NEW PEACE, NEW TEACHERS: STUDENT TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES OF DIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Abstract

This paper reflects upon student teachers’ conceptions of inter-community relations and the preparation they receive to address issues of diversity and mutual understanding. The study in Northern Ireland is set against a backdrop of political, social and educational change, where a shared, peaceful future appears possible. Student teachers at a Catholic institution and a predominantly Protestant institution indicated a willingness to engage with issues concerning diversity and inter-community relations, despite having a limited knowledge of the concepts. However they also demonstrated clear views about the relevance and value of the preparation they received. The findings are evaluated using multicultural theory.

Keywords

Teacher education, multiculturalism, cultural diversity, intercommunity relations
1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Dealing with conflict and diversity
Societies emerging from periods of protracted conflict are presented with myriad challenges in respect of how they deal with the legacy of violence, division and distrust. Despite the challenges, it is acknowledged that effective engagement with past events is vital if communities are to move forward, to build a secure, peaceful future (Hamber 1998, Theissen 2001). How and when communities begin to address the past is influenced by various factors, including the nature and outcome of the conflict, the political structures established in the aftermath and the wishes of victims - those who have been most directly impacted by the conflict. Clearly, the task of engaging with issues arising from societal conflict and efforts to establish a more peaceful society are shared across different statutory and non-statutory agencies. Education has been identified as a potentially important vehicle through which individuals or groups may deal with controversial and contentious issues arising from their experiences of conflict (Bush & Salterelli 2000, NFER 2005, Smith & Vaux 2003).

Irrespective of a history of conflict, a need to respond to the claims of groups of people whose identities differ from the majority is a feature of all modern states, regardless of whether or not they endorse the ideology of multiculturalism (Kelly 2002). Gallagher (2006) argues that since 9/11, there has been a worldwide shift away from separatist multicultural policy that privileges difference, towards more inclusive, integrationist developments. Indeed multiculturalism as a political doctrine has been significantly challenged by liberal egalitarians such as Barry (2001) who contend that it inhibits social cohesion. Defendants of multiculturalism counter that culture matters and that neutrality offers no protection from the bias and injustice meted out to members of cultural groups (Kelly, 2002). Hence the paradox that attempts to recognize the rights of collectivities and to protect them from harm, may actually reify difference and aid segregation rather than integration.

Whilst Sen blames much conflict in the world on the singular categorization that is ‘the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity’ (Sen, 2006, p.xv), Jenkins (2004) questions our ability to resist the powerful forces of socialisation that neatly pigeonhole each of us into a cultural category. Davies (2004) recognizes that essentialist identities can be mobilised for conflict and encourages educators to resist the confirmation of homogenous, fixed identities. To this end she proposes two educational requirements, firstly, the need to acknowledge the complexity and hybridity of identity and secondly, the need to avoid stereotypical reductions. However, use of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000) in many peace education initiatives around the world encourages the salience of group identity in order to promote prejudice reduction.
Multiculturalism is an historic concern of peace education, which strives not only to promote intercultural understanding, respect and acceptance of alternative perspectives, but also demands the challenge of social injustice (Harris & Morrison, 2004). In countries that have suffered from protracted conflict, peace education focuses on the project of the ‘other’. It has the specific purpose of enabling participants to take on the perspective of the other cultural group and to see that view as legitimate (Salomon, 2004). Response to, and recognition of cultural diversity is hugely challenging for the educators involved, not least due to a lack of ‘official’ advice and most certainly for new teachers who have themselves experienced a separate education system. Thus multicultural theory will provide the framework through which this paper will examine how student teachers in Northern Ireland might act as peace-builders in a changing society.

1.1.2 The Northern Ireland education system
Northern Ireland witnessed thirty years of societal violence, colloquially referred to as ‘The Troubles’, involving the two dominant communities of Protestants (Unionists) and Catholics (Republicans), and resulting in the deaths of over 3,500 people. Despite the advent of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the establishment of a devolved government containing representatives from both ‘sides’, in the form of the Northern Ireland Assembly, political consensus and social reconciliation have yet to be fully achieved.

While recognising the considerable improvements across economic, political and social spheres, separation continues to be a feature of many aspects of life in Northern Ireland, impacting on housing, education, sports and social activities. The school system is separated along denominational lines with the vast majority of children (94%) attending either controlled (mainly Protestant) schools or maintained (mainly Catholic) schools. The remaining 6% attend integrated schools which attract both Protestant and Catholic pupils as well as those of no religion (DE, 2008a). Teacher education at undergraduate level largely reflects the separate nature of the education system with undergraduate students attending higher education institutions (HEIs) which broadly reflect their own religious affiliation. Hence, the vast majority of Protestant students attend one HEI (although it is non-denominational) and a majority of Catholic students attend another HEI (which promotes a strong Catholic ethos). Postgraduate students enrol on university-based courses which have mixed religious intakes. Given the ‘separate’ structures in education, it is highly possible therefore that many teaching graduates (especially those completing undergraduate courses), will have ‘separate’ experiences, remaining in one ‘religious’ sector, from their own schooling, through ITE and then, into employment.

In addition, the education system in Northern Ireland is currently undergoing considerable changes. Falling demographics have dramatically reduced pupil numbers and resulted in recommendations for school amalgamations and closures (Independent
Strategic Review 2006). Naturally this has implications for teachers and teacher education, as employment opportunities have diminished and intakes to initial teacher education (ITE) are being radically reduced (DE 2006, 2007). Indeed, teacher education in Northern Ireland has been the subject of a five-year review and proposals have recently been put forward for the merger of two major ITE providers (DE, DEL 2003, 2005).

1.1.3 Educational Responses to conflict

Given the largely separate schooling experiences of the majority of pupils, a series of peace initiatives were introduced into the education system from the 1970’s onwards (Malone 1973, Skilbeck 1973, McCully 1985, Robinson 1982). Later, these included the insertion of cross-curricular themes, Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage into the formal curriculum (DENI 1992) and the establishment of interschool links through the Schools Community Relations Programme (SCRP). While both initiatives generated some positive outcomes (DENI 2002, Smith & Robinson 1996), significant limitations were highlighted by various educational commentators, including teachers’ avoidance of controversial or contentious issues in the classroom (CCEA 2000, Gallagher 1998, Richardson 1997, Smith & Robinson 1996).

In 1999, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI) published a report entitled ‘Towards a Culture of Tolerance’ which sought to reinvigorate educationalists in their efforts to promote tolerance and respect for diversity by placing these as more central aims of the curriculum (DENI 1999). In 2005, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) released a consultation document entitled ‘A Shared Future’ which set out the government’s vision for a shared and inclusive society (OFMDFM 2005). This contained a series of aims and proposed actions concerning educational policies, structures and curriculae as well as teacher education and professional development. While ‘community relations’ continues to be employed when referring to relationships between the two dominant religious communities, it has also been used to describe relations between other religious and cultural communities in Northern Ireland. Members of the Indian, Chinese, and African communities have been domiciled in Northern Ireland for many years and in recent times the province has witnessed an influx of migrants mainly from Eastern Europe, rapidly creating a more culturally diverse society.

1.1.4 The Challenge for Teachers

Such developments present unique challenges to teachers as they seek to explore concepts such as pluralism, equity, diversity and citizenship as well as contributing to the development of a post-conflict society. In this context, teacher education has a particularly important role (Author et al 2000, Author et al 2004, Smith et al 2006). Commenting on its publication ‘Towards a Culture of Tolerance’, the Department of Education specifically highlighted the importance of teacher education and encouraged all providers of teacher education and professional development to review the content and impact of their courses in respect of community relations education (DENI 1999b).
Similarly, one conclusion reached in the review of the Schools Community Relations Programme in 2002, was the need for a change in the nature of preparation given during ITE (DENI 2002).

This paper examines the provision within undergraduate initial teacher education in Northern Ireland for student teachers to engage with issues concerning diversity and inter-community relations. More specifically, it explores student teachers’ understanding of religious and cultural diversity and their initial experiences of participation in activities associated with community relations. The next section describes the research sample and methods employed in exploring these issues with student teachers. The main findings emerging from the study are then presented and evaluated in the final section, using multicultural theory.

2.1 Research Methodology
The student teachers who constitute the focus of this paper, are part of a larger research sample in a study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council-Teaching and Learning Research Programme (ESRC-TRLP). This examined the values underpinning teacher education and early professional development in Northern Ireland (www.tlrp/proj/asmith.html). The project tracked a cohort of postgraduate student teachers across four phases of teacher education: recruitment and selection, ITE, Induction and Early Professional Development (EPD). A sample of 34 undergraduate student teachers whose responses informed this paper, were also consulted during the first two phases of the project; recruitment and selection and ITE. Also contributing to the paper, is data collected from a questionnaire, administered to 273 first year undergraduate students from two HEIs. This explored various issues, including students’ social and cultural backgrounds, contemporary social issues and their perceptions of teaching.

The student teachers were enrolled on four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) courses at two HEIs in Northern Ireland. Of the students, 19 were enrolled in the first year and 15 in the fourth (final) year of their degree courses. The research was concerned with student teachers’ initial experiences of ITE, therefore first year students were consulted. However, since they had only limited exposure to some aspects of ITE, it became necessary to also include fourth year students, who had greater experience of the issues addressed in the study. Nineteen students attended a state funded HEI, which although officially non-denominational, attracts mainly Protestant students. The other 15 students were at an HEI with a strong Catholic ethos and an almost exclusive Catholic enrolment. The majority of the sample was female (n=32), aged between 18 and 22 years (n=28), and most were enrolled on primary education courses (n=26). The sample from one HEI was entirely Catholic, while 15 out of the 19 students from the other HEI were Protestant. Whilst the research sample is relatively small, the objective of this part of the study was to conduct in-depth interviews in order to construct a detailed account of student teachers’ views and experiences of ITE.
The individual interview data upon which this paper is based, was collected during the ITE phase of the research. This phase investigated students’ engagement with selected ‘values dimensions’ of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, including programmes of citizenship and community relations and the preparation given to students to manage controversial issues and develop inclusive classroom practices. The themes addressed in this paper were explored through a series of questions focusing on student teachers’ understanding and experiences of citizenship education and community relations programmes.

Following transcription, the data was carefully analyzed in order to identify patterns and thematic issues of relevance, which were then coded to allow for further analysis. The first codification raised multiple categories and these were then narrowed down for further analysis. A second reading of the recorded materials allowed the categories to be systematically reduced by combining like terms and eliminating redundant ones. High levels of agreement between the coders were reached after thorough discussions (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987). Thus nine themes were identified, from which a final coding system was created. Four of these themes are reported in the paper.

It is important to note that although there is considerable similarity in the content of undergraduate ITE courses, students at each of the HEIs may not necessarily have studied areas of the course simultaneously and therefore it was anticipated that students in one HEI may have been more familiar with some issues than those attending the other. Also, for 1st year students, interviews were conducted at a relatively early stage in their course, so it was anticipated that they may not have been exposed to some of the areas introduced in the interviews.

3.1 Research Findings
The research explored four key themes. These were student teachers’ conceptual understanding of diversity and inter-community relations; the impact of the course on student teachers’ thinking; student teachers’ perceptions of their role in contributing to positive inter-community relations and their evaluation of the preparation they received to undertake this role. Responses to each of the four themes are documented below.

3.1.1 Students’ understanding of diversity and inter-community relations
Student teachers’ understanding of diversity emerged through their responses to questions about citizenship education and their anticipated involvement in its delivery through the Northern Ireland Curriculum. In the questionnaire, student teachers in one HEI listed 30 different definitions of citizenship, while those in the other HEI listed 25. Their responses were similar with the most common interpretation (cited by 19.5% of the sample), being “teaching pupils to accept, respect and work with those from different backgrounds and cultures”. Students commented;

It’s tolerance and learning to accept others and their beliefs, and;
Becoming more aware of other races and faiths in our country.

Another 10% of students suggested citizenship was “learning about others and their social, cultural and political backgrounds”. For almost one third of the student sample therefore, citizenship education was clearly associated with concepts of cultural diversity. Examining responses given during interviews, not every student teacher in the sample was familiar with ‘citizenship’, however the majority demonstrated some understanding of its meaning. Their definitions related to individuals’ participation in society, being a “good citizen”, the roles and responsibilities that pupils might expect to assume in adulthood and the nature of relationships in the community or wider society. In addition, six\(^1\) students (18% of the sample) suggested that it was concerned with diversity and more specifically, the inclusion and understanding of other cultures. One respondent’s comments were typical of the responses;

> You need to let children know about different cultures...EMU and things but it’s not just about Northern Ireland...you need to know other people’s cultures and religion. You can’t be racist or sectarian. People have got their rights.

When asked to reflect on the purpose of citizenship within the Northern Ireland Curriculum, almost half of the interview sample (n=15) referred to the development of pupils’ understanding about other cultures and the wider community. Eleven students remarked that Northern Ireland was becoming an increasingly multicultural society and thus, it was important that pupils developed an understanding and acceptance of other cultures;

> Have to let children know that because the world is going to get smaller...they’re going to meet people that maybe they see as different and they can’t just isolate them and react differently... People are coming from places where there has been war and they are looking for refuge.

Several student teachers acknowledged that in order to effectively include pupils from other cultures in the classroom, they themselves, would also have to develop particular knowledge and skills;

> We’re seeing different nationalities in our country and it’s very likely we’re going to be teaching those children...that don’t speak our language or are a different religion...we’re going to have to learn to deal with that.

\(^1\) In some cases, student teachers may have given more than one response to a question, so the total number of responses may exceed the sample total.
Interestingly, students recognised that there were specific skills which, if developed, would enable them to cope more effectively with the changing cultural dynamics of the classroom.

Four students also suggested that citizenship education tackled challenging issues such as racism, bigotry and sectarianism and that this could potentially encourage pupils to be more tolerant and accepting;

*It’s to help deal with racism…help children learn about different people’s backgrounds, what to accept and what not to accept.*

In order to establish student teachers’ level of understanding of community relations, they were again asked to define the term. Responses were quite diverse and perceptible differences emerged in the definitions submitted by students in each HEI. This may be explained by variations in the ITE course structures and timetabling arrangements. Just under one-third of students in one institution (n=6), all whom were first years, were not familiar with the term, and therefore unable to offer a definition. Of the remaining 28 students, most suggested that it concerned “relationships”, either between individuals or between schools and the local community.

Definitions of community relations which are more commonly recognised, were submitted by eight students, six from one institution and two from another, each stating that it concerned the relationship between the two dominant religious communities in Northern Ireland. Reflecting these responses, one student teacher referred to her own experiences of community relations activities;

*It’s connections between different communities. We had cross-community work in primary school and we went out with the closest Catholic school and had exchange trips.*

Another commented that it involved bringing people together;

*It’s about people coming together in Northern Ireland…it’s Catholics and Protestants joining together and holding hands, but it seems much more insulated…*

Eight student teachers, all from one institution, associated community relations with Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), a cross-curricular theme in the Northern Ireland Curriculum (DENI 1992), or a course they undertook during ITE entitled Diversity for Mutual Understanding (DMU), which addresses identity, prejudice, human rights and multiculturalism;
I suppose it’s EMU...Protestants and Catholics coming together in integrated schools and having programmes so that there is less sectarianism and racism, and;

Getting people to work together...DMU days we have had here.

Evidently there was some variation in student teachers’ understanding of the term, and from an analysis of the definitions given by students in different institutions, it was clear that the content and emphases of their ITE course, up to the time of interview had informed their responses. Reviewing students’ responses across the sample, approximately 38% (n=13) of the sample offered broadly-accepted interpretations of the term. Once students had responded to this question, a commonly agreed definition was then shared with them in order that they were better informed to respond to subsequent questions.

A review of student responses indicates that the majority were not conversant with the two terms. More student teachers were familiar with the concept of diversity through citizenship than with community relations, although it is possible this could be explained by the nature of the course timetables in each HEI. For many student teachers, their understanding of diversity related to teaching children about ‘the other’ – someone of a different culture, background, race or religion. The objectives underpinning this teaching were to increase pupils’ understanding so that they would be enabled to interact and accept others and their potential to develop racist or sectarian responses would be diminished.

3.1.2 Impact of the B.Ed course on student teachers’ thinking about community relations

Student teachers were asked if they believed the B. Ed course in which they were enrolled, had had any impact on their thinking about community relations. Just over 50% of the sample (n=18) agreed that it had, while the remaining students claimed it had “not really” impacted, not impacted thus far, or not had any impact at all. For five respondents, the ITE course had highlighted the importance of finding ways to contribute to positive community relations;

…it has opened my eyes and it has made me think it’s not all black and white and that there are two sides and people think there is just one side and it’s very, very annoying…I don’t think people realise that they only see one side,

Makes you realise how divided it can be...especially in schools....there’s no opportunities for the two communities to get together and communicate.

Nine student teachers highlighted a number of issues around which their views had changed. These included how diverse classrooms could be;
Made me realise I could have a diverse class because in my primary school for example, it was just everyone from the same area...There was no coloured children, no different religions really...But now it’s changing and you have other cultures and people with different beliefs and values systems...you could have like 10 different religions...in your class and how would you cope with addressing that, making sure everyone is included.

Their approach to potentially contentious issues;

...it definitely does have an influence on your thinking and how you might reword things in the classroom;

Integrated education;

Probably made me think that integrated schooling is the way forward and really there isn’t much difference in the way we learn, and;

Other peoples’ perspectives;

Made me realise that students [from another institution] think the same things as we do...seeing that their argument is just as valid, they have reasons for their opinions and barriers need to be broken down much more cos I’ve never, through school come into contact, as far as I know with anyone from the Catholic faith. I’ve never even learnt about it because it’s such a taboo. Teachers wouldn’t even approach it...This needs to be acknowledged...I think a lot of it is ignorance.

Fourteen student teachers were less convinced that their experiences of ITE had influenced their thinking about community relations. Four students stated that the course had not affected their views, without elaborating further. Five students believed that they had been open-minded and tolerant of other communities before enrolling on the B.Ed course, and therefore their views had not been altered in any way;

Not really because I didn’t have a major thing with Catholics and Protestants or any type of religion...don’t think people realise they only see one side.

Other students claimed that their views were unaffected by the course, as they had not previously given any thought to community relations, did not believe it had actually been addressed during the course or did not regard community relations as a significant issue. And interestingly, one male student explained that he was actively resisting any potential influence the B. Ed course might have on his thinking;
I think I have been so concerned to fight the views of the college being imposed on me. I’ve come out with quite a resilient view of community relations.

Student teachers’ responses suggest that the two B.Ed courses had the potential to impact on their thinking about quite a broad range of issues, which they perceived were associated with community relations. Significantly however, almost the same number of student teachers did not believe that their views had been affected and indeed some felt that the focus on community relations was not unnecessary, as they believed they did not have any difficulties engaging with other religious communities.

3.1.3 Student teachers’ perceptions of their role in promoting diversity and contributing to positive inter-community relations

Reflecting on the teacher’s role in contributing to pupils’ development as citizens, the vast majority of student teachers in the interview sample referred to the teacher becoming a role model or to exploring morals and values with pupils. One student suggested she would contribute to pupils’ understanding of diversity by modelling appropriate behaviour in the classroom;

…There’s a lot of people from ethnic minorities in schools and the whole idea of…people being prejudiced, stereotypes and discrimination …if you happen to have a child from an ethnic minority in your class, the way you would act to having that child in your class, your relationship with them will teach them a lot more than if you open a textbook and say ‘What is prejudice, what is discrimination, how do you stop these in society?’ It’s learning by doing.

Only a small minority (n=3) suggested that the teacher’s role in regard to citizenship would entail developing pupils’ awareness of the wider world, other cultures and diversity;

Teaching them about rights to life and stuff like that. Your basic human rights…teaching them about Catholic social teaching and talking about …poverty and stuff like that in Africa and how it’s our obligation to help other people in the world community.

Thirty students in the interview sample (almost equal numbers from each institution), cited examples of how, as teachers, they could contribute to the promotion of positive community relations. Examples included undertaking practical activities, teaching pupils about community and the principles underpinning community relations and acting as role models. The most common suggestion, put forward by 14 student teachers, involved establishing and sustaining links between controlled and maintained schools through activities such as joint trips, projects, competitions and penpal schemes. Adding a note of caution however, five student teachers did emphasise that contact between pupils from
different schools had to be “meaningful”, involving more than simply bringing children from different backgrounds together;

There’s like the contact hypothesis where two groups meet. But I think it has to be done meaningfully. Teachers need to be educated in community relations because…I don’t know if its something you can just do, and it be at a level where it will be meaningful…maybe extended contact, teachers getting together themselves to plan things… and;

There has to be real involvement, not just sitting in the cinema on different sides.

Three students referred to the importance of developing pupils’ knowledge about the wider community and encouraging them to participate;

It’s making pupils more well-informed about their country and the community they live in, learning opinions about things and encouraging them to voice these but in a way where they are not going to offend or get into trouble. It’s about making them well informed, that they have the knowledge to express themselves.

Two respondents from one institution underlined the benefits of teachers working with local communities to contribute to good community relations; “I don’t think teachers can work in isolation...should be a whole community...” Acting as a role model for pupils was perceived by two students as one way in which teachers could promote positive community relations, “...hopefully pupils would follow your lead”. Four students proposed that teachers should directly address values or attitudes associated with good community relations’;

By teaching pupils that there is really no difference between people...everyone is just the same and should be treated equal (sic), and;

Demonstrating that Protestant people aren’t different from Catholic people and vice versa. I think it’s important to instil that in the primary school because a lot of prejudice is learnt from home...it’s the responsibility of the school to break those barriers down before they have a chance to manifest themselves in a child’s soul.

Reflecting on the role of the teacher in community relations work, two fourth year students from one institution highlighted the potential challenges. One commented;

It’s very difficult. A teacher can say things...like you really should build relationships...and not be narrow minded but just by saying it, it isn’t really going to work...even my own experiences of going on trips. It was… a
Protestant school, it was a school trip and that was it...we didn’t build any relationships.

Approximately 90% of student teachers indicated ways in which they felt they could contribute to the promotion of good community relations in schools. These approaches included organising joint activities between schools, (of which some student teachers recalled their own experiences), bringing pupils from different backgrounds into contact with one another, demonstrating appropriate behaviours by being a role model and engaging directly with values and attitudes.

3.1.4 Evaluation of the preparation student teachers received to undertake this role

The two HEIs attended by student teachers, provided various opportunities for students to engage with community relations issues, either through specific courses, as part of other subject areas; Personal Development (PD) and Religious Education (RE) or through joint DMU workshops. At the time of interview, it was anticipated that student teachers’ experiences of such opportunities would vary, depending on what stage they had reached in their course and which HEI they attended. As expected, first year students were much more likely than fourth years to report feeling unprepared, although almost every student did indicate that they had participated in sessions addressing community relations.

Six student teachers from one HEI and three from the other (comprising six first years and three fourth years), described the preparation they had received in positive terms, highlighting opportunities to meet student teachers from different cultural backgrounds, having positive discussions or finding activities that could be adapted for the classroom. Reflecting on the joint workshops, students observed;

*I met some very interesting people there...it’s good because you’re free to make up your own mind, and;*

*It was the idea of discussing things in a circle and being a bit more physical in discussions....really enjoyed the days there...a lot more than other people. But I had a good facilitator.*

Three students at one institution referred to aspects of RE or PD, which they believed were particularly useful in terms of preparing them to engage with community relations;

*We looked at it in PD...just remembering that there are different communities out there and we’ve been told to be sensitive and while you may hold values and morals, you can’t force these.*

Six students’ evaluations were more mixed. One respondent commented that although she had “learnt a lot”, the joint sessions could be “quite boring” as they covered issues that students were already familiar with. Two students felt the sessions were “ok”, but
could not recall what they had done. A fourth year student had enjoyed the workshops she attended that year, but suggested that the activities facilitated in previous years had been “silly”.

A third group within the sample (n=8), consisting mainly of fourth years, was quite critical in its assessment of the preparation given, particularly with regard to the joint initiatives. They described the workshops as “patronising”, “artificial” and a “waste of time”, criticising the use of icebreaker activities and games which they regarded as “unhelpful” and “unnecessary”. Several students also noted that many of their peers failed to attend, that if they did, they tended to stay within their friendship groups, and that the workshops were organised only as “one-off things” when they should have been arranged on a more regular basis. Three students acknowledged the laudable objectives underpinning the initiatives, the preparation required to arrange the days and genuine intentions of the organisers, however they believed the workshops had failed to engage many participants or to provide effective preparation. Two students’ comments accurately capture the sentiments of this group;

*Our trips...were a bit gloomy...we went to X to do joint activities but it’s hard to find common ground when you are gluing yoghurt pots...need to do something we would have done with our friends...still a bit worried about doing things like EMU in the classroom..., and;*

*EMU days were not helpful...I don’t think it was necessary for us to be playing games and feel as if we had to prove we weren’t bitter.*

One student teacher was very negative in his assessment of initiatives to promote community relations through the HEIs, asserting that he had participated more effectively in community relations through his involvement in activities outside ITE;

*Well, I think EMU is productive if you don’t put labels on it...you just sit there and you go ‘Hi, I’m from X and we’re usually seen as the Protestant college and you go to Y and you’re usually the Catholic’. So there you go there’s the divide and I think people are very tired of that. It becomes very tedious...I think people know who they are. You don’t have to set this all up...personally I believe I have been prepared through my interactions with different people from Northern Ireland’s political and religious spectrum, I think I’m ready anyway.*

Another respondent questioned whether it was really possible to be adequately prepared to deal with community relations issues in the classroom. Asked whether they felt they needed additional preparation in this area, 23 student teachers concurred. Suggestions included opportunities to engage in more practical sessions (n=4), facilitating more joint classes for students (n=1) and including more lectures on EMU (n=1). Six first year students in one HEI anticipated having more opportunities to explore community
relations at a later stage in their ITE course. Again it is important to record that some respondents may have had only limited exposure to community relations’ issues.

Despite exhibiting a limited understanding of community relations, few student teachers were unclear in their evaluation of the preparation they received to engage with community relations issues in the classroom, although the evaluation in many cases, was rather negative.

4.1 Discussion
In 2004, an Author et al surveyed final year students in the predominantly Protestant HEI in this study and their findings are somewhat similar, that is, that whilst student teachers agree that issues of diversity and community relations are important, only a limited number report being comfortable and prepared for dealing with diversity in the classroom. Four years on and even taking into account that a proportion of the sample were first years, it would appear that there are still major challenges in terms of developing the community relations competence of teacher candidates in Northern Ireland.

However neither the revised teacher competences (GTCNI 2008) nor the new curriculum (CCEA 2000, 2002 and 2003) explicitly stress a community relations role for teachers despite the intentions of the earlier culture of tolerance report (DENI, 1999a, 1999b). The competence model continues to emphasise standards of technical excellence and to define attainment in essentially instrumentalist language. Little reference is made to professional development in affective, social or emotional terms. Commenting on this, Smith et al (2006), suggest that within this type of educational and professional culture, ‘what matters are outputs rather than beliefs, values or authentic relationships’ (p.217). The role for teachers is therefore implicit rather than explicit and can be addressed (or not) through aspects of citizenship, Personal Development and other curriculum areas. Nowhere in the revised curriculum do the terms ‘peace’ or ‘peace education’ feature. As such there are fundamental tensions around the purposes of education with the Department of Education failing to endorse its own recommendations on developing a culture of tolerance. Indeed the most recent proposal for school improvement (DE 2008b) does not mention a community relations role for education, speaking of examination achievements as the primary measure of educational success. Thus community relations continues to be either cross-curricular or extra-curricular, but not ‘core-curricular’. In this way it remains a peripheral activity in many schools rather a set of values and behaviours that are strongly embedded in school culture.

In both the HEIs studied, there is however a long history of involvement in activities designed to promote better community relations, in particular by bringing together the students from the two institutions in planned and curriculum focussed joint professional development. In addition both institutions have a responsibility to prepare student teachers for teaching personal development and citizenship in the classroom, curriculum elements that are now statutory since the Author et al study of 2004. There is evidence
here that the two HEIs are successful in communicating to their students that diversity and community relations are an aspect of education for which teachers have responsibility. The students themselves clearly recognise that they need to develop the skills of cultural competency in order to fully include children from different cultural backgrounds. However, for some at least, the problem is the lack of competency that they perceive that they gain from their initial teacher education. There was evidence that student teachers had identified a need to develop specific skills and knowledge to support them in dealing with potentially controversial and contentious issues arising from their engagement with community relations. Students highlighted challenges in this area and noted that the teacher’s role could be “very difficult” They also referred to the need to be “sensitive” to others’ perspectives and expressed concerns about dealing with community relations in classrooms where children held strong views. If education is to meet the expectations of a positive post-conflict contribution (Bush & Salterelli 2000, NFER 2005, Smith & Vaux 2003), the development of appropriate educational priorities needs firstly to be recognised and secondly to be reflected in the teacher competency model.

Other researchers have highlighted the need to prepare student teachers for encounters with controversial issues in the context of promoting community relations (Smith & Robinson 1996, Author et al 2000). In addition, McCully (2005) emphasises the need for teachers to engage with each other at an early stage in order to effectively “work through issues, experience uncertainty and discomfort and clarify their own thinking, before introducing issues to pupils” (p.41).

In particular, for students, opportunities for engagement with the ‘other’ perspective are limited and some have difficulties with what they see as the contrived nature of joint professional development events between the two HEIs. The HEIs themselves are no doubt aware that sustained engagement between students from different backgrounds is what is truly needed to develop cultural competency and yet it is exactly what they cannot provide by nature of the separate institutions. As a result, rather than do nothing, both HEIs continue with a flawed but well intentioned model of joint training that offers lasting insights to only a few and risks alienating other students from community relations work. To what extent the curriculum in the institutions can compensate for the lack of contact between Protestant and Catholic undergraduate teachers is untested but it is clear that opportunities for sustained engagement with their peers are limited. The argument for more regular, sustained and “meaningful” engagement was supported by student teachers in their suggestions for other activities, such as collaborative projects and joint lectures or courses. An initiative which has recently been integrated into ITE in a number of HEIs is the opportunity for student teachers to undertake school experience in a school which has a different religious affiliation to themselves. Essentially this involves Protestants teaching in a Catholic school and Catholics teaching in Protestant schools. Since most students usually complete school experience in schools which reflect their religious denomination, (unless they are integrated schools), this is quite a significant departure from common practice. Such experience offers student teachers a more sustained
opportunity to explore cultural and religious differences and, to pursue conversations around relevant issues with colleagues. Whilst little evaluation has been undertaken of these initiatives thus far in Northern Ireland, it has been acknowledged by educationalists as a valuable exercise (Causey et al 2000, Melnick & Zeichner 1998, Author et al 2008, Nelson 2008).

In light of the growth of multicultural classrooms in Northern Ireland, and a recognised requirement to equip teachers to manage the perceived challenges accompanying such changes, it may be possible to expand the meaning of community relations to encompass cultural diversity as it is understood through the impact of recent migration to Northern Ireland as well as through the more traditional religious-cultural differences encapsulated in the ‘two communities’ culture of Northern Ireland. This may require a reconceptualisation of community relations and a review of how it is mediated by the HEIs. Joint courses for students enrolled in different HEIs could employ practical strategies to explore issues around diversity, for example involving practitioners from different cultural backgrounds and representing different social, political and educational agencies in Northern Ireland. Promoting an understanding of the realities of difference ‘on the ground’ could provide valuable insights for student teachers and help them to clarify their own perspectives before entering the classroom.

There is a clear need to see community relations work more deeply embedded in initial teacher education (Author et al 2000, DE 2002, Kilpatrick & Leitch 2004). It has been proposed there is merit in student teachers having the opportunity to examine deeply held values, beliefs and assumptions at an early stage in their professional development before they assume many responsibilities of the classroom and curriculum (Smith et al 2006). This could be supported by identifying theoretical development that could provide a frame for developing the competency of student teachers. One possible frame is multiculturalism. Whilst the political doctrine of multiculturalism has been significantly criticised for increasing rather than decreasing the boundaries between groups (Barry 2001), multiculturalists such as Parekh (2006) reconceptualise multiculturalism in a way that promotes interaction and understanding between groups, activities that are at the fore of community relations work. Parekh (2006) views multiculturalism not as a political doctrine nor as a philosophical theory but rather as a perspective on human life. He provides us with three central insights into multiculturalism, firstly that human beings are culturally embedded, secondly that whilst cultural diversity is both desirable and a reality, dialogue between cultures is mutually beneficial and thirdly, that cultures are internally plural.

The reality of Northern Irish society is that the majority are embedded in membership of either the Protestant or the Catholic community, whilst the minority are affiliated to a range of other socio-cultural, religious or ethnic groups. Whilst the majority of undergraduate teachers will work in schools that are predominantly Protestant or Catholic, due to migration, there is an increasing linguistic, national and cultural diversity in most schools which creates new opportunities for dialogue between different
perspectives. Although student teachers recognise that facilitating dialogue between the historically contested perspectives of Catholics and Protestants is an important dimension of education, the possibility of either initiating and/or sustaining such dialogue is restricted by the separation of schools and indeed, their HEIs. Exposure to the other perspective is thus constrained, the possibility of mutually beneficial dialogue is limited and unsurprisingly students do not feel prepared for dealing with diversity in the classroom.

In such a context, the role of education in shaping the formation of identities needs to be critically evaluated lest stereotypical reductions emerge that can be mobilised for conflict, as per the warnings of Davies (2004). However Parekh’s (2006) contention that cultures are internally plural offers peace educators a frame through which they can challenge monocultural and essentialist representations of conflicting groups because the concept of cultural heterogeneity and evolving identity is one that allows for myths about the ‘other’ to be challenged. However without sustained engagement and dialogue intercultural exchange can be at best be limited and superficial. The two HEIs in this study continue to provide a joint programme that brings together student teachers who would otherwise not meet and this is despite the absence of official recognition of a community relations role for education. For the students who are nonetheless committed to making a positive contribution to the latter, limited engagement would appear to be insufficient. New initiatives such as the undertaking of school experiences in a wider range of school types and the students’ request for joint modules may offer the opportunities for intercultural dialogue and exchange that are currently limited.

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