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# Community Conversations: deliberative democracy, education provision and divided societies

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## Abstract

How can Community Conversations be used to give communities a voice in policy decisions? This paper is a response to the challenge of engaging citizens in inclusive, meaningful dialogue and deliberation on potentially sensitive policy topics that affect their lives and to create a bridge between individual, community and policy perspectives. This dual aim therefore is to give individuals and communities a stronger voice in key decisions affecting them and to provide stakeholders involved in public policy and decision-making a genuine evidence base which they can use to inform their work. This challenge is even greater in divided societies where consensus building can be difficult. The paper focuses on a Community Conversation methodology and the innovative Community Conversation Toolkit developed by the authors as a mechanism for deliberative democracy through citizen engagement in important public policy decisions. Particular attention is given to the application of the Community Conversation methodology in relation to educational change and sustainability in Northern Ireland, a divided society. The methodology and context are aligned with a socio-ecological perspective which provides a conceptual lens to better understand the complex interplay that spans individual (micro) to policy (macro) levels. In addition to providing a theoretical foundation for the methodology, its application in a specific educational context is presented and discussed. It is therefore intended that the paper provides a rubric for the adaptation and application of the Community Conversation approach in a wide range of policy settings and contexts in order to evoke change. The value of the approach in enabling constructive dialogue on sensitive topics in a divided society is explored throughout the paper. Using an exemplar where divergent community views on school provision were shared, we synthesise the Community Conversation methodology with the socio-ecological approach to illustrate how our approach is particularly suited to closing the gap between parents/communities and policy stakeholders and enabling change.

**Keywords** Community Conversation · Decision-making · Deliberative democracy · Education · Educational change · Northern Ireland · Socio-ecological perspective

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Extended author information available on the last page of the article

## Introduction

The authors' Community Conversation methodology is detailed as a specific approach, enabling a powerful dialogue that can establish an evidential base for policy stakeholders and ensuring policy decisions are informed by the people and lives they will affect. We argue that the Community Conversation approach set out in this paper is particularly useful in divided societies where consensus on contentious or sensitive issues may not be easily reached. Education in Northern Ireland, and in particular school provision within an Area-Based Planning context, provides the background in which the Community Conversation is applied. Through this, the authors can both describe the methodological approach and examine its relationship within a broader policy content, a perspective that is often missing from the literature on Community Conversation approaches. This paper examines the important role that deliberative democracy can play as a bridge between individuals, communities and policymakers: "The use of deliberative democracy methods to engage the public in answering challenging questions is gaining momentum" (Ward 2018, np). It addresses the question 'how can Community Conversations be used to give communities a voice in policy decisions?' The relationship between Community Conversations and deliberative democracy is important. The authors view Communities Conversations as a methodology that can enable "citizen-centred democratic practice" (Hildreth 2012, p. 296) and "action-oriented deliberation" (Deliberative Democracy Consortium 2017). Community Conversations are a tool or practice within a broader deliberative democracy agenda. To better understand how Community Conversations can be utilised to give a strong civic participatory voice in policy implementation and decision-making, we need to understand the context or setting in which they are applied.

### Setting the scene: education in Northern Ireland

While Northern Ireland (NI) is widely considered to be a post-conflict society, it is still nonetheless deeply divided, and the system of schooling remains one of the most contested policy issues, with up to 95% of pupils attending schools segregated by religion (Roulston and Hansson 2019; Milliken et al. 2019). As Gallagher (2019, p. 32) points out,

our fractious political system has made it difficult to generate consensus on key educational issues and promote a discourse of the common good. That we also have a school system that is mainly characterized by division probably does not help in that goal.

This is a situation that arose historically through the provision of different school types to accommodate the needs of different social and religious communities. In NI at primary level (pupils aged 4–11) there are two dominant school types each attended by 45% of primary pupils in NI (NISRA 2020): Controlled schools, which are under the management of the Education Authority (EA) and predominantly

Protestant (8% of pupils at Controlled primary schools are Catholic), and Maintained schools, which are under the management of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and predominantly Catholic (1% of pupils at Maintained primary schools are Protestant) (NISRA 2020, p. 29). The remaining 10% of primary schools fall within the following sectors: Integrated and Other Maintained which includes Irish-medium schools (where all teaching is through the Irish language) and a small number of independent schools associated with Protestant churches.

This separated system of school provision is part of a continued division in NI, where housing as well as education remains largely segregated, particularly in lower income areas (McKnight and Schubotz 2017). Even twenty years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) peace accord in NI, aspirations for a shared future (OFMDFM 2005) have been slow to emerge and considerable tensions persist around ‘commemorating the past’ and cultural traditions associated with both ‘orange’ (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist) and ‘green’ (Catholic/Nationalist/Republican). Indeed, as Gardner (2016, p. 351) notes: “Segregated schooling in Northern Ireland is considered by some sections of the public to be a good thing for protecting culture, promoting faith-based values and, close to many people’s concerns, providing safety for children in what at times can be a volatile environment.”

Although the challenges of maintaining a duplicated education system (Gardner 2016) are well known within NI (for example: budget constraints, financial cutbacks, school transport, and the distribution of school places), implementing solutions have moved at a slow pace. Increasingly, the policy challenge centres around an economically unsustainable system of ‘too many schools’ for the size of the population (Department of Education 2006; Northern Ireland Audit Office 2015). However, there is also a misalignment of school places in terms of the different school sectors in some areas (O’Neill 2019). For example, in urban South Belfast, there are some primary schools that are struggling to recruit pupils and have a surplus of places, while another primary school close by in a different sector had more first preferences for school places than it could accept (Bates et al. 2019).

The Education (NI) Order 1997 gives parents in NI the right to express a preference as to the primary school which they wish their child to attend. When applying for a primary school place, parents are encouraged to list at least four primary schools in order of preference as there are no guarantees their child will be accepted into their first choice. Admissions criteria for individual schools are published online and typically include expectations that a child of the family is already enrolled at the school, that the school is the closest primary school to the pupil’s permanent address, and in the case of Catholic Maintained schools that the family is residing within the Parish boundaries of that school.

In the NI education context, Area Planning is the responsibility of the Education Authority, which is tasked with addressing the issue that: “In some areas ... there are too many school places for the size of the population, while in other areas, there are not enough places. Area planning aims to establish a network of viable schools that are of the right type, the right size, located in the right place, and have a focus on raising standards.” (Education Authority 2019). This is achieved through Annual Action Plans, which the EA develops in partnership with other educational bodies including the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

Educating pupils in different school sectors has implications for the fabric of society as there is less interaction with, and knowledge of, the experiences of the ‘other’ (Hughes 2011). While the system of education has been slow to change, there is increasing evidence that many parents now favour a more integrated approach and a single school system where pupils from all backgrounds are educated together (LucidTalk 2018). Department of Education (2020) data also demonstrate the growing demand for Integrated places, reinforced by a growing number of parents who designate their children as ‘Other Christian/Non Christian/No religion/Not recorded’ in response to the question regarding religious background. The percentage of pupils being educated in Integrated primary schools has seen moderate growth from 3% in 2000/2001 to 6.1% in 2019/2020. The percentage of pupils designated as ‘Other Christian/Non Christian/No religion/Not recorded’ was 7.1% in 2000/2001, and 18.5% in 2019/2020. This is also reflected in the Northern Ireland Life and Times annual surveys undertaken by ARK. In the 2018 survey, in response to the question ‘if you were deciding where to send your children to school, would you prefer a school with children of only your own religion, or a mixed-religion school?’ 68% of respondents indicated a preference for a mixed-religion school whereas only one in four (25%) stated they would want to send a child to a school of their own religion only (ARK 2018).

Thus far, there has been a conspicuous lack of formal mechanisms that give parents parity of voice on the issue of school places and Area-Based Planning. Area-Based Planning has largely been conducted on a sectoral basis by the Education Authority and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, respectively. The newly reformed Executive, Northern Ireland’s devolved government, has, however, prioritised “civic engagement and public consultation at the heart of policymaking” (Northern Ireland Office 2020, p. 13) so this focus on Community Conversations and deliberative democracy is timely.

## Deliberative Democracy

Deliberative democracy is concerned with working towards consensus through information, dialogue and debate and can inform and precede formal consultation and decision-making. O’Flynn (2017) argues that “developing shared intentions between conflicting communities is important for overcoming their conflict” (p. 199) and that deliberation provides an opportunity for building shared intentions and considering the best way forward. For deliberative democracy to produce effective outcomes, there needs to be a strong connection between the citizenry engaged in the dialogue and the stakeholders responsible for decision-making. Deliberation cannot exist in a silo and should be seen to have some effect; participants therefore need to have realistic expectations of both outcomes and implications if there is to be trust in the process. As Hayward (2014, p. 31) emphasises:

...if deliberation remains stagnant at the level of civilized discussion and pointless public consultation, people’s demands for better democracy may

gradually peter out into a reluctant acceptance of the institutionalized myth that Northern Ireland is a society of two irreconcilable halves.

In their paper on deliberative democracy research, Curato et al. (2017, p. 33) reflect on its successful application in divided societies: “Such deliberation can promote recognition, mutual understanding, social learning about the other side, and even solidarity across deep differences.” Thus far, efforts at deliberative democracy in NI have largely been the product of citizen-led initiatives and grassroots organisations (Hayward 2014) and have had limited influence on policy. There is therefore a dual need to provide individuals and communities with opportunities to genuinely contribute their views and experiences to key matters affecting their lives and to connect this with the wider policy sphere so that their deliberations can have a real impact on decision-making, and policy development and implementation.

The Community Conversation Toolkit developed by Bates and O’Connor-Bones (2018) provides a methodology that is designed to be a bridge between individuals and communities on the one hand, and policymakers and statutory stakeholders on the other. In this paper, we examine how the Toolkit has been used to support deliberative democracy in the context of implementing sustainable educational change in a divided society. At the core of the paper is the issue of how to enable more meaningful policy development and implementation around Area Planning for schools in Northern Ireland. However, the proposed framework and methodology will also resonate in and be relevant to other social and public policy areas, and in other aspects of educational change internationally.

## Community Conversations

The purpose of examining community conversation as a type of research is to consider how the findings from these local applications contribute to patterns of meaning that might be instructive and evidentiary for the field of transition. (Trainor 2018, p. 4)

It can be difficult to pin down a definition of ‘Community Conversations’ as the methodology is utilised in a range of different contexts, often with differing interpretations about what is intended by the term. Examples of Community Conversations can be found internationally at both government (national, regional, local) and non-government organisational levels. With origins in health projects (including disability, public health and mental health), the approach has been applied in a wide range of settings including library planning, community engagement and environmental awareness and climate change (Swedeen et al. 2011; Carter et al. 2012; Dutta et al. 2016). For example, in Library and Information Science, it has been used to refer to a panel led discussion on library and information education (Abels et al. 2015). In an agricultural policy context, the methodology has been used to encourage dialogue in rural communities in Canada with regard to improving the quality of life for these communities (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada 2013). Within mental health, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human

Services, developed a toolkit to encourage dialogue about mental health, explore community-based solutions and steps that local communities can take to support the mental health of its citizens (SAMHSA 2013).

Trainor (2018, p. 2) provides a meta-analysis of how Community Conversations can be used in the field of disability as “a tool for collaborating, educating and researching.” According to Trainor, the methodology sits within an interpretive paradigm, enabling meaning to be created from multiple perspectives. She also emphasises that rese writing and editing the final report arch utilising a Community Conversation approach need to be undertaken with rigour that adheres to transparent protocols, particularly as the methodology can be applied in a wide range of settings. These settings include working with diverse groups engaged in a conversation relating to one or more sensitive issues. With variability in how the methodology is understood, Trainor (2018) argues that qualitative research ‘touchstones’ need to be applied. This includes involving stakeholders in the research, a contextualised analysis of the data and researcher reflexivity. What is missing from most of the broader literature on Community Conversations are empirical exemplars that demonstrate how the findings can be used to effect policy development. Significantly, that Community Conversations have hitherto been under-used generally within education research; more specifically, within the divided society of NI, there is little or no evidence of their application in relation to the school system.

### **Developing the Community Conversation approach for a NI educational context**

The Community Conversation methodology developed by the authors was a response to the absence of parental voice informing the Area Planning process for school provision in NI, particularly at the pre-formal consultation stage. While our work was funded by the Integrated Education Fund (a charity which supports Integrated schooling in NI), critically, it also had wider stakeholder support from the outset through the involvement of the two statutory management bodies for schools in NI (namely, the Education Authority and the Council of Catholic Maintained Schools) who recognised the necessity of parental buy-in in the emotive arena of school provision. The methodology was designed to enable “communities to participate as active agents in determining the shape of the places in which they live and the services they require” and is an articulation of the principal that “a right to participate is a foundational principle of civic democracy” (DTNI 2018).

Participatory dialogue is essential at all levels of society; crucially, some issues are too important and sensitive to be the sole decision of policymakers and politicians. As a methodology, the Community Conversation does not presume to have all the answers or to resolve a particular issue but, as a process, it can challenge perspectives, contribute critical insights and thereby provide a strong evidence base to inform the direction of policy opinion and implementation.

### **Community Conversations and divided societies**

A Community Conversation approach offers tangible benefits in divided societies, where communities, institutions and politicians continue to struggle with changes

and challenges to the status quo and divergent viewpoints on local issues can be highly sensitive and contentious for everyone involved. Each Conversation provides an opportunity for a diverse range of community members and stakeholders to come together to identify, discuss and generate potential solutions to a pressing issue facing the community.

With a focus on participatory dialogue, Community Conversations are essentially qualitative in nature, although it can be useful to collect supplementary quantitative data such as Census information, other local population statistics and information relating to the demographic background of participants in order to contextualise findings.

Figure 1 sets out the rationale for undertaking a Community Conversation.

## The Community Conversation Toolkit

The principles that underpin the methodology of the Community Conversation Toolkit developed by Bates and O'Connor-Bones (2018) are set out below in Fig. 2.

Community Conversations can take different forms, for example, small group discussions or world café style meetings (where discussions take place at a number of tables within a room and are then shared among the participants, see Carson 2011). Writing about the world café model, Brown and Isaacs (2005 pxii) emphasise the benefit of “collective intelligence” and how developments in one conversation can stimulate and deepen discussions in another: “...wisdom emerges as we get more and more connected with each other, as we move from conversation to conversation, carrying the ideas from one conversation to another, looking for patterns, suddenly surprised by an insight we all share.”

Regardless of the chosen format (which will be designed to meet the needs of the project), conversations involve three key actors—facilitator(s), note-taker(s) and participants. It is the role of the facilitator(s) to create a constructive environment

### Why have a Community Conversation?

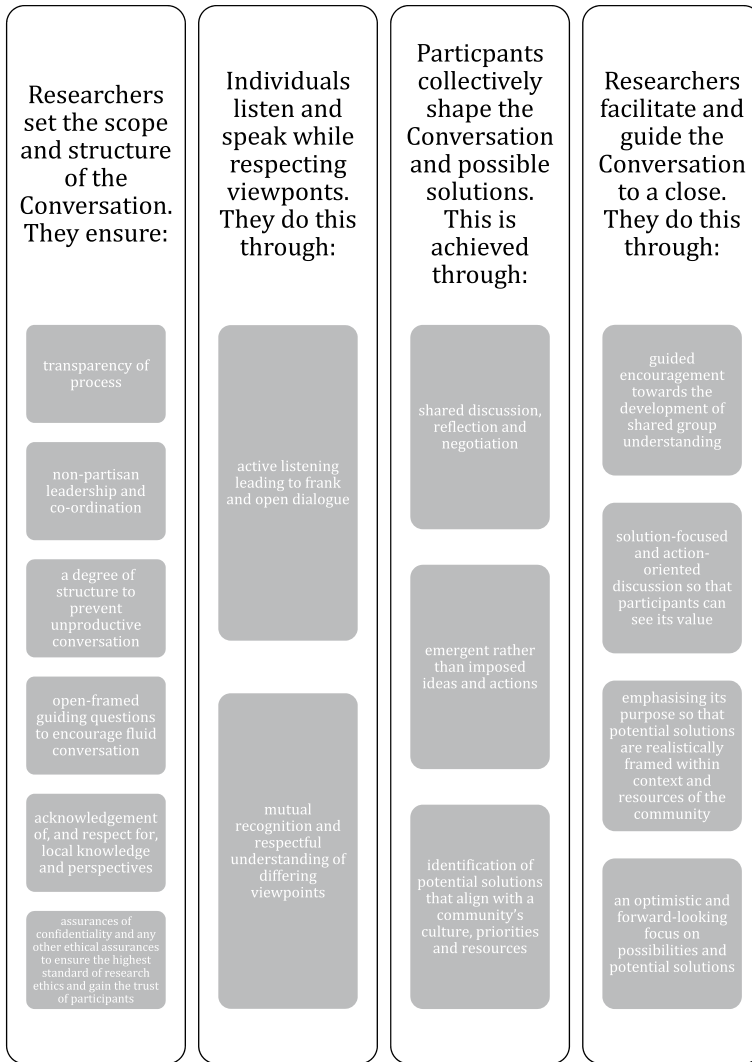
Community Conversations are key to participatory governance

#### As a methodology it:

- Provides a feasible, do-able opportunity to gather community feedback around a given topic.
- Offers the potential to explore sensitive and/or divisive topics of local concern.
- Promotes social empowerment, enabling communities to have greater voice in issues that directly affect them.
- Broadens the ownership of a particular issue thereby helping reduce inequalities of power, as well as inform practical decision-making.
- Creates an environment of mutual respect to discuss social issues in a constructive, participatory manner.
- Helps participants to find common ground leading to insights that generate options to move forward.
- Provides policy-makers with a deeper understanding of community views.
- Offers a community-focused evidence base which can lead to meaningful, effective policy implementation and potential social change.

Fig. 1 Why have a Community Conversation (Bates and O'Connor-Bones 2018)





**Fig. 2** Community Conversation principles

in which meaningful dialogue can occur, to promote discussion and to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to participate. They should encourage critical thinking, open discussion and respect for all viewpoints, while guiding the direction and flow of the conversation and maintaining group focus. The note-taker(s) liaise with the facilitator(s) in advance of the conversation to agree roles and responsibilities. Their responsibility is to ensure that key points from the conversation are recorded accurately. They can also check any comments that are unclear or require additional explanation with the participants. The participants provide grass roots insight into local community issues or the specific issue under discussion. By

offering insights, suggestions and solutions that are meaningful and achievable in a local context, they can contribute to more effective implementation of policy- and decision-making. There may also be occasions where meetings with individuals are necessary to ensure a free-flowing, authentic conversation rather than meeting with a group of people. Likewise, undertaking the Conversation in an online space is also an option if this is deemed to be appropriate for the context, so long as it is an environment participants will feel comfortable with. In previous Community Conversations undertaken by the authors, it has been useful to run a parallel online survey that individuals can respond to if they are unable to participate in a face-to-face event.

A Community Conversation follows four main phases and has a series of steps within each phase (Bates and O'Connor-Bones 2018), which are as follows:

Phase 1: Preparing the ground and developing trust;

Phase 2: Logistics.

Phase 3: The Conversation.

Phase 4: Follow-up.

In order to create an effective process, it is crucial that no step(s) is overlooked or given insufficient time and attention as this could undermine the validity of the process.

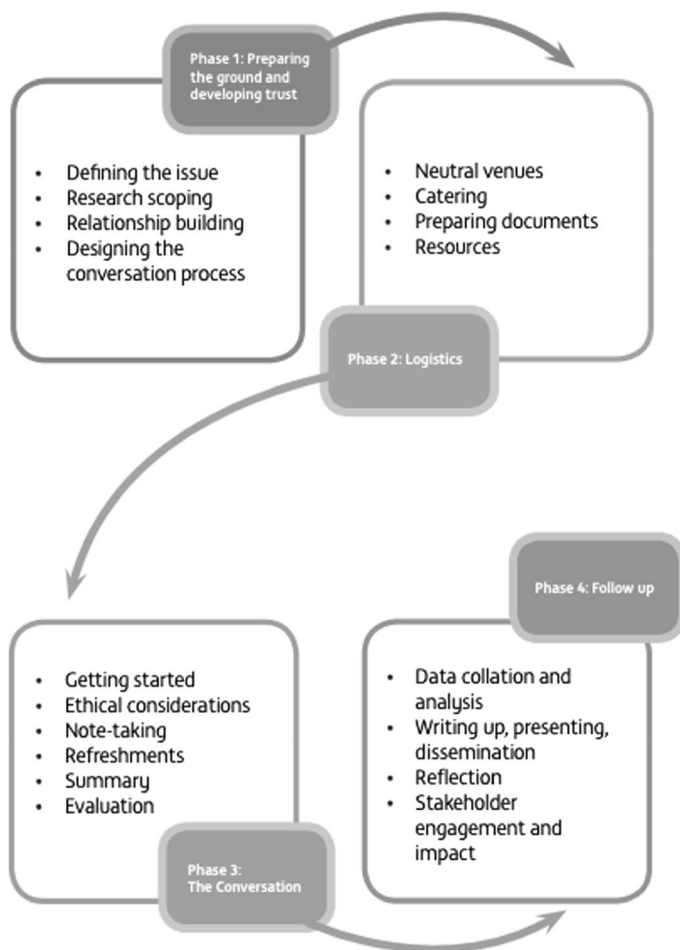
The key phases and main activities involved in undertaking a Community Conversation are set out in Fig. 3.

Further detail on the steps and activities within the different phases can be found in the Community Conversation Toolkit (Bates and O'Connor-Bones 2018). The Conversation itself is a sequential process that conforms to an agreed and manageable timescale. Within this process, the Conversation can be broken down further into a series of discrete steps that enable open, constructive and respectful dialogue. While timings will vary depending on the context, the sequence presented in Fig. 4 is offered as a useful template to start with.

The Community Conversation process should facilitate a respectful, constructive dialogue that takes individual capital and through the conversation mechanisms and interactions creates social capital that can be used to inform policy implementation and decision-making so that it becomes political capital. It is therefore helpful, we would argue, to frame or view this research approach within a socio-ecological perspective.

## Socio-ecological model

With origins in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) human development research and adopted widely in health research and the social sciences, the socio-ecological model (SEM) presents the social environment in a concentric paradigm where the individual, located at the centre, is influenced by the expanding influences of interpersonal (micro), organisational (meso), community (exo) and societal (macro) norms (Glanz and Kahan 2014). The multiple influences within the SEM underline the porous and



**Fig. 3** The phases and activities involved in a Community Conversation (Bates and O'Connor-Bones 2018, p. 11)

bidirectional complexity of social systems when multiple perspectives and ideological positions converge on a specific issue (Kilanowski 2017). The model is used as a “foundation ... to highlight the multi-level approach needed” (Srivastav et al. 2020, p. 525).

In the context of this study, the socio-ecological model provides a relevant conceptual framework for the participative democracy of Community Conversations. Specifically, its potential to harness the interplay between parents, social networks (micro), school (meso), community (exo) and public policy (macro) on sustainable school provision in Northern Ireland provides a holistic lens on which continues to be a divisive and sensitive issue in Northern Ireland.



**Fig. 4** The Community Conversation process

While there are various iterations and adaptations of the socio-ecological model, Fig. 5 depicts the five influential spheres relative to this study, demonstrating the bottom-up, top-down relationship that Community Conversations seek to bridge.

### Case study: education provision in NI

...a critical condition for strengthening accountability in education involves providing different actors with an opportunity to articulate and represent their views... (Smith and Benavot 2019, p. 194)

The Community Conversation methodology was developed, and refined, for effective engagement with local communities (parents, school governors, principals, teachers, other school staff, community representatives and members of the wider community) in relation to school provision in an Area Planning context. It focused on specific geographic areas where there was either a surplus of school places creating unsustainable schools vulnerable to closure, or insufficient school places to meet the local demand in particular school sectors.

This case study of how Community Conversations were applied in the Area Planning Education context in NI draws on two recent Community Conversations carried out by the authors—one is a Conversation in the rural area of Glenarm and Carnlough (on the north-east coast of NI) where there were a number of primary schools in close proximity with a surplus of schools places and the other is a Conversation in the urban area of South Belfast / Carryduff where demand for places exceeded supply for a number of schools (mainly in the Integrated and Catholic

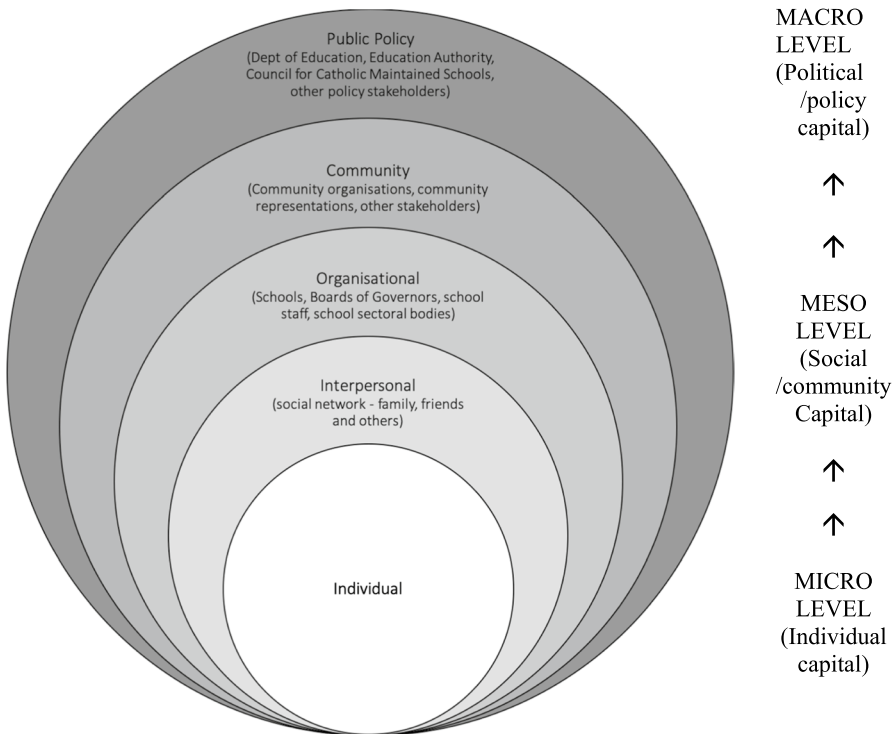


Fig. 5 Nested socio-ecological model

Maintained sectors). The two distinct conversations offer a complementary lens on Community Conversations as a mechanism for deliberative democracy in the wider context of educational change in NI. The core of these Community Conversations was the question—‘what is the best way forward for sustainable school provision in the area?’.

As with the socio-ecological model, individuals—in this case parents—are at the centre of the Community Conversation. The Community Conversation is designed to give them a voice regarding what kind of school provision they would like to see. In designing a Community Conversation, it is important to ensure that the framing of the Conversation is aligned to the needs of the statutory bodies that have a responsibility for school provision or there will not be any effective policy implications. The approach and methodology are therefore a bridge from the micro (individual) level to the macro (policy) level. It is equally important to ensure representation and participation from the schools and wider community in which the parents live and longer-term school solution(s) are going to be situated and to recognise that parents’ perspectives can be shaped and influenced by their extended personal networks—all of which brings in the meso-spheres of the model.

Drawing on the nested construct of the socio-ecological model (adapted from Bronfenbrenner 1977), the Community Conversations we have undertaken (for example, (Bates et al. 2019); (Bates et al. 2018)) provide illustrative examples which demonstrate the ways in which people’s perspectives are informed, shaped and at times constrained by their interpersonal relationships and social networks, the organisational context around the schools setting (including the values and ethos of the school setting), the wider community in which they live and the public policies that govern the NI education system—and that they in turn can shape their environment. For example, in relation to parental perspectives on school preference and quality of education, one parent in the urban location of the South Belfast Conversation emphasised the influence of her immediate social network when considering what school to send her child to: ‘I know my friends are of the same mindset: ‘I went to a Catholic school, so must my children.’ I know other parents in this area think that way too. And I don’t know people outside of that circle’, similarly another stated about their school preference ‘‘my husband went there so there is a link to the school.’’

Reflecting the meso-spheres in the socio-ecological model, the connection between family, community and school was particularly evident in the rurally situated Community Conversation in Glenarm and Carnlough, where parents emphasised the need to retain a school in their community or the community itself might not survive: ‘‘We need a school here. We have lost our bank, our post office, our doctor. We really don’t want to lose anything else. If there is no school here then families will move away and what will we be then, a retirement village? Please no.’’

It was also clear in this Community Conversation that among the parents there was a ‘‘consensus that any new provision should unite rather than divide the community.’’

Community Conversation participants were also pragmatic in terms of considering what outcomes in terms of local school provision would be sustainable and

beneficial, in their view, for society as a whole, as demonstrated, for example, by the following quotations from parents in the Glenarm and Carnlough Conversation:

I think there needs to be rationalisation across the 4 sites in terms of their estate and teaching resource. This may be at the cost of children having to travel some distance. Integration is the way forward. Most important factor is the provision of outstanding teaching and achievement for children in the area. Our children's success is the future of our villages.

I feel that for long term sustainability a more integrated approach would need to be taken. There are too many schools around the area with little numbers. It would be more beneficial if these schools joined together. It would also be better for the community as a whole and Northern Ireland in general if children weren't segregated at such a young age.

The Glenarm and Carnlough Conversation also found that "parents' views were aligned to a wider social context and it was observed that young people saw Northern Ireland as 'stuck in the past' and many chose to leave to take up university or employment opportunities. Parents emphasised that the education system needed to change if this perception was to shift and young people were to feel more positive about making their futures here: 'If only one school is left standing, it has to be integrated as that is the future'."

School principals have emphasised the importance of giving their school communities a voice in relation to important decisions that affect their future:

We welcome any research, particularly independent research that gives parents a voice and opportunity to express their feelings to get an overview of what the needs are for the kids in the area. (School Principal, speaking about the South Belfast Community Conversation, in Colhoun 2018).

The Community Conversation will help to shape the strategic response and hopefully, will ensure that future primary provision reflects the community's preferences. (School Principal, speaking about the South Belfast Community Conversation, in Colhoun 2018)

Everything gathered pace following the Community Conversation, so we're very much indebted to the process. (School Principal, speaking about the Carnlough / Glenarm Community Conversation, 2017, from the follow-up research in Glenarm in September 2019 regarding the impact of the Community Conversation)

The application of the Community Conversation methodology is undoubtedly a step forward in a more democratic approach to policymaking and corresponding evidence of the shoots of change is indicative of its impact. In September 2019, additional evidence was gathered from the School Principal and parents in Glenarm regarding the impact that the Community Conversation had had on their school community and in particular on their plans to move forward with plans to transform the school from a Catholic Maintained to an Integrated school. Parent views regarding the Community Conversation included:

I think it gave us the confidence to move forward because there then was evidence. (Participant, speaking at a follow-up focus group about the Carnlough / Glenarm Community Conversation)

Actually the University of Ulster coming in independently made it much easier, because within the community it was seen to be independent and neutral and it allowed people to feel freed up to talk and I think people really did, at all levels, engage in the process. (Participant, speaking at a follow-up focus group about the Carnlough / Glenarm Community Conversation)

I think it generated an interest amongst parents in the community in education. The Sustainable Schools Policy – I mean I know I didn't really know what it was prior to the conversations that we had in the board but I think in the wider community, a lot of parents suddenly were interested in the status quo and the future and all of those factors. I think a lot of people probably wouldn't have known the criteria...I think it's helped to inform the community so that they have more of a confident voice of what they want for their kids. (Participant, speaking at a follow-up focus group about the Carnlough / Glenarm Community Conversation).

These quotations highlight the porous boundaries and the bidirectional relationships between the different spheres within the socio-ecological model and also serve to illustrate the simultaneous bottom-up/top-down nature of the Community Conversation approach.

The Community Conversation in Carnlough/Glenarm is widely regarded by the main participants, the management bodies and the wider media as being a good example of civic participation in decisions that affect lives locally. One of the schools involved is the first primary school in the Catholic Maintained sector in Northern Ireland to enter the formal process to transform to an Integrated school. The above quotations demonstrate that the Conversation played a significant role in terms of giving the parents and the wider school community the confidence to move forward on this path as the empirical evidence from the Conversation demonstrated that the support was there to move in that direction. In terms of impacting on policy implementation, Michael McConkey, Head of Area Planning in the NI Education Authority, has stated: “The Education Authority regards the Community Conversation Toolkit and approach developed at Ulster University as a highly valuable non-partisan mechanism to develop a best-practice model of consultation. This enables who communities to meaningfully engage with education planning, and in particular with Area Planning, and contribute to more effective and informed policy implementation” (Bates and O'Connor-Bones 2018, p. 3).



## Discussion and conclusion

Flippo and Butterworth (2018) establish the place of Community Conversations in relation to systems change work and this is an appropriate way to conclude. Community Conversations are about change—in how people think about things, their behaviour and ultimately about decision-making, policy implementation and policy development—in a way that connects individuals, communities, stakeholders and policy. According to Flippo and Butterworth (2018, pp. 10–11), the strengths of the approach from a systems change perspective are that:

1. Community conversations support defining both the problem and the goal, assisting stakeholders to use common language and definitions, and to ensure all perspectives are included;
2. A key element of community conversations is brainstorming solutions to identified barriers and challenges;
3. Community conversations engage stakeholders and expand the network of advocates for change implementation;
4. Community conversations support changing expectations for participants; and
5. Community conversations strengthen local implementation of changing policy and goals.

However, they are not a panacea and even with the involvement of key policy stakeholders at critical junctures in the Community Conversation journey, it can still be a challenge to see outcomes from a Community Conversation implemented at policy level. O'Connor et al. (2020, p. 5) recognise that, “In divided societies, education reform is imbued with additional distinctive challenges. Reform in NI can be seen as both a reaction to, and a reflection of, the fragility of a post-conflict society. ... Yet, the peace process simultaneously created an opportunity for a radical education policy vision.”

The Community Conversation approach developed by the authors has enabled communities to contribute their views on sustainable education provision in their area in a way that was academically rigorous and ethically sound. It has been important that the research has been undertaken by academic researchers, independent of statutory and sectoral bodies each of which shape education provision and have their own specific priorities. At the same time, the data obtained from these Conversations can be used by sectoral and statutory bodies to inform educational policy and delivery at a local level in terms of Area Planning.

The strength of our approach is that it both gives voice to communities, enshrining the principles of deliberative democracy, and provides a robust evidence base for those involved in decision-making and policy development and implementation. It is therefore considered to be both bottom-up and top-down in its approach. It has been important from our experience that policy stakeholders are involved right from the outset to contribute to discussions regarding the parameters for a Community Conversation as this will ensure that the focus and questions that are being asked are relevant to or aligned with their needs and it also helps to ensure that the

Conversation itself focuses on what can be realistically changed as there can be a danger in creating unrealistic expectations for those that participate in the Conversation. This model has been endorsed and its value is recognised by senior staff and representatives of educational bodies in Northern Ireland, by those leading organisations working in the area of civic participation and deliberative democracy and by the participants themselves.

According to Building Change Trust, NI (2018, p. 25) “Both the Education Authority and Department of Education are actively exploring how to mainstream the community conversations methodology in their development of area plans.” Indeed, this is evident in the House of Commons NIAC (2019) report on Education Funding in Northern Ireland. Paragraph 104 states: “The Department of Education should use part of the public sector transformation fund allocated in the 2019–20 draft budget to run community consultations on school provision, so that communities have a real stake in decision-making rooted in their desired outcomes.”

The need for greater citizen participation in decision-making and policy implementation is also recognised in the New Decade, New Approach Deal (Northern Ireland Office 2020) which the which the UK and Irish Governments invited the NI Political parties to endorse as a basis for restoring the NI Executive. Paragraph 4.5 in Annex 4: Programme for Government states: “...the parties agree that the principles and practice of *citizen and community engagement and co-design* will be a key part of the development and delivery of the Programme for Government and its supporting strategies. This will empower citizens to secure their own rights and wellbeing” (original emphasis).

According to the New Decade, New Approach Deal (Northern Ireland Office 2020 , p. 43) and its Programme for Government 2020 and beyond—Strategic Priorities, “ The education system has a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values. However, it is not sustainable.” By setting out the methodology, within the context of deliberative democracy and within a divided society setting, it is hoped that others will see a value in our approach, learn from it and apply and/or adapt it for their own needs, particularly in relation to educational change.

In addition to demonstrating how this body of work has had an impact on community voice in Area Planning for schools in NI, and on the stakeholders that have responsibility for policy implementation, the work is also intended to contribute to the literature based on iterations of the Community Conversation methodology specifically, and on deliberative democracy—particularly in divided societies, more generally. The paper is therefore partly also a response to Trainor’s (2018) call for more research focusing on how Community Conversation are implemented in qualitative research to help establish the methodology. The Community Conversation approach presented here is an example or application of deliberative democracy that is designed to enable greater public participation in policy implementation and decision-making. It is an exemplar of deliberative civic engagement and it adds to the growing evidence base that “Ideas gathered from the conversations can be used as recommendations to policymakers to further the change initiative and to justify its implementation” (Flippo and

Butterworth, 2018, p. 11). As Perna (2017, p. 3) and others have emphasised, deliberative democracy “must produce societal outcomes.”

**Data availability** The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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