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— FOLLOWS THE FULL TEXT OF THE ARTICLE —

Religious Education as Peace Education: A Perspective from Northern Ireland

Norman Richardson: Stranmillis University College, Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

Abstract

The role of religion in schooling in Northern Ireland has long been contentious and has often been represented as a major factor in the region's conflicted sectarian history. Religious Education (RE) in schools is predominantly Christian in style and content, often largely instructional in nature and is perceived to be representative of one or other of the dominant cultural communities. Yet, throughout the decades of political conflict and right up to the present, some educators have proposed pedagogies and developed resources towards a conception of RE as a major contributor to peace and community cohesion.

This study sets out the background to this situation and outlines the obstacles and challenges to a Religious Education focused on building peace through improving good relations in the local sectarian context as well as in relation to the wider context of race and inter-religious relationships. It draws on a range of research and on-going qualitative studies, based on interviews and questionnaires, focusing on the attitudes and experiences of serving teachers, student teachers, parents and members of minority ethnic-cultural communities. In particular, it highlights attitudes to diverse learning beyond traditional confines and to the levels of pedagogical confidence of educators in dealing with potentially controversial topics in the classroom.

Overall findings in Northern Ireland have indicated significant teacher wariness about tackling such topics but also a growing openness to the possibility of moving towards a more inclusive and professional approach to the teaching of RE. These views are analysed and some options for further research and professional development are proposed and discussed.

Keywords: Peace, Peace Education, Northern Ireland, cultural diversity, human rights, intercultural dialogue, community cohesion, inclusive Religious Education

Religious Education (RE) has, from time to time and in variable contexts, been associated with processes and strategies concerned with education for peace. The late Karl Ernst Nipkow, a leading German religious educator who had lived through the Nazi period,

once pointed out that “in the past, the chief subjects in schools that promoted a spirit of war or peaceful attitudes, feelings and concepts were history and religion”, and that “education for peace is a crucial part of education for lived democracy and critical citizenship” (Nipkow, 2007, p. 113). From within the UK, Jeff Astley has proposed that “discussions focused on issues of peace and violence should be of central concern to all those who teach and explore religion and its communication” (Astley, 2007, p. 1). In this paper these perceptions of Religious Education will be explored, particularly from the perspective of Northern Ireland.

Religious Education professionals have sometimes made significant claims for their subject in relation to its capacity to empower positive social change. Perhaps this is in part due to a regular need to defend the subject against those who dismiss it as irrelevant in a secular age; perhaps it is also out of a conviction that many of the issues explored in RE are extremely relevant at a time when religiously motivated conflict is constantly in the news. Religious beliefs may be taboo as a topic of discussion for many people, but some RE educators have frequently argued strongly in favour of talking about the very issues that divide and lead to conflict, as a way of moving beyond those conflicts. While some teachers of RE may perceive this as a key pedagogical approach, governments may sometimes have sensed the possibility of political expediency in such processes. Indeed, other teachers of the subject, perhaps due to lack of confidence, insecure knowledge, limited professional training or fear of causing offence, have probably contemplated such approaches with caution and considerable uncertainty. This is not made any easier by the fact that RE has often been disadvantaged at all stages of education by a high percentage of non-specialist teachers. These different experiences and perceptions may well create uncomfortable ground for many working in the field of Religious Education.

Issues around peace and community relations have from time to time been the subject of discussions and experiments in RE in Northern Ireland, and this will be considered in more detail later. Firstly, however, it seems helpful to consider the wider picture and to set in context this author’s personal interest in the area. After several years working as an RE specialist in primary and secondary schools, the middle years of the author’s career were spent in an ecumenical project developing peace education resources and training for schools and churches during some of the very intense years of the Northern Ireland conflict, known as ‘The Troubles’ (1968-98). The insights gained in this role into issues around religion, peace and the building of good community relations proved invaluable for a subsequent career phase in academic life and teacher education.

A concept of peace is prominent in virtually all religious traditions, even if religions often seem conflicted and compromised by their incapacity to live up to it. The ecumenical peace education project indicated above was significantly built around a rationale that stemmed from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, notably two key Biblical words that are translated into English as “peace”. The concepts of wholeness and well-being suggested in the Hebrew “shalom” are complemented in the New Testament by the Greek “eirene” (used for “shalom” when the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek) with its sense of breaking down barriers and reconciliation. These deeper understandings of peace, going far beyond the simple notion of an absence of conflict

or violence, are also evident in several secular human rights statements. (It is worth noting that some religious thinkers, including the theologian Teilhard de Chardin, were influential in contributing to the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the mid-1940s [UNESCO 1949]).

This approach, it can be argued, offers a genuine basis for religious and secular ideologies to work together in the development of a rationale for peace education. Human Rights declarations have increasingly emphasised a key purpose of education as being about living together peacefully. Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child indicates that education should teach children to respect their own and others' cultures and prepare them to live responsibly and peacefully in a free society "in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin" (UN, 1989: Article 29[d]). UNESCO's Delors Report (UNESCO, 1996) identified "Learning to live together" as one of what it called "the four pillars of education".

In England, following radical Islamist attacks, the UK government's *Prevent Strategy* drew some RE organisations into developing related programmes such as the Religious Education Council's "RE-silience" project, which set out to foster "integration and national cohesion" by means of "building confidence to handle contentious issues in RE" (REC, 2010). A later initiative urged those responsible for RE and other subjects to promote "fundamental British values" to counter religious radicalisation and extremism. RE teachers, curriculum developers and academics have often responded positively to such requests, even if with some reservations, recognising that there is a valid place for RE in the process of building peace and contributing to social cohesion and have attempted to create meaningful programmes for schools and learners. So, for example, in their 2013 review of Religious Education in England and Wales, the Religious Education Council proposed that one key purpose of the subject should be to "Gain and deploy the skills needed to engage seriously with religions and worldviews, so that they can [...] enquire into what enables different individuals and communities to live together respectfully for the wellbeing of all" (REC, 2013, p. 15). In 2013-14, several meetings of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Religious Education focused on "RE and Good Community Relations", offering evidence from a range of practice and highlighting desired outcomes, many of which related to adequately preparing and supporting teachers to deal with difficult inter-community and intercultural issues in their schools (REC, 2014).

The Council of Europe (CoE) has emphasised the importance of religious communities in developing a religious dimension of intercultural dialogue for "the promotion of values, peace, dialogue, education and solidarity" (CoE, 2008a), and has also produced materials for teachers working in publicly funded schools, offering case studies of effective practice and guidance on how to develop relevant skills (Jackson 2014; Keast 2007). In 2008 a recommendation to member states proposed that the objectives for education should include "providing opportunity to create spaces for intercultural dialogue in order to prevent religious or cultural divides; [...] promoting knowledge of different aspects [...] of religious diversity; [...] combatting prejudice and stereotypes" and "developing skills of critical evaluation and reflection with regard to understanding the perspectives and ways of life of different religions and non-religious

convictions” (CoE, 2008b). A survey conducted in 2011 in all CoE member states found considerable interest in this recommendation, though also a range of concerns and some confusion. These included uncertainty around the differing perceptions of RE in schools (whether it should be about developing open-ended religious awareness, or instruction into a religious way of life); concerns about the quality of teaching and the adequacy of teacher education in RE; uncertainty about the appropriateness of including non-religious beliefs; how to deal with public perceptions of religion in the media; and issues relating to minority rights and the displaying of religious symbols (Jackson, 2014, pp. 23-24). A specific non-confessional approach was offered by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religion and Beliefs in Public Schools* (ODIHR/OSCE, 2007) was produced by a panel of independent experts in law, human rights, religion, sociology and education with the aim of establishing agreed principles for those teaching about religion and beliefs in order to “foster democratic citizenship, promote understanding of societal diversity and [...] enhance social cohesion” (Ibid: 13). Also, during this period a major European research project known as REDCo (Religion, Education, Dialogue, Conflict) was established in eight European countries to enquire into whether studies of religions in schools can help to promote dialogue and reduce conflict in school and society, resulting in the publication of a series of books and articles (Weisse, 2010).

This kind of rationale in RE and the strategies to which it has given rise, have not been without criticism. Moulin (2012) has warned of the danger of simply turning RE into a form of civics and ignoring its religious purposes, citing the RE-silience programme as an example. Gearon (2012) has suggested that “the current predominance of political and secularizing aims of religious education are a significant ‘misrepresentation’ of religion within education” and has expressed particular concern about the ways that RE has become “increasingly enmeshed with political agencies across a wide spectrum of geopolitical contexts”, citing in particular the Toledo Guidelines and the REDCo project (ibid.: 152; 154-5), suggesting that this is a wilful attempt to reduce Christian influence. Other writers, such as Barnes (2009), have suggested that “post-confessional, multi-faith religious education” has misrepresented the nature of religion in order to appeal to an approach focusing on tolerance and social cohesion. This is not the place for a detailed representation of this debate, but in a rejoinder to Gearon’s critique, Jackson (2015) argued that support for learning about religions from organisations like the Council of Europe or the OSCE does not imply that RE educators are working to the particular political or security agendas of those bodies. Jackson also emphasises that the focus of RE on issues around mutual respect and social cohesion is by no means intended to be the only valid purpose of the subject. This point is also made in the British parliamentary (APPG) report, which indicates that promoting good community relations is only one dimension of RE. Janet Orchard (2015, p. 43) agrees that “RE as a subject would be severely diminished if it were to be reduced to this aim alone”, also pointing out that such issues should certainly not be limited to Religious Education. Any consideration of a role for RE in relation to peace and community relations needs to be understood in this context, namely that it is an important dimension of education as a whole.

While fears of radicalization and how to deal with it have largely prompted recent debates and approaches in Britain and parts of Europe, in Northern Ireland, as a contested interface between the United Kingdom and Ireland, the significant ‘community cohesion’ issue has continued to centre on relationships between the two predominant cultural/political/religious communities. While the shorthand terminology of “Catholics” and “Protestants” is commonly used, the terms reflect primarily a sense of national belonging – Britishness or Irishness – rather than an indication of current religious practice. These relationships certainly remain an important area of concern, but over recent decades the numbers of ethnic and religious minorities have grown and issues around racism and a wider multiculturalism have gained significant prominence. Thus, although the context remains noticeably different from that in other parts of the UK and many parts of Europe, there are many similarities in how these issues work out in social relationships in general and inter-faith relationships in particular. It has therefore seemed to this writer that much of the thinking gleaned from the work of the Council of Europe, the Toledo principles and similar initiatives can be broadly helpful in offering perspectives and approaches for the particular situation of Northern Ireland.

Space does not permit a detailed outline of the background to the role of RE in peace education in this Province of the UK, but a few key points can be summarised here.

- Northern Ireland continues to stumble through its emergence from decades of civil unrest and frequent violence, fuelled by historical, cultural, territorial, colonial and economic factors, often underpinned by people’s sense of community/religious identity.
- Publicly funded schooling remains effectively separate along Catholic/Protestant lines for about 90% of the population. (Only just over 7% of pupils attend intentionally mixed or ‘integrated’ schools). Many believe educational separation to be a major contributor to community discord, though others suggest that this is only a symptom, not a cause of division. Perhaps it is both! As a consequence of separate schooling, many Catholics and Protestants have never had opportunities to learn about, with and from each other and many people are wary of religious discussion (Richardson, 2014).
- Historically the larger Christian Churches were responsible for the establishment of schools before the provision of education became a state function. Protestant denominations mostly transferred their schools to state control in the 1930s, but sought to retain influence in management and the teaching of religion. The Catholic Church in Ireland continues to be responsible for the management of its schools, even though they are now fully state funded, and Catholic Religious Education remains overtly confessional ‘faith formation’.
- Religious teaching in the form of Christian instruction was always common practice in schools but was formally prescribed in law for all schools in Northern Ireland’s 1947 Education Act, which stated that schools had to provide Religious Instruction “based upon the Holy Scriptures” plus a daily act of collective worship. Conscience clauses permitting parents to withdraw their

children were included. Despite the change of name to Religious Education, these provisions remain in place to the present (Richardson, 2014).

- As schooling is largely separate, so is RE. The ‘Core Syllabus for Religious Education’ in Northern Ireland (DE, 2007) is written exclusively by the larger Christian denominations¹ and is predominantly Christian in assumptions, tone and content. In devising the Core Syllabus, the Churches made clear from the outset that their intention was to “restrict the core syllabus to a study of Christianity” (Churches’ Drafting Group, 1991), and in their later revision document they continued to argue that it was important to retain “the essential Christian character of Religious Education for all grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland” (Churches Working Party, 2003). A limited unit on world faiths was included in the 2007 revision of the Syllabus, but only for pupils aged 11-14. Integrated schools have, however, tended to operate a more inclusive and broadly-based approach to RE. (In 2022 the Northern Ireland High Court found the RE Core Syllabus to be in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights, the legal consequences of which, at the time of writing, are yet to be revealed [Judicial Communications Office, July 2022]).
- RE is not included in professional school inspections unless specifically requested by a school’s Governors; in practice this seldom takes place. Churches retain the right to inspect RE but, in the case of the Protestant denominations, this is now seldom carried out.
- While Religious diversity – among different kinds of Christians and other faith communities – has continued to grow, many people in Northern Ireland have little or no inter-religious awareness or understanding and until very recently schools have largely ignored this aspect of learning.
- A range of initiatives in community relations education were developed during and since the Troubles, initially by voluntary or academic groups and later with the support of government. Peace education curricula initiated by the Churches, Quakers and others often fed into these programmes under terms such as Cultural Studies, Education for Mutual Understanding and, later, Local and Global Citizenship. These often included opportunities for cross-community inter-school contact, and they have now mostly been incorporated into the Northern Ireland education system in various forms, although it could be argued that RE has been less impacted by this than other aspects of the curriculum (Richardson, 2019).

During the period of the Troubles, some RE curriculum developers and some educational administrators encouraged RE teachers to explore, through their subject, contentious local issues, not least cultural, political and religious differences (CPEP, 2005; McElhinney, Harris, & Greer, 1987; Richardson, 1986; 1990). Many teachers of RE, however, were to say the least wary of stepping into such dubious territory, while some politicians and religious leaders – including some with considerable influence – opposed any such suggestion, often in religious terms and with political support

1 The Catholic Church in Ireland; the Presbyterian Church in Ireland; the Church of Ireland (Anglican); and the Methodist Church in Ireland.

and even occasionally with veiled threats (Richardson, 2011, pp. 146-150). Despite this some interesting and influential work was carried out, although its impact was undoubtedly limited by the concerns and constraints of the time. Most notable was the work of John Greer and his collaborators in the “Religion in Ireland” project, in which post-primary teachers were encouraged to visit different churches and explore similarities and differences between Catholic and Protestant traditions with their pupils (Greer & McElhinney, 1985). This may seem tame in the extreme now, especially elsewhere in the UK and Europe, but in ‘mid-Troubles’ Northern Ireland it was regarded as contentious, even possibly dangerous. The publication of these resources was followed up by a professional development and research process which encouraged and investigated the use of classroom discussion in controversial issues in RE (McElhinney et al, 1987). Greer was also significantly involved in investigating young people’s attitudes to Catholic/Protestant differences (Francis, 1996). In their Teachers’ Guide to the *Religion in Ireland* materials, Greer and McElhinney (1985, p. 11) observed that “Religious Education may easily become part of the process of initiation into the tribalism of Northern Ireland”, a verdict that may still hold some validity in the light of continuing educational separation.

At the same time as Greer and colleagues were developing their programmes, the Churches’ Peace Education Programme (CPEP) was focusing on curriculum materials for primary schools, including a significant RE element. Their resource pack (CPEP, 1983) initially included stories based on children from different local and global religious and cultural backgrounds and case studies of religiously motivated people committed to working for peace² and was later expanded to include a resource to support joint school visits to Catholic and Protestant churches (CPEP, 1985). The recognition that many teachers had a limited sense of how to make use of resources of this kind, however, led to a good deal of CPEP’s later work being focused on awareness-raising and training for serving teachers.

As the scope of these initiatives moved from focusing solely on ‘Catholics and Protestants’ to other expressions of religion, it became increasingly evident that the deficit in awareness of Christian diversity was even more marked when it came to understanding world religions. The refusal of the Churches to include world religions in their first version of the RE Core Syllabus certainly did nothing to ameliorate this situation, and the eventual inclusion of world faiths, limited to pupils aged 11-14, in the 2007 revised syllabus could be judged as a rather half-hearted gesture³. Despite some creative initiatives in relationship-building through RE, the subject remains contentious and sensitive in the perception of many teachers and others, some of whom may certainly believe RE to be part of the problem rather than the solution.

From this analysis, it is perhaps now possible to draw together these strands and propose a construct that indicates how RE may contribute towards education for peace. As in other areas of the curriculum, there are perhaps four key *overlapping* dimensions to the processes required to develop a peace education approach to RE. These are

2 Aspects of these publications were later updated and compiled into a single volume entitled “People Who Need People” (Richardson, 2005).

3 In the Churches’ introduction to their revision proposals, it was suggested that world religions “will require only a modest amount of teaching time” (Churches’ Working Party, 2003, p. 11).

deliberately represented in relation to the UNESCO “Four Pillars of Education”, as indicated in the Delors Report (UNESCO, 1996):

Knowledge (*Learning to Know*): learning *about* religions and beliefs/worldviews; religious diversity – within and between religions; the impact of religious beliefs;

Skills (*Learning to Do*): responding and interpreting; how to find out; working through dilemmas and options; dealing with stereotypes and prejudice;

Encounter (*Learning to Live Together*): visiting; meeting; including different ‘others’; sharing; listening; dialogue; *and*

Reflection (*Learning to Be*): feelings; thinking through personal responses; attitudinal development; taking a holistic view; learning *from* religion.

This “four pillars model”, as a construct for peace education in RE – and indeed in the wider curriculum – is based on awareness of and respect for diversity, with implications that are essentially social and relational. A relational approach is central to a recent British Quaker document that outlines a philosophy of peace education and explores its practical outworking (Gee, Brooks, & Cartwright, 2022). The authors propose that peace in education is about “the health of society in its diversity” and that it helps young people “to forge conscientious relationships with themselves and the world around them”, in the context of supporting the “common hopes of young people to shape a more just, more inclusive world”. This perspective has great potential for an education system such as in Northern Ireland that is trying to mitigate the effects of community separation, and the document goes on to explore various aspects of its relational approach in the curriculum and beyond. Surprisingly, however, for a Quaker (Religious Society of Friends) document, there is no reference to RE or to any religious dimensions of their approach.

Research into these issues in Northern Ireland has been limited, but nevertheless has helped to inform an understanding of some of the challenges and concerns as well as some of the possible ways forward for peace-building through the medium of RE. Earlier attitudinal surveys (Greer, 1972; 1988), tended to indicate a reasonable level of openness among young people towards religion in general and religious diversity more specifically. What was not clear, however, is the extent to which that openness extended into adult life. It is difficult to follow this through without significant longitudinal studies, but surveys by the Equality Commission (2012) or the Northern Ireland Life & Times (ARK, 2022) suggest that public attitudes towards religious difference are generally positive, though with some evidence of negative attitudes towards some minority groups.

Indications of specific challenges for RE arising from increased religious diversity since the end of the Troubles were evident in two small scale studies that set out to discover the experiences of minority faith communities, both of which seemed to indicate that the “knowledge” dimension of RE was seriously deficient. A survey of minority faith parents (Richardson, 2003a) from the Muslim, Hindu, Baha’i, Jewish, Buddhist and Sikh faiths provided some insights into how teachers’ limited awareness of diversity issues was perceived by those “on the receiving end” of educational provision. A series of questions focused on parents’ experiences of the teaching of RE,

opt-out provisions, and accommodation of diet, dress and absence for festivals. About half of the sample indicated that their children did attend RE classes, although two-thirds of the Muslim group did not attend. Of the non-attenders the most common reasons offered related to unhappiness with what was being taught in RE or uncertainty about what was involved. Only a small number of minority faith respondents indicated that RE in their child's school ever included consideration of their own religion, or indeed of any religion other than Christianity. Where such teaching did take place, a majority felt this to be "accurate" or "fair", but a small number indicated that they believed it to be "inaccurate" or "unbalanced" or even "biased". When asked about the extent to which they were satisfied with the RE provided by their child's school, two-thirds indicated that they were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" and about half of the remainder indicated that they were "unsure". On the basis of the parents' concerns the survey concluded that "the most important and most urgent areas are in relation to general awareness-raising amongst all who are working in schools – principals, classroom teachers, ancillary staff, governors – in order to make our schools more welcoming, more understanding and more inclusive" (ibid.:5). (An attempt in 2019-20 to revisit these findings was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but general experience of discussion with student teachers, serving teachers and minority faith parents suggests that there may not have been significant change).

A study by Mawhinney et al (2010) involving both pupils and parents from minority belief backgrounds (including religious and non-religious beliefs) also uncovered similar deficiencies in the awareness and understanding of religious diversity among teachers. The principal focus of this survey was on the RE opt-out provision as guaranteed in law, and the evidence suggested that many schools and teachers were unaware of, or unclear about this legislation. As in the earlier study, many of those interviewed were critical of what they perceived to be the narrow base of RE in schools, especially when it centred on doctrinal Christianity and appeared unsympathetic to, or unaware of, other beliefs. One of the recommendations of this report was that:

"All schools should review the content and approach of their Religious Education curriculum and periods of collective worship with the aim of making each more inclusive and welcoming of diversity in order to minimise the need for parents to withdraw their children. In this regard we commend the principles and practices indicated in the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools ...*" (Mawhinney et al, 2010, p. 67).

Other surveys have focused on the attitudes of student teachers and serving teachers, in particular relating to their awareness of diversity and the possibility of more inclusive practice in RE towards building greater mutual understanding. A student teachers' survey carried out in 2003 (Richardson, 2003b) included 171 students, mostly RE specialists, and was roughly balanced between two Initial Teacher Education providers in Northern Ireland: one (Y) is non-denominational (but has historically mainly served the Protestant community⁴) and the other (Z) is Catholic (with almost no intake from

4 The student intake for teacher education courses in this institution has become increasingly mixed (in terms of Catholic/Protestant background) in recent years.

other backgrounds). Students in both institutions indicated that they had a moderate to high knowledge and awareness of Christian religious traditions (Z = 86% and Y = 98%), having studied them in school and as part of their education degree courses. Knowledge and awareness of world religions, however, found most of the students in the moderate to poor category, and almost 50% of the Y students rated themselves as “poor” in this regard, as compared with only 25% of Z students. Overall, this survey seemed to suggest that there was a growing openness towards teaching diversity issues from those entering the teaching profession, although it was clearly tempered by their own limited opportunities for such learning, especially because of a lack of inter-community and inter-religious encounter.

Follow-up surveys in the same two institutions over subsequent years set out to explore the background and relevant experience of students, their attitudes to the desirable qualities and capacities of an RE teacher and their understanding of the purposes of RE; once again there was a significant focus on diversity issues. The first (Richardson, 2008), with 224 respondents (all of them primary or secondary RE specialists) were roughly evenly balanced between the two institutions. A further study (Richardson & Hunter, 2011), using an almost identical questionnaire, also included a small cohort of PGCE students from a third ITE provider, a religiously-mixed-background university education faculty (X). With just 131 respondents overall and a different balance than previously, this study was therefore slightly more limited in its scope, but the nature of both studies has, nevertheless, enabled reasonable comparisons to be made between students from the different institutions, between the different cultural/religious backgrounds represented and also between students at different stages of their teacher education courses.

Both studies reveal a high level of religious affiliation on the part of students preparing to become teachers of RE. Only a tiny minority gave any suggestion of no longer belonging to a Christian tradition, and no students in either study had been brought up in religions other than Christianity. Overall, it is probably reasonable to interpret the data as indicating that the great majority of Catholics and Protestants who set out to be specialist RE teachers in Northern Ireland are practising members of a Christian denomination with a relatively conservative approach to their particular faith tradition.

Respondents in both these studies were asked to assess their past opportunities for meeting with other religious traditions, both within and beyond Christianity. In general, all students rated their opportunities for encounter with other kinds of Christians to have been notably greater than opportunities to meet members of other faiths, though Protestant students seemed slightly more confident in this regard. When asked to indicate the level of importance they attached to a range of suggested personal qualities, dispositions and capacities of RE teachers, over 90% of students in each study attached most importance to an RE teacher being someone who has “openness to people who believe differently”. Other responses in this section suggested a general openness to diversity and recognition of professional responsibilities regarding balance and inclusiveness. Students in the Catholic institution (Z) attached greater levels of importance, nevertheless, to “faith-related” qualities, such as “a personal Christian commitment” and “active church membership” than their counterparts in X or Y.

These later surveys suggested a slightly more confident approach to diversity issues on the part of student teachers than the initial study, though differences between the experiences and approaches in the two teacher education institutions appeared to remain significant.

Over almost two decades, student teachers in Y have been invited to record participant observer reports on their experience of RE in different types of primary schools. This has revealed, however, that the attitude towards diversity in too many classrooms is of “a problem to be avoided”. The great majority of observations, with only a few exceptions, have suggested a lack of any sense of the importance of RE as a medium for encouraging cross-cultural awareness and understanding, with little evidence of improvement over time, as this brief sample (taken from surveys between 2008 and 2022) indicates:

“There was no evidence at all of World Religions being taught despite the fact that there was a ... classroom with many different Cultures”;

“There is no diversity in the RE ... there is no-one to promote diversity and push for more cross-community activities”;

“This school was fairly multicultural, but it was clear that the attitude was that this was a Christian-ethos school and if you come here, you will simply accept that and be part of it or opt out”;

“... I saw that the school stuck closely to a Christian based curriculum, with no diversion into other faiths. This poses the risk of pupils developing prejudices early on ... as they lack understanding of other faiths. When asking the teacher about why they do not go into different diversity issues, she discussed that it was due to parents’ wishes ... that they wanted pupils to learn about their own faith ...”;

“Due to a lack of training, I believe teachers lacked confidence when teaching RE ... The school’s approach to RE is very narrow as all RE followed the protestant belief, despite having a religiously diverse student body. No policies address the integration of minority faith pupils into the school furthermore, no attempt is made to discuss other world religions.”

A small number of other students, however, have over this period recorded observations of good practice whereby similarities and differences between Catholics and Protestants were explored and world religions were also included. The most positive focus on diversity was frequently found in the small sector of integrated schools.

A study of the attitudes of serving teachers to RE in 127 Northern Ireland primary schools from the three main schooling sectors (State controlled, Catholic maintained and Integrated) unsurprisingly reflected a similar range of views to those found in the student teachers’ surveys (Richardson, 2012). While there were indications of conservative and cautious attitudes in all sectors, but especially in the controlled and maintained sectors, this study seemed to indicate openness to the exploration of diversity and recognition that this would become increasingly significant for the teaching of religion in Northern Ireland. Many of the responding teachers clearly saw RE as being mainly about “the promotion of Christian values”, but when asked how important they felt it was for children to explore issues of religious diversity in RE, the

level of support in all school types grew significantly through the different stages of the primary school and the predominant view in all sectors was that by Key Stage 2 such work was “very important”. Other aspects of this 2012 survey, however, suggest that teachers are still seriously lacking in training opportunities in RE and that their awareness of resources is extremely limited, especially in relation to issues around how to develop awareness of diversity and develop greater mutual understanding between those from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Ongoing informal surveys by the author of student teacher experiences in RE classrooms have continued to paint a very similar picture of limited and disappointing practice. There is clearly a need for further research in this area, involving a wider sample of teachers from all school types and, if possible, following cohorts’ attitudes through from teacher education into the qualified profession.

The willingness or otherwise to explore diversity in RE is clearly a significant factor in the process of developing peaceful relationships between communities, cultures and faiths. In their investigation of how RE teachers’ personal views impact on their classroom practice, Nelson and Yang (2022) have argued that “religious educators in publicly funded schools bear a particular burden to ensure that what they teach cultivates citizens who make a positive and reconciling contribution to their society”. They conclude that what is required – but is also clearly lacking in many schools in Northern Ireland – is “a code of practice for teachers of religious education, the inspection of Religious Education by qualified inspectors, a well-balanced curriculum that is informed by a pedagogical model for inclusive religious education in plural environments, and a meaningful and contemporary legal framework for teaching about religion”.

A number of other conclusions and provisional recommendations may be drawn from the surveys indicated above.

- Religious Education, when taught in an open and inclusive manner, does have potential for a positive contribution to education for peace in Northern Ireland and in other conflicted societies. This, however, should be recognised as one aspect of RE, not its sole purpose.
- RE that is broadly-based and inclusive, both in content and approach, can help teachers and learners to approach and understand difference in a positive manner. RE that is narrow and sectional, however, may well be counterproductive.
- Education for peace through RE is more than just a matter of extending pupils’ knowledge, important as that is. It must also include human encounter, discussion and dialogue and time for reflection.
- RE is not the only area of education that can contribute to peace education. For such work to be effective it needs to be seen in a broad context with the curriculum as a whole and as a whole-school concern.
- It is difficult to achieve opportunities for pupils and even many student teachers to engage in inter-denominational and inter-religious encounter within a system of significantly separate schooling along perceived religious lines, such as in Northern Ireland. The shared classroom in a common school is a much more appropriate environment for meeting, dialogue and intercultural learning.

- The danger inherent in the experience of many schools in Northern Ireland, where RE is narrow in conception and where there is an avoidance of exploring diversity and intercultural relationships, is that the subject will be marginalised and ultimately excluded from the curriculum. If lack of religious awareness and understanding is a part of the inter-community conflict in Northern Ireland (or anywhere else), these issues have to be opened up and included in any positive approach, not avoided.
- Teachers of RE (specialists and non-specialists alike) will benefit from personal and professional opportunities to extend their awareness of religious diversity, including encounter with people of different traditions and faiths and the development of active learning skills in dealing with controversial issues. This is a particular priority in relation to RE specialists. For a variety of reasons, not least that of the absence of almost any RE quality control, teachers in Northern Ireland remain at a particular disadvantage in this respect.
- It will be particularly helpful for schools to adopt standards of professional practice in relation to learning about religions and beliefs. Documents such as the Toledo Guiding Principles (ODIHR/OSCE, 2007) and “Signposts” (Jackson, 2014) should be considered for inclusion in professional development programmes for teachers, head teachers and educational administrators.

It seems reasonable to propose that, at its best, Religious Education can make a valuable contribution in education towards mutual understanding and peaceful attitudes at an interpersonal and intercommunity level, not least in situations where religion has played a significant role in historical and contemporary conflicts. Perhaps, however, as Janet Orchard suggests, it would be more important to say that it is *teachers* of RE who have a very significant role, through their personal and professional commitment and the way in which they “take a lead in modelling to others how to relate to people who are religiously and culturally different” (Orchard, 2015, p. 48).

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