

Educating for Understanding

Challenges and Opportunities in Inter-Faith Learning

A Conference organised by the Inter-Faith Working Group of the Church of Ireland

Belfast, 13th October, 2012

Religious and Cultural Diversity in Schools:

Challenging the Learners or Challenging the Teachers?

Norman Richardson

Just before the turn of the century a “Task Force on Education for the 21st Century” was set up, working under the auspices of UNESCO and chaired by Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission; they produced a Report entitled “Learning – the Treasure Within” (UNESCO, 1996). It is not all that well-known, disappointingly, but in its deliberations the group came up with what they termed the **Four Pillars of Education**:

Learning to Know

Learning to Do

Learning to Live Together

Learning to Be.

I think they got it absolutely right. *Knowledge* is important; *skills* are important; but no less important is *learning to live together*; and *learning to be* suggests to me the potential for holistic development that can emerge when we get that balance right – the sum total of the parts, a sort of binding ethos. Education is, or should be, of the whole person – an individual, cultural, community and global experience; and, I think I would add in the broadest sense, also a spiritual process.

For me this helps to offer a sound basis not only for understanding just what education is all about but also how it can help us to make sense of the challengingly diverse world in which we all live. It was until recently possible to ignore some of that diversity, living in our somewhat remote corner-of-an-island home; we acknowledged the local dimension to diversity as expressed in the sometimes turbulent reality of “Catholics and Protestants”, though we all too often dealt with it by building structures of separateness and avoidance. Wider religious and cultural diversity has been a closed book to many with whom we share this part of the world, and some seem to be willing and able to continue to keep it at arm’s length despite the changes that are increasingly evident in our cultural mix. The very education that is supposed to be about learning to live together has all too often failed those whom it should be serving by means of perpetuating the separateness, avoidance and sometimes simply the ignorance that it should be challenging. Despite a great deal of commitment by teachers and other educators, there remain many obstacles to education for understanding; teachers themselves are not well served by the system and may in some ways be among the greatest victims of educational separation.

Education is not about perpetuating the status quo. That was the controversial message of Malcolm Skillbeck, a professor of education at the University of Ulster in the 1970s, when he created a great deal of discomfort by describing teachers in Northern Ireland as “naïve bearers of [sectarian] culture” – though the word “sectarian” was omitted when his talk was published (Skillbeck, 1976). He wasn’t actually accusing teachers of being sectarian, but he was suggesting that if they were not careful the outcome of their failure to challenge cultural assumptions and ignorance would be, in effect, an unwitting perpetuation of sectarianism. Much more recently, when the representatives of the Churches argued in their introduction to a revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education that the study of world religions would probably confuse children and that it was necessary to maintain “the essential Christian character of Religious Education” (Churches’ Working Party, 2003:4) in Northern Ireland, perhaps they too were in danger of trying to sustain a small, comfortable world that would nevertheless fail to meet the challenges of life in a pluralistic society.

I tell my students that they should be challenged by education. Education should make people think – it’s a fundamental process of learning. If they, as student teachers, want to learn how to challenge their pupils, they should be ready to be challenged themselves. It’s very like that old adage about the role of religious faith being “to comfort the troubled and to trouble the comfortable”! Education, like faith, should have the capacity to move us *out*

of our comfort zones. So I want to explore this concept of “challenging education” as a means towards improved religious and cultural diversity, towards an education that really can contribute towards intercultural understanding.

How can we ensure that this challenge is effective and sustained in relation to those who are **learners** – the children and young people in our schools and colleges, the young adults in our universities, not forgetting people of all ages in our churches and other faith communities? At one level many of the opportunities for such learning are greater here in Northern Ireland than they have ever been. The Northern Ireland Curriculum has now mainstreamed the issues of local and global cultural and religious diversity and the system has, though perhaps rather uncertainly, indicated that these issues are priorities. Children in primary schools learn within a new area of learning (since 2007) called **Personal Development and Mutual Understanding** (PDMU), of which Strand 2, *Mutual Understanding in the Local and Wider Community*, includes themes such as *human rights and social responsibility; causes of conflict and appropriate responses; valuing and celebrating cultural difference and diversity; and playing an active and meaningful part in the life of the community and being concerned about the wider environment* (CCEA, 2007a). In post-primary education as part of Learning for Life and Work, **Local and Global Citizenship** focuses on *human rights and social responsibility; diversity and inclusion; equality and social justice; and democracy and active participation* (CCEA, 2007b). Even in Religious Education (RE), which has for so long been a local refuge for over-cautious Catholic and Protestant conservatism in Northern Ireland, children at Key Stage 3 (aged 11 to 14) now learn, to some degree, about different Christian traditions and even about religions other than Christianity, albeit in a much more restricted way than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK.

Some may be surprised to learn that the educational sector that seems to have taken this kind of learning most strongly into its approach is the early years sector – in nursery schools and the very first years of formal education. Research carried out some years ago by Paul Connolly and colleagues in the University of Ulster, and later in Queen’s University, showed clearly how young children indicated signs of preference, in relation to race and religious-cultural community, which, if not subjected to positive educational interventions by parents and teachers, could grow into racial and sectarian stereotyping and prejudice as children became older (Connolly et al, 2002). Early years professionals have taken this very seriously and their training and resources in this regard are very impressive. (See, for instance the

website of the *Early Years* organisation and particularly their *Media Initiative for Children*: <http://www.early-years.org/mifc/>).

A great deal of focus has been placed over the years of the Troubles and since on cross-community contact at the level of schools and youth work. There has, however, been much criticism, and rightly so, of superficial contact; unfortunately, however, as the government has pulled back from most of its financial support that such work used to receive, it is not only the poor quality work that has been lost but also many of the really good quality inter-school contact programmes.

Despite the limitations and difficulties of contact programmes, I firmly believe that the dimension of inter-personal and inter-group contact is crucial in the process of learning to live together. Inter-community suspicions and separation, combined with the continued recourse to separate schooling systems – still strongly supported by the Catholic hierarchy – and the regrettably limited development of the integrated schools movement leave us in a position where we somehow have to contrive to find alternative ways of providing opportunities for encounter. The concept of school collaborations in Area Learning Communities, or “shared schooling”, has made some impact in recent years, and again some very good work is under way in terms of sharing resources and staff, but in some of the schools involved in these schemes there has been a reluctance to go too far into the community relations dimension and thereby a neglect of the opportunities for developing cross-community relationships in other than a superficial way.

These curriculum and structural innovations overall are far from perfect, especially in their inevitably variable delivery, but they are nevertheless indicators of movement and response to the challenges of our local and global diversity. They contrast significantly to the situation 30 years ago when I was moving out of classroom teaching into a role as an inter-church-based Peace Education Officer (with the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace). My initially defined task was to prepare, write and edit with others on an ecumenical basis a series of classroom resources designed to help children and young people think and learn about these same kinds of local and global issues. But as I began to hawk these around schools I quickly learned that most teachers did not know what to do with them, where to locate them, where they fitted into curriculum, or how to approach some of the potentially contentious issues that they were being asked to introduce. The task of curriculum development rapidly turned into one of teacher development. Not everyone understood this point, including some of those with whom I was working, but that realisation is certainly the main factor that has led me to my present role in teacher education.

Learners at all levels still need to be challenged with the realities of separateness and unawareness of and prejudice towards 'the different other', locally and globally. Sectarianism has not gone away, and racism has certainly arrived in our community. There is a temptation on the part of some to suggest that these are now the problems of the past, or not really relevant to this part of the world: the notion that "we don't have any of these problems here" is still too often heard, but it is a blinkered denial of reality that is as unhelpful now as it was in the 1970s and 80s. There is still a job to be done to educate for understanding at all kinds of levels.

But in my title I also suggested that **teachers** need to be challenged too. I suggested earlier that teachers were amongst the greatest victims of our separate system. Many of them still attend separate schools, live in separate areas, do their teacher training separately and go on to teach in the separate schools. When we ask such teachers to be the channels of inter-community and intercultural learning it's hardly surprising that some of them find this to be a challenge too far. Thankfully some of this is breaking down; our university schools of education train their post-graduate student teachers together; my own institution, Stranmillis University College, has become significantly more mixed over recent years; there are greater opportunities for international student exchanges than in the past; there are more opportunities for interaction between Catholic and Protestant student teachers than previously; and the issues of local and global diversity now form a part of the teacher education curriculum in a substantive way. This is right at the heart of my own work and I'm delighted that I'm able to do it, but there is still so much more that could be done. Too much teacher education is still conducted separately; the system seems set up to protect that separateness and there are too many vested interests in keeping it that way.

Two areas in particular give me cause for continuing concern. One is the lack of opportunity for local student teachers to learn about the wider ethnic and religious diversity. Very few teachers and student teachers in Northern Ireland come from those communities and there is little current indication that this will change any time soon. Despite some recent curriculum changes in learning about religions other than Christianity, it is still the case that almost no current student teachers in the system have learnt anything ever about such religions and the cultures that surround them. Yet there are increasing numbers of pupils in our schools from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Research evidence (Richardson, 2003; Mawhinney et al, 2010) suggests that many teachers do not understand their cultural needs, sometimes even at a very basic level. If this is now being dealt with a little more effectively in teacher education programmes, there are still many gaps in supporting the professional development of serving teachers (many of whom probably never touched on these issues when they were students) in relation to these issues.

My other concern is about Religious Education in schools and the way it continues to be controlled by the Churches in Northern Ireland. I could go on about this for a very long time but I will confine myself to a few observations. To many teachers it is perplexing and perhaps even offensive that they are told what they should or should not teach in schools by members of organisations concerned with the promotion of religious belief rather than the promotion of open-ended education! This is compounded by the fact that the four Christian denominations officially responsible for the writing of the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus for RE (Department of Education, 2007) have not involved any members of other faith communities in the process, and it is a disgrace that the government has not insisted on this. I know that there are others in the churches, and certainly in the schools, who share this view, but there is still a great deal of defensiveness of what some in the churches have described as their “ownership” of Religious Education. My personal passion is the teaching of Religious Education, but I cannot own any allegiance to the official view taken by the Churches, that, for instance, primary school children are “too young” or will “be confused” if they learn about religions other than Christianity (Churches Working Party, 2003). This seems to me to be a major obstacle to inter-religious and intercultural learning in this part of the world and the sooner we start to talk seriously about how to change this situation, the better. Evidence from recent research (Richardson, 2012) suggests that a growing number of local teachers are open to a more broadly-based approach to RE, and I continue to be committed to working towards the time when RE in schools is taught in an open, inclusive and fair manner, respecting the diversity of beliefs that are part of Northern Ireland today. The danger, it seems to me, is that this current partisan approach to RE will be completely counter-productive and only give ammunition to those who call for the banning of all religion from publicly-funded schools. There is a long way to go in this process!

As a footnote to these concerns about the ways in which religion is, or is not, taught in schools, I want to suggest that churches and other faith communities themselves have an important role here. Do we make use of our opportunities with our own members to develop effective educational programmes? Do we provide classes for our members on awareness and understanding of other religions and cultures? Do we in our own parishes and congregations and other faith places discuss and engage in processes designed to promote mutual respect, inter-faith encounter and joint action? Do we even educate our own members particularly well about their own faith? People who feel insecure about who they are and what they believe are less likely to feel comfortable exploring the beliefs and practices of others! Conferences like this are great, but I doubt if on the whole they are attracting many ordinary members of church congregations, any more than this is the case with organisations like the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum. Education for understanding is not just a task for schools; it is a community responsibility and a lifelong

process.

So perhaps there are challenges that we need to put in several directions. As concerned citizens and members of our various communities we should expect and encourage schools to continue to engage in these intercultural processes so that children and young people are enabled to take these opportunities further. Sometimes this means asking questions, whether as parents, school governors or in some other capacity, to ensure that opportunities are not missed. But we need to look to ourselves and our own communities and make sure that we are not neglecting the opportunities for learning and human encounter. Do we talk about our cultural similarities and differences in an open way and thereby model the behaviour that we wish our younger members to adopt? Or are we still somehow bound to the culture of silence about religious and cultural diversity: “Whatever you say, say nothing”? Can we challenge the culture of separateness that still leaves so many people without the normal opportunities to be part of a shared and inclusive society, not least in our schools? Do we have ways of asking these questions of our churches and our church leaders, or of other communities to which we belong?

As I said at the start, these kinds of processes are what I believe education to be all about. One of my favourite quotes, frequently used with my students, is from a book on self-esteem by Dennis Lawrence:

“Education is not just about learning cognitive skills. It is also about helping children to learn about themselves, to be able to live peaceably with themselves and with others and to help them to develop into competent, mature, self-motivated adults.” (Lawrence, 1996:xii)

Norman Richardson lectures in Religious Studies at Stranmillis University College, Belfast, where his main focus is on religious and cultural diversity and intercultural education.

n.richardson@stran.ac.uk

References

CCEA (2007a) *The Northern Ireland Curriculum: Primary*. Belfast: Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

CCEA (2007b) *The Statutory Curriculum at Key Stage 3: Rationale and Detail*. Belfast: Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Churches' Working Party (2003) *Proposals for a Revised Core Syllabus in RE in Grant-Aided Schools in Northern Ireland*, The Churches' Religious Education Core Syllabus Review Working Party

Connolly, P., Smith, A., Kelly, B. (2002) *Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Community Relations Council

Department of Education (2007) *Core Syllabus for Religious Education*. Bangor: Department of Education for Northern Ireland

Lawrence, D. (1996) *Enhancing Self-Esteem in the Classroom (2nd Edition)*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing

Mawhinney, A., Niens, U., Richardson, N., Chiba, Y. (2010) *Opting Out of Religious Education: the views of young people from minority belief backgrounds*. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast

Richardson, N. (2003) *Curricular, Faith and Pastoral Issues for Minority Faith Children in Northern Ireland Schools: The Views of Their Parents* (paper given at the Diversity, World Faiths and Education Conference, Belfast, November 2003)

Richardson, N. (2012) *Religious Education in Primary Schools: Report on a Survey of Teachers*. Belfast: Stranmillis University College (unpublished research report).

Skillbeck, M. (1976) 'Education and Cultural Change', in *Compass: Journal of the Irish Association for Curriculum Development*, 5(2), 3-23

UNESCO (1996) *Learning: the Treasure Within – Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation