the development of higher order thinking and analytical skills.

I found the example activities from today really beneficial! They were so practical and had several layers so you could build and build to higher level questioning and reflection. Yes, higher level questioning would be the main thing needed in RE.

Participants had been presented with conference contributions from, the English, Northern Irish, and Irish educational contexts. On reflection of these experiences, they were then asked to reflect how much they knew prior to the event delivering RE in England. Only one participant responded that they knew a lot about the English system, while 56% felt they did not know much and 41 % felt they had a little knowledge.

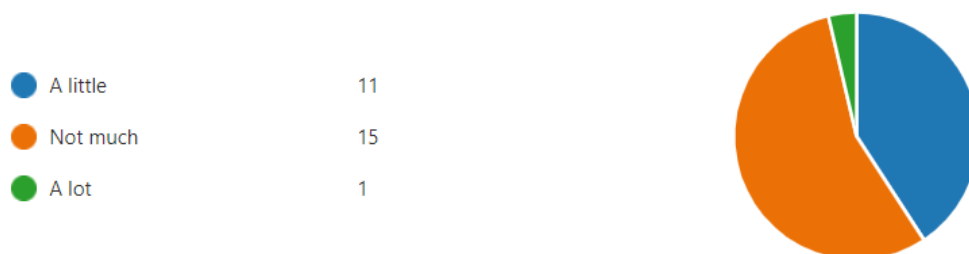


Figure 8 illustrating teacher perceptions of their knowledge of teaching RE in England.

Likewise, participants were asked about their knowledge of teaching RE in Ireland prior to the conference. Participants seemed to have slightly more knowledge of the RE curriculum in the Republic of Ireland than they did of that in England. More participants were unsure of the nature and content of RE teaching in the Republic of Ireland than in England with 70 percent stating they had not much knowledge.

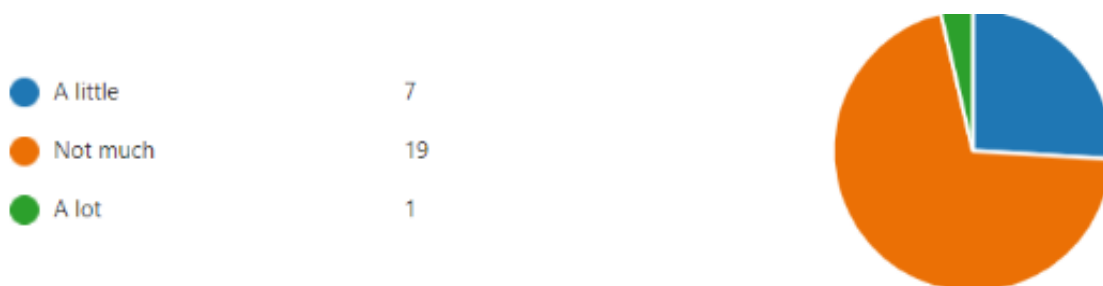


Figure 9 illustrating teacher perceptions of their knowledge of teaching RE in Ireland.

On reflection of the conference contributions, which were designed to provide participants with inspiring and innovative pedagogy from England and Ireland, respondents appeared to be much better informed on these education systems. Teachers reflected that they now had an increased understanding of other jurisdictions with 89% responding positively in this regard.



Figure 10 illustrating teacher perceptions of their increased understanding of teaching RE in other jurisdictions after the conference.

Post Knowing Your Neighbour Project Evaluation

A year after the initial project interventions, the participants were contacted to give their views on the influence of the project on their professional life. Participants all responded extremely positively to their experiences with the project, which had influenced the nature of both their teaching and their views on being a teacher in Ireland (North and South).

Participants were asked if learning about RE in different jurisdictions had increased their reflective process. One participant responded:

Definitely and [it] opened my eyes to different teaching approaches and an understanding of the different values we teach, it helped me to think more about engaging young students in conversations about how RE is taught and viewed in other countries.

The comparative education approach as a lens for self-reflection was apparent in the next respondent's comments. It is clear from this commentary that inclusion in the project was a transformational event. Helping the participant to become a more critically reflective practitioner.

I hadn't really stopped to think about how we teach RE here. The discussions we had with the other teachers really shocked me into realising just how much we are still expecting pupils to have a level of understanding and experience with a Christian faith, which I know isn't the case for many. I am a Sunday school teacher also and I think (even though I consciously try not to) this influences some of my classroom practices. I think we need much more guidance and direction in the controlled and integrated sectors as to what we should be doing and how we should be doing it. Also, the different schools I have taught in all take slightly different approaches to how RE is delivered. I am much more reflective after taking part in these conversations.'

There was evidently a process of professional reflection and self-examination in the next participant's commentary:

Yes its' made me question why I do things in a certain way and question "accepted givens" about how things operate. Like when we explained about assemblies and stuff the teachers from the Educate Together schools said that was faith formation, and I suppose they are right, it is.

As a reflection of this Northern response on their schooling system, a southern counterpart reflected that Multi-denominational schooling is more ethics based than in Northern Ireland where the model is still that of Christian focused Religious Education.

I would say that in the South, the experience of Multi-d education is more clearly connected to ethics than in the North but that RE in the North is more liberal than corresponding RE in the South. The process certainly led to increased reflection in relation to our complex relationship to the North of Ireland. One was stuck by the need for far more communication and co-operation across the border.

On reflection of the conference content and professional development opportunities respondents commented extremely positively on how they had embedded learning from these events into their units of work and everyday teaching:

Yes, I've used lots of the materials from the conference especially when teaching Other World Faiths at Key Stage 3. All the materials available to support learning are from the English context which is much more detailed and involved than we have space for in our curriculum. It also assumed too much prior knowledge from primary schools which our pupils at key stage three don't have as this is their first experience of other world faiths. Many of the activities we were shown [at the conference] I've been able to adapt and use in lots of ways. But I think what I got out of it most was the freedom to question and talk about pedagogy in RE and not to be afraid of doing the wrong thing.

Participants were asked to reflect on their educational philosophy, had the exposure to the project and the conferences influenced their philosophical views. It was apparent that little time had been given to teachers to format this macro-view of education and what they believed their educational philosophy to be. With one participant reflecting *'I am not sure I couldn't really describe what by educational philosophy is'*. However, other participants reflected that inclusion in the project had helped to make them more questioning of the systems in place in their context:

I would say it has made me more open to exploring what happens in other countries and more questioning of what we do here. It has opened my mind to looking beyond the NI context. It has made me more inclusive in my practices and more alert to the diversity within my classrooms.

Developing this concept of personal growth and self-philosophical examination, a Southern teacher reflected that the small group working from the project was key in developing cross-jurisdictional learning:

Pedagogically, the need for smaller group and interactive work is a key learning. In relation to principles of education, I would say that the strong connects between RE and Ethical Education have become more important to me as well as seeing the possibilities between the two domains (and not simply the tensions between).

In Summary

It is clear from participants responses to the conferences and the community conversations approach, that substantial learning has taken place both pedagogically and philosophically. There has also been personal growth and self-reflection as professional teachers. The increase of knowledge of their 'neighbour' has also increased substantially through this exchange. The 'borders in the mind' were significantly broken down and new territories explored.

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications and A Model For Progress

This project mapped the specificity of the Irish teacher education contexts, with an emphasis on educational ethoi North and South. It demonstrated that to a great extent the Irish education system, teacher education employment law and practice remains significantly under the influence and control of religious institutions. In such a context, when it comes to teaching about religion, beliefs and values there will be inevitable challenges to be met, especially with an increasingly diverse and secular student population. Such issues, however, are not unique to Ireland and can be seen as part of a more contemporary global philosophical discussion that arises from a consideration of the changing role of religion in education. Of most relevance to the contexts outlined above, are issues of authority, nurture, agency and criticality and these can be thought of in relation to a bifold framework. The first, following Hanan Alexander (2005), that ideology is a feature of all teacher education institutions and the second, following Paulo Freire (1996), that education can function to reproduce social inequalities or unbalanced power relationships unless the education aims explicitly for liberation in theory and in practice (or in his terms praxis).

A further process of mapping needs to take place, exploring how Primary education in the North and South of Ireland is responding to increasing plurality in how they address religion, beliefs and values? Historically, there have been diverse claims made in relation to the use of religion in education – that it acts both as cultivating a 'culture of compliance' in Irish schools (Norman 2003) and a source of liberation. Therefore, it is imperative in exploring the contemporary context that the Alexandrian and Freirean perspectives are employed and

attention must be given to issues of authority, nurture, agency and criticality if we are to achieve a full understanding of the terrain.

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism Report (The Forum 2012) focused clearly (if briefly) on the need for significant change at the ITE and primary school sectors in Irish education. The report acknowledged that, in principle, 'all colleges accept students of any faith or none' (The Forum 2012: 98). It also marked the change in the Colleges of Education culture which had seen a newly understood aspiration emerge to 'prepare the students to teach religious education in a variety of school settings' (The Forum 2012: 98), while noting that students still felt compelled to undertake the Certificate in Religious Education (The Forum 2012: 98). Finally, the report acknowledged the evolution of an 'alternative programme to the religious methodology programme', which is described in the report as now taking place at two Colleges of Education (The Forum 2012: 98). This Forum report was published nearly a decade ago. Since that time, these changes have continued in a gradualist mode, they have been genuinely hard-won at ITE level in Ireland. These changes built on significant changes in the content of ITE programmes developed in the Teaching Council's Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education (Teaching Council 2011), as well as the decision to extend the three year BEd programme for primary school teachers in Ireland from three to four years, beginning in September 2012 (Hyland 2012). In the context of such far reaching re-evaluation of ITE programmes, the Forum report stated that '*the time is apposite for incorporating a dual approach to the religious education methodology programme*' (The Forum 2012: 98). The report also affirmed a study of cultural diversity by Honohan and Rougier in this context. In this context, the Advisory Group agrees with the conclusion of Honohan and Rougier in their study of cultural diversity in Irish schools when they state, '*whatever the shape of future Irish education, teachers need to be equipped to deal with religious and cultural diversity within schools. There is a clear need for more compulsory training for teachers in this area*' (The Forum 2012: 98).

Over the course of this research project, some gradualist progress has been in diversification of multifaith RE programmes across Ireland. Emerging continuity and democracy is evident in teacher education programmes both North and South. At the same time, the distinctiveness of the approaches North and South respectively can lead to misunderstanding

across the two jurisdictions and additionally, it can create unnecessary challenges for teachers who wish to work between the two nations or in both. Returning to our bifold framework noted above for understanding teacher education, it is perhaps the Freirean principle which should be reiterated in concluding: that education can function to reproduce social inequalities or unbalanced power relationships, unless the education aims explicitly for liberation in theory and in practice (Freire 1996).

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