

Sharing Beliefs, Sharing Education: policy and
curricular responses to plurality of beliefs in
Ireland, North and South

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Summary

This project primarily centred on two symposia designed to facilitate dialogue among stakeholders from across the island of Ireland on issues of *Sharing Beliefs Sharing Education* in Primary schools. One symposium was held in Dublin City University (St Patrick's Campus, Drumcondra) and another in Queen's University Belfast. Each symposium consisted of twelve invited participants who were policy-makers or teacher educators with a particular interest in issues of religion, beliefs and values in education. The focus for each symposium were briefing papers provided by the participants on the project theme. The briefing papers and transcripts of the discussion were analysed by the researchers and, with the help of MaxQDA software, were coded and annotated with memos to work towards the identification of patterns and core conceptual categories. These were developed further through the use of diagrams, reflection on relevant literature and the elaboration of qualitative commentary on the categories to develop a model of religion, education and learning on the island of Ireland. The findings from this study show that while the political systems of North and South are distinct there are significant historical areas of similarity in the approaches taken to teaching about religion, beliefs and values as well as common issues arising from the increasing plurality of religions, cultures and beliefs in classrooms. It is concluded that in both jurisdictions there is a reluctance for state actors to intervene in matters of religion and education with the result that: churches retain significant levels of control over religious education curricula; there is a disconnect between communities of belief, other than Christianity, and curriculum programmes raising issues of fairness and equality; the position of the teacher in relation to identity, belief and professional integrity is not well defined and, as a result, this can cause personal and professional difficulties for teachers. It was also observed that inclusive pedagogical approaches have yet to be confidently owned by teachers in plural classrooms. Finally, the researchers noted an enthusiasm for the development of new 'spaces' for religious, beliefs and values education among participants as well as a common view that, considering the religiously separate nature of most education on the island, the opportunities to cultivate shared values of welcome, equality, sharing and reconciliation should be maximised.

Introduction and Background

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 and Multi-denominational schools (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) formation of children (Barnes 2007; Irwin 2013)

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 'interbelief 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 stakeholders in policy and teacher education contexts around recent developments in policy and practice of teaching about religion and beliefs in schools. Second, to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to provide perspectives and responses to current challenges in this area. Third, to investigate in particular the current and potential use of dialogue and collaborative learning opportunities as pedagogical tools for teaching about religion and beliefs in primary schools.

[Brief Outline of primary level schooling arrangements, North and South](#)

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 (Coolahan et al. 2012). 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 the North, 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 (see Table 1). 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 the North 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, l.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.

Table 1: Types of Primary School and Curricula for teaching about religions, beliefs and values on the island of Ireland

	North	South
Main School Types (Primary)	Maintained; Controlled; Integrated	Catholic; Educate Together; Community National Schools; Church of Ireland; Presbyterian; Methodist;

Religion, beliefs and values programmes	NI Core Syllabus for RE; <i>Grow in Love; Delving Deeper; Anti-Bias Curriculum</i>	<i>Grow in Love; Learn Together Curriculum; Goodness Me Goodness You; Follow Me</i>
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To conclude this section, it is worth mentioning the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) sector which is responsible for preparing students for Primary teaching. 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). In the North, ITE provision has been more varied than in the South and while the separation by religion of the majority of students preparing for Primary teaching has been a dominant feature, there are also examples of religious integration in some institutions (Nelson 2010).

Review of relevant literature

Our discussion above of the specificity of the Irish school contexts, with an emphasis on educational ethoi North and South, demonstrated that to a great extent the Irish education system 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 so we wish to consider in this section selected literature from scholars who highlight some of the underlying philosophical issues that arise from a consideration of the changing role of religion in education. Of most relevance to the contexts outlined above, we believe, are issues of **authority, nurture, agency and criticality** and we wish to explore these in relation to a bi-fold framework. The first, following Hanan Alexander (2005), that ideology is a feature of all schools 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*).

Authority and Nurture

Following Alexander's (2005) view that ideology is a feature of all schools, and Freire's (1996) view that education has the potential for oppression as well as hope, we can say that concepts of authority and nurture are inevitable elements of schooling, for every school must choose how they use their power and control to encourage children into particular ideological orientations. In the Irish system, the concepts of authority and nurture have been strongly connected to religion through the overarching denominational nature of Irish religious education (Norman 2003). While there is an emphasis on child centeredness in curricular documents North and South, it can be argued that the predominance of denominational education in Irish primary education has meant that ethical and religious education has become synonymous with a certain pedagogical approach which aims to nurture children into a Christian community defined in denominational terms (for example, The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference 2001) or non-denominational terms (for example, *The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986*). As noted above, this can include the teaching of religion as faith-formation in school time (in all schools which have an explicitly denominational foundation) and the preparation for sacraments by the class teacher (in Catholic schools North and South) (Norman 2003; Williams 2003). And, as Nelson (2017) and Yohanis (2015) have shown, a confessional approach is also common in the Controlled 'non-denominational' sector where many teachers openly teach in a confessional manner from a Protestant Evangelical tradition.

Thus, the process of nurture has been rooted in forms of Christianity which carry with them an authority from tradition and existing social status. Some commentators have suggested this has bred an unhealthy form of 'domination' and pointed to a 'culture of compliance' in many Irish schools, where teachers and students (and indeed parents) are reticent to question the authority of the school ethos (Norman 2003; Williams 2003). Arguably, an example of the position of authority churches maintain in schools can be seen in the legal privilege they possess, in both jurisdictions, to discriminate on the basis of religion with regard both to teacher appointments and, in the South, child enrolment in schools (Irwin 2013).

Contrariwise, however, one can read these concepts of authority and nurture as exemplified in a much more positive manner in the Irish education systems, North and South. We might refer to this latter perspective as one of 'benign authority', and this thematic will be returned to in the findings. Here, the conception of authority in Irish education, mostly through church schooling but also in terms of the authority of more pluralist teachings and ethoi, is seen as empowering and supportive of children and communities. At the heart of this conception of authority is the related notion of 'nurture'. From this point of view, confessional or formative education (whether Catholic, Protestant or otherwise, as in Human Rights or Anti-Bias Education (Waldron & Ruane 2013), is seen as nurturing the whole child in his/her flourishing and well-being. Similarly, while there is a particular faith tradition of authority embedded in most such schools, children from other belief systems are seen as also being equally respected and nurtured through a spirit of inclusion (for example, The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference 2001). In a related way, while there is not such a strong emphasis on authority in multi-denominational, equality based or integrated schools, there is still a strong sense of 'nurture' and specific values of respect, empathy and generosity. In this latter sector of schools, there has also been the recent emergence of a notion of 'belief nurturing' which is seen as less tradition-specific than the more traditional notion of 'faith formation'(Irwin 2016).

Agency and Criticality

Returning to Alexander, he argues that what follows from his assertion that education is inevitably ideological and, in our terms, bound up with questions of authority and nurture, is the need to attend to issues of agency and criticality. For Alexander, the position taken on agency and criticality is the ultimate test as to whether an ideology is moral or amoral. Moral ideologies 'embrace the conditions of human agency - that people have the freedom of will within reasonable limits to choose their beliefs and behaviours, the moral intelligence to tell the difference between better or worse according to some conception of these notions, and the capacity to err in belief and practice.' (Alexander 2005, p.4)

And it would seem that the visions of the 'good' conveyed by the patrons and members of management boards in all sectors of education in Ireland assert a holistic moral position which meets Alexander's agency test, whether that be a vision of a human rights based education (Educate Together 2015), a faith based education, or other. The Catholic Bishops, for example, state that:

'Catholic schools are defined by their values: love, solidarity, truth, justice and the pursuit of the common good. These values by their nature carry certain responsibilities. Foremost amongst these is the provision of an education that is essentially liberating, that forms our young people in the fullest sense, not only in terms of their intellectual ability and spirituality, but also as communal beings equipped to live in harmony with others.' (The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference 2001, p.2)

Visions, however, mean little without actions and Alexander (2005, p. 15) notes that his particular vision of agency-based education requires teachers to raise pupils' awareness of alternative views and promote the 'humble recognition that competing orientations have many advantages of their own'. One practical outcome would therefore be the recognition of plurality within and across schools and the deliberate and sustained creation of opportunities for dialogue and debate (Nelson 2016).

However, the tensions between authority and agency as well as between nurture and criticality mean that vigilance is needed to ascertain the extent to which aspirations for agency and criticality are met and new possibilities imagined for how they can be articulated in practice. Without such vigilance, education may become disabling rather than enabling. Freire (1992; 1996; Irwin 2012) for example, in his work on pedagogy describes what he refers to as the 'teacher-student' contradiction, which is rooted in inequality and which *disables the possibility of agency in schools*. Freire describes it thus: 'the teacher presents him or herself to the students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he or she justifies his/her own existence' (Freire 1996, p.53). The teacher is all

knowing the student ignorant, the teacher always powerful the student powerless, the teacher always vocal and active the student always passive and silent. In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1996) refers to this ideology of education as a 'banking system'. Such an approach to education is self-evidently dysfunctional and we might imagine that with the advent of progressivism in education that it is a thing of the past. But Freire's warning in *Pedagogy* is that this mindset and technique of education can be extremely persistent, not simply in traditional forms of education but also in supposedly more emancipatory perspectives and ideologies.

With regard to the question of agency in our respective Irish contexts North and South, thus, we might put it to the Freirean test. Is the banking education mindset and system still evident in Ireland and if so, where might we locate possible points of agency for teachers and students? The first point to make here would be that despite the position of authority and influence of churches in the school system, seen for example in their control over religious education, that it would be lazy to simply identify denominational education with the banking system. Similarly, it would be equally lazy to identify equality based, integrated or multi-denominational approaches simply as 'problem-posing' or as having gone beyond the banking system of education. The Freirean perspective which he outlines in *Pedagogy* for example is clear that no one type of education has a monopoly on criticality or on what he refers to as 'problem-posing education' (Freire 1996; 1992; Irwin 2012). Indeed, it should be noted that denominational approaches to schooling cannot be seen as anti-critical in essence for Freire's own work in education and pedagogy (as that of others such as Ivan Illich) stems from a radical pan-Christian tradition of liberation theology in Latin America (Gutierrez 2001; Irwin 2012). So, from a Freirean perspective, we need to look beneath the generalities to the specific contexts to evaluate the practices on the ground (Freire 1992; O'Sullivan 2005; Waldron and Ruane 2013; Nelson 2017; Richardson 2014). Only then can we judge whether such authority and nurture is benign or malign, or whether such supposed progressivism is merely rhetoric or genuine reality.

Let us conclude this section by returning to the core question of primary concern to us, that is how those involved in Primary education in the North and South of Ireland are responding to increasing plurality in how they address religion, beliefs and values. We can see from this brief literature review that, 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, as we try to illuminate the contemporary situation we must be aware of the Alexandrian and Freirean perspectives and attention must be given to issues of authority, nurture, agency and criticality if we are to achieve a full understanding of the terrain.

Methodology

The key activities associated with the project were two symposia on *Sharing Beliefs Sharing Education* – one was held in Dublin City University (St Patrick's Campus, Drumcondra) and another in Queen's University Belfast. Each symposium consisted of twelve invited participants who attended both sessions.

Participants were regarded as relevant stakeholders in that they were either involved in the policy development of education about religion and beliefs in schools at primary levels or involved in the development and/or delivery of education about religion and beliefs in teacher education institutions. In other words, recruitment was carried out in a purposive manner and participants were selected on the basis of their expert knowledge and their familiarity with education policy around the teaching of religious education, beliefs and values. In addition, consideration was given to the sectors represented by the participants and an aspect of the selection criteria was that a diverse range of educational and religious interests were included in the Symposia, in particular those with an interest in Catholic, Protestant, Integrated, Educate Together and Multi-Denominational sectors.

The symposia were structured to allow for clarification, questioning and discussion. While, initially it was hoped that a Delphi Method (Linstone & Turoff 1975) approach would be adopted, the logistical constraints of the project meant that a fully developed Delphi process was unrealistic. In such a process, a group of experts work on a problem through multiple phases of clarification, questioning and feedback (see, for example, Baumfield et al. 2012). The small-scale nature of this project combined with the significant geographical spread of participants did not allow for regular meetings and multiple iterative phases, but several significant elements of the Delphi process were used. Firstly, briefing papers were shared with all members prior to the symposia. Secondly, there was a limited amount of time for participants to present their paper and, instead, emphasis was placed upon the clarification of key issues and discussion among the wider group in response to these. Typically, five minutes were given to a summary of the paper and the questions posed by the presenter, five minutes for clarification questions from the group and twenty minutes

for a discussion of the questions. Thirdly, in the second symposium, time was given at the end of the session for participants to provide an expert response to a context different from their own. The intention was not to arrive at definitive solutions but to provide a range of perspectives from expert ‘outsiders’ which may help to clarify and help to evolve the thinking around complex issues.

For the initial presentations, the group were divided into two; half of the group prepared papers for the first symposium and the other half for the second. On each occasion, the numbers presenting from North and South were equally split (see table 1).

Table 2: Format of Symposia

Symposium 1 - Belfast	Symposium 2 - Dublin
Presenter 1 - North	Presenter 7 - South
Presenter 2 - North	Presenter 8 - South
Presenter 3 - North	Presenter 9 - South
Presenter 4 - South	Presenter 10 - North
Presenter 5 - South	Presenter 11 - North
Presenter 6 - South	Presenter 12 - North

Ahead of each meeting, presenters had to provide a short briefing paper on their own context along with several open-ended questions which reflect current challenges (see Appendix 1). The organisers collated the responses and circulated these one week before each symposium. At the symposium, the members used these as the basis for discussion and dialogue. Out of these symposia the project leaders collated the papers and the audio-recorded discussion in order to identify core issues in relation to education about religions and beliefs on the island of Ireland; summarise current developments in education about

religions and beliefs in general and inter-belief dialogue in particular; offer suggestions for further areas for exploration.

The analysis was undertaken using qualitative tools. The papers and transcripts from the discussion were uploaded to MaxQDA and, following Miles and Huberman, key concepts were coded and cross-cutting patterns were identified. While the participants spoke and wrote from two different political contexts the data was not separated out for analysis in geographically separate units. The purpose of the research was to investigate responses to shared challenges in relation to religious education and the exploration of beliefs and values in Primary schools in a climate of increasing plurality.

Findings and discussion

During the Symposia, a significant amount of time was spent on clarifying the contexts, especially variations of school types and curricula. This was an incredibly important part of the project and fulfilled the specific aim noted above of facilitating cross-border inter-professional learning for stakeholders in policy and teacher education contexts around recent developments in policy and practice of teaching about religion and beliefs in schools. The processes of explanation and clarification were extremely valuable in generating rich data as it required participants to consider foundational questions and visit basic assumptions in relation to their area of expertise. Through a close analysis of the data it was possible to discern a range of issues in relation to religious, beliefs and values education of concern to the participants and these are summarised below under three headings: system; aims; curriculum. Participants' opinions were, inevitably, varied and it is our intention to represent the diversity in the findings below, but in keeping with the project's aim we have attempted to draw out current challenges in the area of beliefs and values education and identify what responses are being made.

System: the structures of control and management

At its most basic, the high-level context within which issues of religion, beliefs, values and education were contextualised by participants were in relation to powers of the state, the school (or representative bodies acting on behalf of the school) and the national curriculum (**Error! Reference source not found.**). This system level context was spoken of in terms of historical developments, legislation, constitutional arrangements; specific themes which could be identified were authority, choice and control.

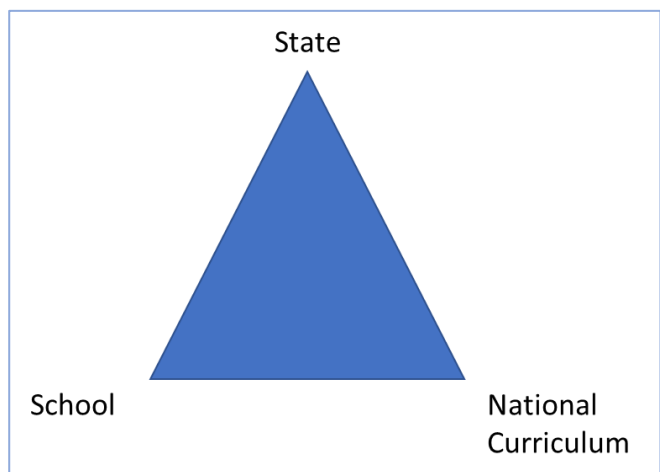


Figure 1: System arena

While the political systems of North and South are distinct (see section above) there are significant areas of similarity, not least because of a shared genesis of each education system prior to partition in which churches gained significant control of education and the all-island organisation of churches (Catholic and Protestant) which continue to retain very significant influence and control within both education systems. Given these common features in mechanisms of control there was among the participants a sense of familiarity regarding the issues raised by their counterparts. Common too was the awareness that changes in social attitudes as well as shifting demographics were having impacts on education at multiple levels, including the structural or system level, and there was a feeling that the present period could be described as one of adaptation and transition.

Ball (2012) has labelled the position of the British government at the time of the introduction of mass education as ‘the reluctant state’, and there was a strong sense from the participants that a *laissez-faire* position still underpins both Irish systems of education in relation to religion. This was most evident in the way that Churches were noted to mediate the control of the state through sectoral bodies or trustee organisations¹. Their influence was also noted as being sustained through historical concepts found in legal formulations such as ‘patronage’ and ‘characteristic spirit’ in the South or ‘non-denominational schools’ and ‘transferors’ in the North. The participants’ characterisation of the role of churches in the state was two-sided – on one side their influence was spoken of in terms of satisfying parental choice and sustaining a coherent communitarian vision which nurtured young people into Christian values, while maintaining a tradition of openness to all:

It has to be noted that in the vast majority of these cases, Christian schools have shown themselves to be inclusive, welcoming, and respectful environments. From a Catholic perspective, inclusiveness and universality are core features of school life (Participant D)

¹ In the North, examples include: The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and The Controlled Schools’ Support Council (CSC); in the South: Catholic Education An Irish Schools Trust (CEIST) and the Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools (ATCS)

From this perspective, the authority of the church is benign and not interested in empire-building. In some settings, there is even a reluctance to exercise the control that they possess. Participant D noted *'There has also been a recognition by the Bishops (and Archbishop Martin has been particularly vocal about this) that the current situation of Christian dominance cannot continue given the increasingly pluralistic nature of Ireland'*. In addition, where churches do wish to assert their control, it is with the intention of sharing or cooperating with other sectors. Reference was made to the leadership shown by Catholic schools in relation to Shared Education in the North, and the potential of a shared church school in Northern Ireland was given as an example of an important development in church controlled education: *Faith integration in schools... will be a very public demonstration of the churches working together* (Participant F)

On the other side, the churches' position was seen to be one of 'privilege', 'majoritarian control' and 'domination'. A participant from the South, for example, stated:

The effects of mono-integration are experienced as domination and subordination by individuals at various points in the schooling service - by parents, by teachers and by social formations which do not identify with the world-view of the dominating churches. (Participant L)

From this perspective the examples above of benign church control looked rather different as neither of the two processes, divestment of Catholic schools and the creation of joint faith schools, have yet to achieve any results and, at the same time, some churches have worked to retain or increase their control in education such as the increased influence achieved as a result of sustained lobbying by some Protestant churches regarding the Education Act (Northern Ireland Assembly 2014) and establishment of a Controlled Schools sectoral council in Northern Ireland (Armstrong 2016). Furthermore, there was an awareness that certain groups (minority Christian groups and other religions) and a growing number of people are excluded from, or have very limited access to, bodies which control education. As a result, there was a feeling on the part of some participants that structural

changes would be required in order to address the dominant control of churches. Suggestions included, to 'break the link between property and patronage' in the South and 'that the operations attaching to the concept of patronage, including those relating to characteristic spirit, be democratised' (Participant L).

This latter point also raises the issue of choice, which was another significant theme in relation to the role of the 'reluctant state'. Some participants saw any sharing or integrating initiatives to be complimentary to a 'plural system' (Gallagher & Duffy 2016, p.37).

Participant J said: *'If we want to move towards a truly shared and integrated society in which we recognise and accept difference and demonstrate in practice our respect for diversity, we must also respect the diversity in educational provision.'*

But there was a sense of frustration from another participant (G) that in a plural system which favoured communitarian positions the result would be a 'marketplace of ethoi' which created an illusion of choice but which inevitably favoured majority over minority interests. In other words, where choice is offered it was regarded by some as not a true choice, as parents of minority beliefs do not have an equal right to choose a school. Or it is a false choice as one option is untenable or unreasonable. In relation to employment opportunities in the South, one participant spoke of teachers being faced with a 'frightening choice' if they decided not to teach in a Catholic Primary School.

A final theme pertaining to the reluctant state relates to the provision of 'multicultural' sectors of education. Gallagher and Duffy (2016, pp.37 & 47) define 'multicultural systems' as 'recognition of multiple identities in a single school'. In both regions, at system level, has been the emergence of bodies to support such forms of education² and there was a recognition from all participants that models of sharing and integration were a significant and legitimate aspect of both systems of education. Yet, it was also remembered that their emergence was characteristic of the 'reluctant state' as it was noted that in most cases the

² In the North: Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and in the South: Educate Together and CNS.

creation of new forms of integration and sharing emerged as disruptive movements to which the state reacted rather than as policy enactments from a core ideological commitment by any government. While it is possible in such a situation to feel frustration at the lack of system level leadership, Skeie (2001, p.246) would look on the wider context in a more positive light; speaking of religious education across Europe, he believes ‘weak systems’ have ‘a historical flexibility and a decentralised structure that at their best may show an ability to include the ‘new’ multicultural variations as it has included the ‘old’ European religious plurality.’

Having unpacked the range of opinions around structural relationships in the education

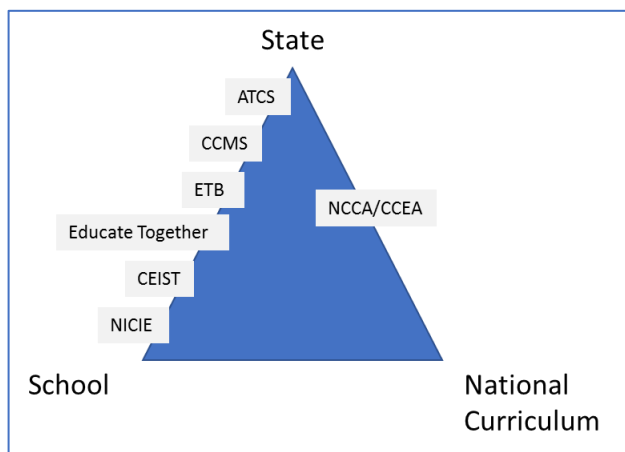


Figure 2: Bodies which mediate control

system, it is important not to conclude without addressing the third element of system control and that is the state control of the curriculum. In both jurisdictions, state control is mediated through non-governmental curriculum organisations, CCEA and NCCA, which have responsibility for the curriculum, except for religious education. State control over the national

curriculum was largely uncontested and little

mentioned in the data; of more concern was discussion around Patrons’ programmes in the South and the Churches Core Syllabus in the North, and this will be dealt with in the ‘Learning’ section below. There was, however, discussion of the first government initiative on the island to introduce a state-controlled subject relating to religion and beliefs in the Primary curriculum: Education about Religion, Ethics and Beliefs. While the majority of participants were positively disposed to this development during the first symposium, by the time of the second symposium, enthusiasm was tempered by the changes that were mooted as a result of a consultation process that had taken place. Most notable was an understanding that there would be a move from a discrete curricular area to a thematic approach. As a result, a feeling dominated that proposals for the subject wouldn’t make it to

statute, or they would be so compromised as a result of changes to the curriculum as it had been originally imagined, that it would be worthless.

It seems that it is disappearing into nothing - it's depressing. A thematic approach will not give the programme a proper place. People have no idea about this subject. The NCCA will tick a box and it will be all change but everything will stay the same (Participant C)

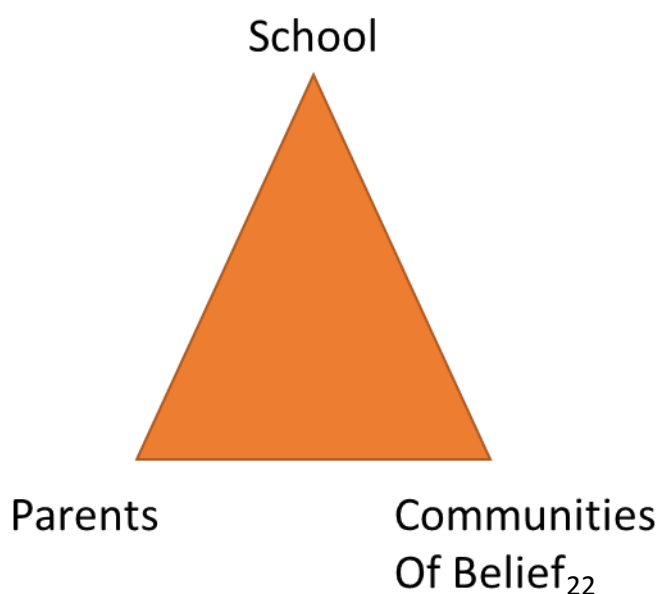
On the whole, the discussion of ERBE highlighted a recognition that change in this area was required but, at the same time, there was a keen awareness of the historical powerlessness that governments have had in directly intervening in curricular matters pertaining to religion and beliefs on the island and a sense of inevitability that it would continue to be difficult in the years ahead.

Aims: the basic commitments from which the purposes of education emerge

Traditionally, the aims of a faith-based education have been regarded as a commitment to the development of a fully developed person in the image of God supported by a tripartite structure of school, parent and church. These three elements were given emphasis by participants and noted as still significant in shaping the characteristic spirit or ethos of many schools. In the South, the desire to maintain a healthy regard for the role of families, especially parents, as primary educators was particularly evident and reference was made to the constitutional position of parents in that regard. Similarly, Integrated Educators in the North see parental involvement as a cornerstone of their work although in both jurisdictions it is recognised that this can lead to disagreements where the school values and family values conflict. One participant (A) noted the need to acknowledge these differences and for schools to see this as an opportunity for pupils to develop 'moral bilingualism' although another questioned the esteemed view accorded to parents. Similar to Daly (2016), participant K noted that while parental involvement can be a positive influence in schooling, it can also be employed as a cover for a communitarian agenda: 'we need to interrogate more closely the philosophical presuppositions, in particular in relation to certain conceptions of communitarianism, that are shaping conceptions of ethos, faith formation, and values in the case of schools' (Participant G)

The place of 'Church' in the formulation of the aims for education was regarded as still significant for the majority of schools on the island. In the North, 'almost every school in Northern Ireland in their prospectus will publish publicly that they have a Christian ethos' (Participant E) and in the South: '96% of Irish primary schools operating as denominational schools (and over 90% of these are Christian)' (Participant D). Although for some sectors (Educate Together, CNS and Integrated Schools) the reference to 'church' is likely to be too narrow and participants from these sectors were more likely to refer to the role of various communities of belief contributing to their ethos, mindful of the fact that these included non-religious beliefs such as Humanism. And, similar to Coll (2013), regarding the Catholic sector it was suggested that changing demographics required a renewed awareness of their mission in relation to other beliefs: *For many years in Northern Ireland there was a high degree of complacency in the Catholic Maintained sector because you could count on having an influx of pupils from local Catholic community. The demographic is now changing and we have to say to ourselves: how do we know we are a Catholic school... that includes respecting difference, treating everyone fairly, including everyone in your school, not practicing exclusion* (Participant J)

So, it is reasonable to say that an adapted form of the traditional tripartite model represents, to a significant degree, the foundational elements governing the formulation of aims and underpinning values in the majority of schools in Ireland: school, parents and communities of belief (Figure 3:).



However, changing the traditional formulation causes a disruption in several ways which were expressed during the analysis of participants' discussions about the aims and purposes of education. Firstly, it

Figure 3: Aims

challenges the foundational aims of traditional faith based schooling. The arguments for faith-based education tended to coalesce around sacramental preparation in Catholic schools, theories of primary culture (the idea of being nurtured into a community to secure a child's sense of identity and belonging) and Christian principles. And while, as noted above, the role of the churches at system level was deemed strong there was less confidence in their position in relation to the aims of schools. Indeed, in some cases it was felt the values of churches have been sidelined from their own schools and these should be reclaimed: 'if a school is going to set itself up as a Catholic school then it needs to ask itself, is it living out the values of the Catholic faith?' (Participant J). And similarly, in relation to the Protestant nature of Controlled schools in Northern Ireland: 'Protestant children cannot develop a firm, reasoned understanding of their own beliefs and are therefore at a disadvantage when their beliefs are challenged and have little appreciation for their own distinct religious identity.' (Participant E). Therefore, although the role of churches in education remains strong, their influence over school values is not guaranteed and some participants indicated a desire for more authentic and stronger religious values in schools in response to plurality and growing secularism.

Interestingly, the concept of authenticity is appealed to for different reasons and from different perspectives. As well as the call for more authentically Christian schools, participants reported examples of teachers and students who did not feel able to express themselves authentically as they were a minority within a Christian setting. This suggests a hidden assumption in the traditional model – that the identity and beliefs of the teacher are in harmony with the dominant belief in the school and, similarly, the identity and beliefs of pupils are in harmony with their parents. Where they are not in harmony it raises issues of authenticity and integrity, as seen for example in the report of a student teacher who admitted that hypocrisy was the only solution for her:

I want to be honest in my interview – I'm not a believer – but I can't be if I want a job. So, I feel like I'll have to be a hypocrite; pretend I'm a Catholic to get the job and then hope I don't have to teach 2nd or 6th class because I have no idea about Holy Communion or Confirmation or any of that stuff. I don't know what to do. (reported by Participant D)

The lack of a conscience clause for teachers in Ireland was noted by several participants to be a real concern and likely to actively discourage those of minority beliefs from entering the teaching profession.

In addition, there were concerns about the place of children from belief minorities in church schools:

Children from a religious/belief minority attending a Church-run school may begin to question their own identity and the identity of their religious communities if educated in an environment that fails to recognise them in a meaningful way. (Participant A)

This suggests an issue of equality and this concept was spoken of by many participants. Interestingly, equality was spoken of as both an aspiration and a positive value to be promoted in relation to a core value of a Catholic ethos, a Shared Education ethos, an integrated education ethos, an Educate Together ethos and an inter-cultural dialogue approach. It is worth noting, however, that this concept was mentioned most frequently in relation to minority 'multi-cultural' school-types where equality was spoken of in relation to specific concerns:

- the historical inequalities for minorities in a school system dominated by faith-schools
- the difference between equality of belief and equality of people
- legal challenges to equality, for example, in employment law or with regard to religious education qualifications (certificates)
- the practical difficulty in treating all faith and beliefs equally in relation to resources and time

What these points highlight is that while there is a broad acceptance of the value of equality, there are a number of very specific ways in which inequality is experienced, mostly as a result of systems which historically privilege majority Catholic and Protestant religious traditions.

Yet, despite the common cause that 'multicultural' schools share in wishing to challenge dominant positions, they do not share a single vision of common schooling. Partly as a result of the ground-up evolution of the 'multicultural' sectors, the conceptualisations of integration and sharing they possess were noted to be quite different and these varied views were found among the participants, especially regarding their approaches to religious education. Indeed, the religious identity of these schools varied between designations of 'Christian', 'Multidenominational' and 'a half-way point between denominational schools and secular schools'

Across all participants there was a sense that the characteristic spirit of schools remained an important focus for further debate and discussion, especially as it related to the sponsoring authority (church, representative body or other Patron) and the enactment of the values in curriculum and school life. (The relationship between Aims and Curriculum will be addressed below)

Two things might be said by way of conclusion to this section. Firstly, there was a sense that, in a system which was balanced in favour of religious separation, mitigation of potentially negative outcomes from separation was needed. While the level of the mitigation differed, participants offered values which might ameliorate the negative effects of separation. These values were identified as mutual understanding, shared values, reconciliation, welcome and equality.

Learning: students' learning in relation to religions, beliefs and values

This was the area of greatest discussion by participants. Due to the richness of the data it is necessary to subdivide this section into three: curriculum; pupil participation and pedagogy.

Curriculum

In both jurisdictions, responsibility for learning about religious education or beliefs and values education lies outside of the national curriculum. Some participants believed it to be an area of learning that is 'different' and 'set apart' from the rest of the curriculum.

Interestingly, several participants noted the historical failures of the states (pre- and post-partition) in controlling this area of learning, and the tendency of governments, north and south, to adopt a laissez-faire approach. In some cases, state impotence was evident as failed policy initiatives but in others it was seen to be a direct result of a systemic context where churches and Patrons were given powers of veto and control over aspects of the curriculum. In relation to the south, for example:

The Education Act [1998], refers both to: the patron's right to mediate the curriculum in accordance with their ethos, and also the requirement on the Minister to give due consideration to the ethos of schools when developing curriculum. (Participant K)

This ability to filter state regulation can also be seen in the north where one participant noted 'The position of RE is anomalous – it's part of the 'curriculum' but not part of the NI Curriculum!' (Participant I). Nonetheless, despite limited state control and regulation, based on participants' reports, it is possible to say that the vast majority of Primary schools across the island have access to a religious education syllabus or patron's programme which sets out a range of content that teachers can or should cover during time allocated for religious education. What was notable from the discussion, was the varying perspectives taken when defining the programmes or curricular area dealing with religious, beliefs or values education. These issues around titles, labels and definitions are an inevitable part of dialogue and debate in the field of religious education whether across continents (Moran 2005) or within specific regions (Williame 2007) and reflect an ongoing effort to define the 'object of study' (Aldridge 2011).

Despite the apparent level of support for this curricular area, participants were very alert to issues around provision, and these seemed to be shared North and South. Three particular concerns raised by participants were: degrees of control and prescription; differences between policy and practice; and concerns over quality.

Although programmes are provided by churches and Patron's there are degrees of control and prescription. Some are compulsory others optional, some have detailed teacher resources, others only provide a 'skeletal syllabus' (Participant H). Some arise out of an established pedagogical framework and others make no mention of pedagogical stance. None, apart from the proposed ERBE curriculum in the South, attempt to be fully integrated into the national curriculum, yet there is evidence that, to varying degrees, they are influenced by developments in the wider national context, particularly pedagogical innovations such as the skills based Northern Ireland Curriculum or the play-based Aistear curriculum. In basic terms, it is possible to picture the learning arena as an interplay of three

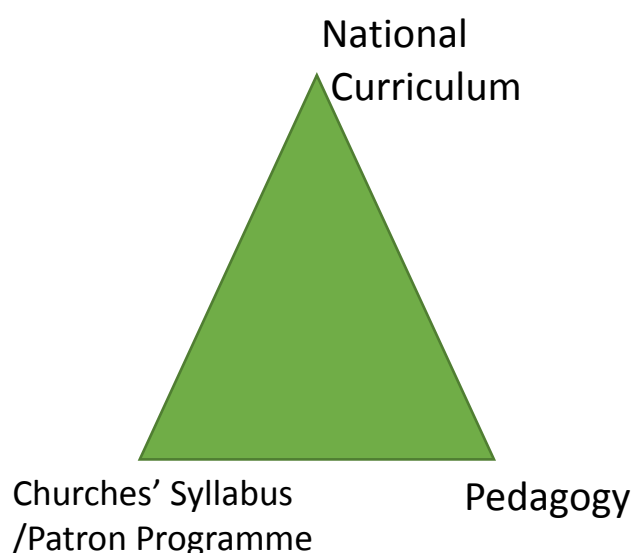


Figure 4: Learning

factors: the national curriculum; the Patron's, Church's or Churches' syllabus; pedagogical approaches. (Fig 4)

Regarding policy and practice there was a feeling that avoidance was widespread. From the South one participant (G) said:

Everybody who works in Primary education knows that RE is not being taught in a lot of schools - it just isn't - nobody's going to say it, but it just isn't. People will do a little bit when it is being inspected, but other than that they won't do it.

And from the North:

Anecdotally, many schools in Northern Ireland are not fulfilling their statutory obligations towards the subject (Participant E)

It was suggested that, in some cases, cross-curricular teaching was an indirect cause of avoidance; religious education topics or themes would be subsumed into areas of personal development, for example, as this was seen to be a less controversial space in which to deal with ethical issues, values or beliefs.

And in relation to quality, it was noted that even when the subject is taught it can be done badly, either because it is dealt with superficially or religions are misrepresented:

An over-emphasis on religious celebrations, however, can result in a superficial exploration of religious beliefs - an 'othering' of these viewpoints or as a friend put it 'a bout of religious tourism, dipping in and out of weirdly exotic practices before hitting the trail for home'.

(Participant C)

The lack of formal inspection by the state and inconsistent training and resourcing were noted as contributing factors to the patchy quality of provision.

Participation in learning in relation to religions, beliefs and values

Schools have developed a range of participation models involving separate and common classes across both regions, which are felt to reflect the ethos or spirit of the school. In this context withdrawal of pupils from RE was seen by different participants as either a positive or negative option. The withdrawal of pupils from confessional religious education was regarded by some as a positive right in faith school contexts but, echoing the findings of Mawhinney et al (2010), regarded as a form of exclusion by others. Similarly, in inclusive or multi-denominational schools, the practice of separating children for all or some of their education in beliefs and values was regarded as dangerous and segregationist by some, for example in reference to the belief-specific teaching in Community National Schools, whereas by contrast the use of belief-specific teaching within the Integrated sector in

Northern Ireland was noted by some to be a respectful outworking of a desire to respect difference and support parents' choice for a confessional element to religious education.

Pedagogy

For those who spoke about pedagogy in relation to confessional forms of religious education there was an affirmation of its role as 'nurturing' and cultivating 'faith development'. In faith school settings, there was a sense of confidence in the coherent purpose of religious education and the methods used to nurture dispositions of faith. It was acknowledged that plural pupil populations have required a change in perspective and approach; it was no longer possible to make easy assumptions about your pupils' beliefs or be complacent about your values, but the vision of an education inspired by Jesus was, according to one Catholic participant, a continuing foundation in all aspects of school life and influenced the approach to teaching in all subjects:

The basis of a Catholic school is that everything is done in the image of Christ... In a Catholic school the Catholic element is not in 30 mins of RE but in every minute of every day in terms of how children relate to one another, how the staff relate to one another and the children, all of those things. (Participant J)

Discussion around pedagogy for inclusive forms of education in religion, beliefs and values suggested there was less confidence in a common vision or purpose. There was a feeling that teachers were often left to teach about beliefs and values with little support to navigate complex and sensitive contexts. Participants also had an awareness of incongruities arising from contexts where confessional and inclusive approaches were in close proximity, such as in the proposed introduction of the ERBE curriculum in the South. This was reflected in one exchange:

Participant A: How can RE and ERBE look at similar materials from different perspectives: ERBE from a critical, more or less objective manner, but in a Catholic ethos in a denominational school. If you are teaching something as truth in the Catholic programme of RE and then taking a more critical approach in ERBE - I'm wondering what others think of that? Can the two be done in tandem? Is it a fair criticism?

Participant K: We don't have any easy answers.

Yet, the data does contain evidence of participants attempting to answer the challenge of teaching about beliefs and values inclusively in a plural environment. The concept of 'spaciousness' was used by several participants when trying to articulate a vision of this. One participant (D) believed that in religious education there was a transition occurring from 'a monolithic space to a multiplicitous one'. Others spoke of an aspiration that learning in this area should inhabit a 'space' that maintained an 'apartness' from the rest of the curriculum, a special place for 'family projects', explorations of 'lived values' and the development of 'skills, dispositions, knowledge and understanding...' that enabled children to '... to engage positively with the world in which we live, be respectful of those from other traditions, and have meaningful relationships with their peers.' (Participant K)

Specific projects mentioned as examples of a new space were: shared education in Northern Ireland; Anti-bias Curriculum; The Visiting Programme; and The Guestbook Project. These were seen to embody a form of learning about religions, beliefs and values that were connected to the lives of pupils, involved them in dialogue and encounter with people from different beliefs and developed children in a holistic, inclusive manner.

Yet there was a difference of opinion on inter-belief dialogue, some seeing it as a necessary element of an inclusive beliefs and values education, others resisting its prescription:

We would encourage schools to allow children to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to become involved in conversations around their own personal belief system. Some children are uncomfortable with such heightened attention and feel affirmed and validated without needing to voice contributions. (Participant C)

Relationships across the categories

In each arena there are tensions between different elements but there are also common elements and, when these are put together, it is possible to construct a bigger picture that

emerges from the data. This is shown as a model of education about religion, beliefs and values on the island of Ireland (Fig 5).

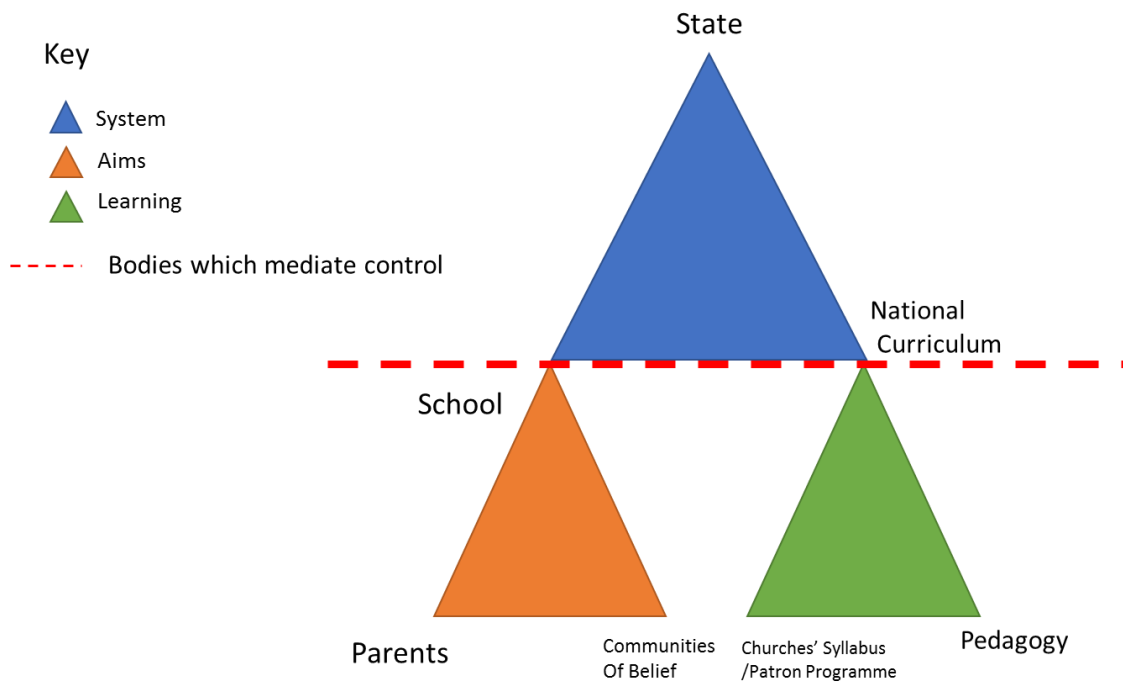


Figure 5: Model of religion, education and learning

What the model shows is that the state, by which we primarily mean Government Departments with responsibility for education, has a relationship with schools and curriculum, though in both cases its control is mediated through various bodies.

In relation to the System-Aims relationship the state has limited control over the aims of education. This confirms what, in their extensive work on policy enactment, Ball et al have noted (2012, p.10): ‘What happens inside a school in terms of how policies are interpreted and enacted will be mediated by institutional factors... [and] depend to some extent on the degree to which particular policies will ‘fit’ or can be fitted within the existing ethos and culture of the school or can change ethos and culture.’ But what the evidence here suggests is that mediation is likely to be even more pronounced in the Irish context.

This devolution of responsibility for aims was possible, as one participant (L) noted because schools had 'community legitimacy' by dint of the overlapping purpose of school, family and church, however, with the increase in plurality of belief the legitimacy is, in places, less certain and requires a new more democratic contract between schools, parents and communities of belief. Indeed, the participants in this research identified specific examples of how the reluctance of the state to extend democratic processes and human rights to schools was undermining the equal and fair treatment of teachers and students. One was the reluctance to impose equality legislation upon schools in relation to the employment of teachers, North and South, and, a second, was the reluctance of the southern state to offer a conscience clause for teachers in the South, thus allowing them to opt-out from delivering religious education should they wish.

A second issue in the System-Aims relationship is that the state pays insufficient attention to the development of common values thus creating a society that has a diminished sense of the common or public good:

I am concerned with the way in which this system of school management forces schools to distinguish themselves from one another in terms of ethos, indeed to compete with one another in this regard in order to secure new schools, rather than to find the points of dialogue. By creating a situation that makes school provision into a marketplace of ethoi, the State has failed to create the conditions for points of connection, for dialogue and for sharing. It runs the risk of demanding monolithic positions in respect of school identity rather than inviting a dialogue about those values that we share with one another and the ways in which these values are lived. (Participant G)

With regard to the System-Learning relationship we can see that the state has no direct control over what students learn regarding religions, beliefs and values as they are not responsible for the writing of the RE or Patron's programmes. And, in the past, when they have attempted to exert direct control in this area the results have, to date, not been successful; the most recent example being the stalled implementation of the ERBE

curriculum in the South. On the other hand, the evidence from the research here shows that the national curriculum has an influence on what happens in relation to learning in religion, beliefs and values as it is the same teachers who deliver the national curriculum and the religious education syllabus or Patron's programme. This is inevitably heightened where teachers teach in a cross-curricular approach and there are a few examples of cross-curricular materials including *Faith and Light* and *St Patrick* that include religious education which have been developed by CCEA in the North. In these cases, active-learning and play-based approaches which are features of the wider curriculum approach in Primary environments have influenced the materials and how pupils are expected to learn in relation to religion, beliefs and values.

Moving to the relationship between 'Aims' and 'Learning', it is important to note the gap between 'communities of belief' and 'Church Syllabuses/ Patron's programmes'.

Traditionally, Christian churches have occupied a powerful place in relation to learning about religions, beliefs and values because they have had the ability to connect these two elements and close the gap between 'aims' and 'learning'. In other words, the Church community, or their representatives, have had direct responsibility for the Church syllabus. The situation has inevitably become more complex as a result of the increased varieties of communities of belief, north and south, including non-belief. To some degree the gap has been addressed by the Patrons of Educate Together schools in the South and Integrated Schools in the North developing their own curricula in response to local parental preferences. There have been some strains and tensions between schools and some religious communities in the process, but the schools have been able to cultivate a sufficiently strong connection between 'communities of belief' and RE/Patron's programmes by closely involving parents in their syllabus planning and adapting inclusive approaches (although these are quite different between the two school types).

The gap between 'communities of belief' and 'Churches' Syllabus/ Patrons' programmes' also raises an obvious question regarding the schools who have maintained the traditional approach where the common element between 'aims' and 'learning' is the Church Syllabus

of Religious Education: how are communities of belief from outside the Church accommodated in learning about religions, beliefs and values? Evidence from this research suggests that faith schools view the opt-out option for pupils as a positive choice in this regard. However, it is important to note the views of young people in this regard reported by Mawhinney et al (2010) that opt-out can result in ‘a sense amongst many minority belief students that their beliefs were not of interest or concern to their school.’

Finally, it is important to make two comments about the interaction between the three arenas. Firstly, in relation to the relationship between system, aims and learning, churches and Patrons have been able to exert a level of control over what pupils learn regarding religions, beliefs and values by having the ability to connect the three arenas to a greater or lesser degree (see Fig 6). By achieving this ‘locus of control’ schools have been able to present a coherent and legitimate form of learning about religions, beliefs and values.

Secondly, a hugely significant aspect of any education system is of course the teacher and they lie at the interface of all three arenas of this study having to deliver on the demands from the system level, work within the aims and expectations of the school and create

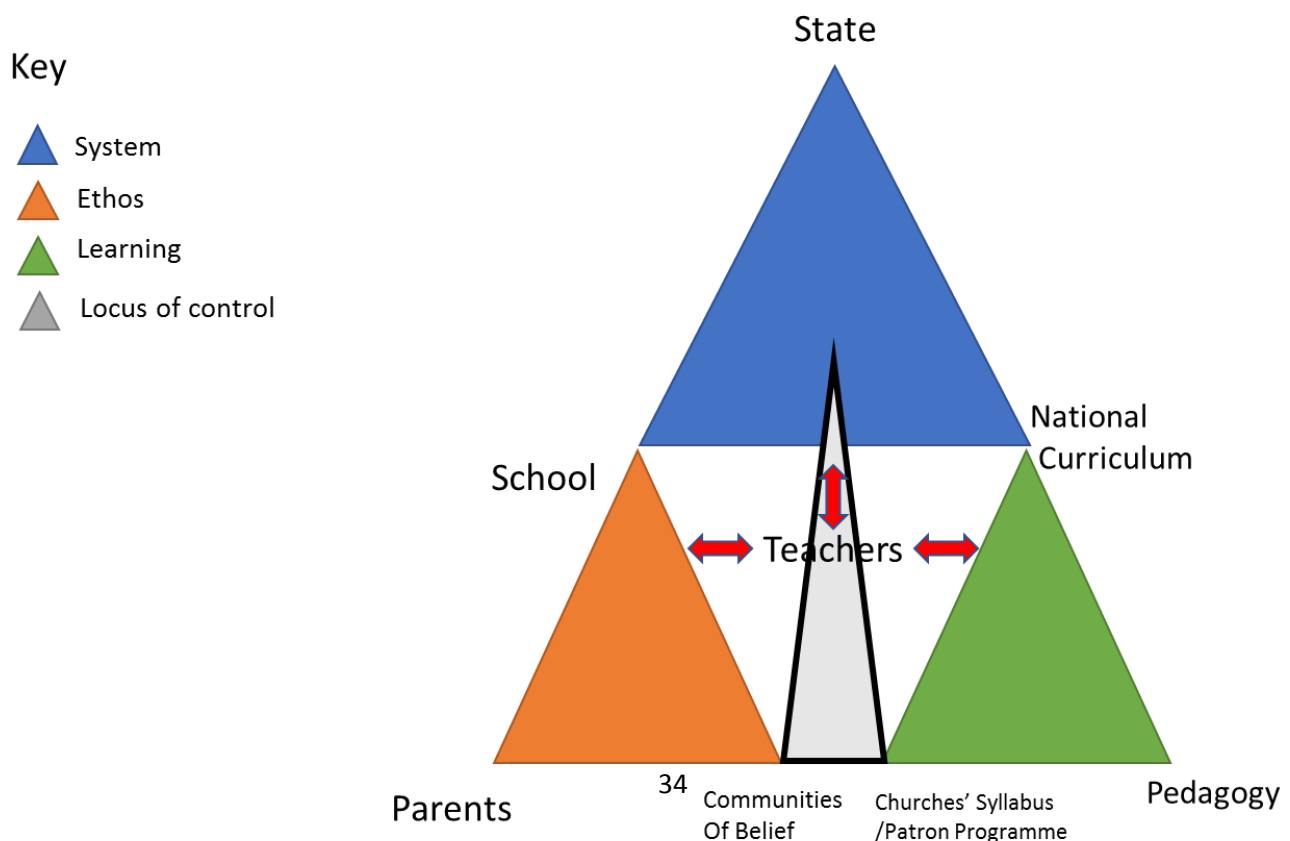


Figure 6: Locus of control

opportunities for pupils to learn about religion, beliefs and values. Traditionally, teachers have achieved a synergy between these three arenas as their own identity, beliefs and values have overlapped with the aims of the school and the modes of learning about religion, beliefs and values. The evidence from this research shows, however, that for some young teachers this harmony of values is not present and this raises issues of authenticity, identity and conscience for teachers.

Conclusions

The first aim of this research was to facilitate cross-border inter-professional learning for stakeholders in policy and teacher education contexts around recent developments in policy and practice of teaching about religion and beliefs in schools. Feedback from an evaluation of the project indicated that it was achieved in a significant way – all participants identified ways in which they found the project valuable, seeing it as ‘an opportunity to learn’, participate in a ‘professional network’, ‘clarify ideas’ and explore ‘deeper issues, meanings and ideas represented by each speakers’ experience’. The format of the sessions was regarded as ‘congenial’ and participants commented on the value of the opportunity to read and reflect on papers prior to the symposia and one noted: ‘Preparing a document in advance really focused my thinking around my own model and highlighted the complexity in trying to describe it.’ The most common recommendation for improvement was to have more time to extend the discussions; one participant felt there were ‘too many papers’ in the time available, however, outcomes from the discussions acted as a springboard for new initiatives. These included plans by one participant to develop a ‘toolkit’ for schools to explore issues of ethos. Another participant noted: ‘I have already planned to meet a colleague from the project about exploring the possibilities of cross-border projects and we have already shared resource materials.’

The second aim was to explore stakeholders’ perspectives and responses to current challenges in this area. Given that participants were all experienced educationalists and involved to various degrees in policy development and theoretical analysis of beliefs and values education, the data provided from the papers and the symposia discussions were rich in breadth and depth. In responding to our original request to *discuss the current strengths and challenges of shared religious education and/or education about religion and beliefs in plural classrooms*, participants reached back historically and drew upon theoretical understandings to contextualise and position their responses, thus fulfilling Skeie’s (2001,

p.247) recommendation that those aiming to transform a system of religious education should 'dialogue with its own past'.

We can see from the data that what children learn in the area of religions, beliefs and values is a result of a complex interplay of historical, religious, political and socio-cultural factors. We have attempted to bring some structure to the complexity by identifying in our data three main arenas through which we can understand how decisions are made and policy developed in relation to this area of education and, crucially, how learning is situated within the wider school, community and policy contexts. We also identified, similar to Freire (1996) and Alexander (2005), that questions of authority, agency, nurture and criticality are of particular significance in these arenas, across all school types.

It was noted that, in both jurisdictions, the state is not involved directly in religious education or in controlling the ethos (religious or otherwise) of individual schools. In the majority of schools on the island, Christian churches retain the strongest influence over how and what pupils learn about religions, values and beliefs. However, alongside this continuity in authority over curricula and preference for nurturing children in faith, is increasing diversity of pupil and teacher beliefs, as well as newly emergent approaches to equality based schooling and integrated and multi-denominational education which have challenged traditional forms of authority in education and received notions of religious education. Thus, greater diversity of belief and practice have raised issues of agency at a group level and a personal level.

At a group level, there is a disconnect between communities of belief, other than Christianity, and curriculum programmes. Absence of formal positions of control for those who sit outside dominant groups clearly raises issues of fairness and equality. At a personal level, the position of the pupil and the teacher in relation to identity and belief is not well defined. For pupils, this may mean that assumptions are made about beliefs on the basis of belonging (or not belonging) to certain communities and the dialogical space which Wright

(2000) believes is essential for developing criticality in religious education, is limited. For the teacher, this can cause issues of personal and professional integrity. Indeed, this research has highlighted the concept of authenticity as one that requires further investigation and attention in respect of teachers' professional and personal lives; in the literature and scholarly discourse of teaching about religions, beliefs and values in the Irish context little work has been done on this concept.

As well as using the lens of authority and agency, we have employed the concepts of nurture and criticality in our investigations. From our findings we can see a growing recognition of criticality as an aspect of learning about religion, beliefs and values even at Primary levels, as well as an enthusiasm for the development of new curricular 'spaces' for religious, beliefs and values education. Integrated schools and Multidenominational schools make more explicit connections to the value of criticality in education than, on the surface at least, do faith based schools. In the South, for example, we can see the development of the Educate Together movement as leading the way in the articulation of equality based approaches in schools, which eschew emphasis on the 'formation' of children in favour of emphases on critical thinking and ethical understanding (Rowe 2000; Mulcahy 2006). The recent ERBE Curriculum developments from NCCA and the emergence since 2008 of the Community National School (and its process curriculum *Goodness Me, Goodness You!*) are analogous examples which even explicitly refer to 'problem-posing' education and progressive educationalists such as Freire as models of practice (ERBE 2016; GMGY 2016). That said, however, and in the spirit of criticality itself, we must also acknowledge the gap between educational rhetoric and reality. While the new approaches described above are to be warmly welcomed in their vision and ambition for agency and criticality, even their own adherents admit to the complexity of this type of educational practice, both philosophically and pedagogically (Mulcahy 2008). While faith based pedagogies can draw on hundreds of years of religious reflection and understanding whilst also being somewhat univocal in design and authority, newer approaches have less tradition to draw on and also are more equivocal and varied in approach. While this is often seen as a positive sign of diversity and openness, it can also especially in practice lead to some confusion. Pluralist approaches to education might thus be regarded as more challenging in the Irish context and will need

time and consideration to become more embedded and confident, both in terms of their philosophical vision and in terms of their everyday curricular practice in schools (there is a need for greater teacher CPD and ITE support in this respect). Inclusive pedagogical approaches, it would seem, have yet to be confidently owned by teachers in plural classrooms. We thus may have to be patient in hoping to see new forms of criticality and agency emerge in Irish education, a criticality and agency which might in important ways dovetail with resituated notions of authority and nurture in schools (if seen as benign and empowering). This dovetailing, at least in principle, this kind of convergence, seems possible in both faith-based and in more pluralist settings of schools. No one type of school has, or should be seen as having, a monopoly on this type of 'shared education'.

In addition, we would highlight from our findings that, to succeed, new initiatives or the development of new 'spaces' must take account of how, historically, decisions about religious education have been made - the 'locus of control'. We believe new pedagogical 'spaces' cannot exist free from the influence of other arenas; and they are unlikely to be sustainable unless they develop a locus of power that links 'learning' to 'system' and 'aims'.

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Appendix 1 – Outline for Briefing Paper

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our all island symposium on Sharing Education, Sharing Beliefs.

There will be 12 members of the symposia, plus two chairs, James and Jones. At the first event in Belfast we plan to discuss 6 briefing papers, three from participants based in the South and three from participants based in the North. You have been chosen as one of the 6 contributors for the Belfast event.

Prior to the event on 7 Dec we would like you to prepare a short briefing paper, around 1000 words (max 1500 words) in response to the theme, 'sharing beliefs and sharing education' in Primary schools. The intention is that you briefly outline the 'state of play' based on your experience of the sector(s)/ school management-type(s) with which you are most familiar. Further, we are keen to hear, from your perspective, what are the current strengths and challenges in relation to shared religious education and/or education about religion and beliefs in plural classrooms especially in relation to opportunities for dialogue around issues of belief, values and religion. Finally, you are asked to end your paper with several open-ended questions which summarise the current challenges faced in the context you have outlined. Please note, this is not a request for a full academic paper, the purpose of the event is to provide a space for thinking and the development of ideas so the briefing paper is simply an entry point into that process.