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Teaching about the Past in Northern Ireland: Avoidance, Neutrality, and Criticality

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Introduction

Efforts to address community division in Northern Ireland have been pursued by education policy makers since the 1980s. The first clear commitment to addressing the conflict in schools was reflected in a Circular ‘The Improvement of Community Relations: The Contribution of Schools’ released by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland in 1982. This communication made it clear that every educational professional at every level was responsible for ensuring that children learn to understand and respect each other so that they could live in a more harmonious society (DE Northern Ireland 1982). With resonances of the multi-cultural and inter-cultural education projects that emanated from the USA and Europe in the 1960s, since the 1980s educational policy makers have sought to address division and conflict in two main ways: firstly, educational policy has created new opportunities for cross-community interaction between pupils. This emphasis on intergroup contact is most apparent in the 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order when statutory recognition was granted to integrated schools which enrol both Catholic and Protestant children. These schools offer a challenge to the prevailing school system whereby Catholics and Protestants attend schools with co-religionists and assume that intergroup contact can contribute to the diminution of community divisions (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Aboud et al. 2012). More recent efforts to promote ‘Shared Education’ – i.e. collaborative networks between Protestant and Catholic schools is similarly underpinned by a commitment to intergroup contact. Where Shared Education is underpinned by an acceptance that children will continue to attend separate schools, Integrated Education offers students the opportunity to attend a school with children drawn from different faiths/ communities. Secondly, there have been efforts to extend knowledge about conflict and division through the statutory curriculum. The development of compulsory cross-curricular themes in 1989 - Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH) - were designed to help children in all schools to better understand issues of culture and identity within the context of Northern Ireland. Critiqued because of a lack of teacher commitment and the absence of content on rights and equality (Smith and Robinson 1996) the themes have since been shelved. More recent attempts to strengthen the curricular response to division have reflected the global imperative to teach civics or citizenship where the emphasis is on fostering political literacy, developing an understanding of human rights and democratic engagement (Veugelers 2011; Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2017). The current programme of Local and Global Citizenship Education (LGC) in Northern Ireland was introduced in 2007 as a statutory strand of work within the curricular Area of Learning ‘Learning for Life and Work’ in post-primary schools. LGC intends that local and global elements of citizenship are given equal curricular emphasis. To this end it is based around four key concepts: diversity and inclusion; equality and social justice; democracy and active participation; and human rights and social responsibility. A key objective is to encourage young people to better understand political and democratic processes at the local and global level and to participate in the society and political culture of which they are part. In this regard the LGC curriculum in Northern Ireland reflected the broad focus on democracy and political participation evident in similar curricula in other jurisdictions however it also captured the particularities of the local context and so specific emphasis was given to addressing Northern Ireland’s ‘past’ (CCEA 2017). As a minimum, students at Key Stage 3 (age 11-14) are required to:

Investigate how and why conflict, including prejudice, stereotyping, sectarianism and racism may arise in the community; investigate ways of managing conflict and community relations (CCEA 2017, 2).

A commitment to prepare teachers to teach the curricular content reflected an expectation that teachers would require support if they were to deliver on these core objectives (Arlow 2012). Yet the curricular guidance also affords a degree of flexibility and autonomy to citizenship teachers which ensure that they have scope to decide what aspects of the citizenship curriculum to teach and how to teach it (McEvoy 2007). This flexibility is important for two reasons: firstly, the curriculum positions teachers to 'perform a gatekeeping role as decision makers' in relation to the teaching of Northern Ireland's difficult past (Klein 2017, 77). However, the autonomy offered to teachers to individualise the curriculum is potentially problematic in that it provides an opt-out clause to avoid engagement with issues that are controversial in the local context (Reilly and Niens, 2014). Secondly, 'conflict' is frequently presented in the curricular text in terms of 'interpersonal conflict' and where it is framed as a societal or political conflict the exemplars presented suggest that teachers have an opportunity to examine conflict in Northern Ireland *or* in other contexts. Overall, therefore, individual teachers have the flexibility and space to interpret and control how the curriculum is enacted in their classroom (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991).

The potential for various interpretations and practices regarding teaching about the conflict suggests the need for further analysis. Specifically, the need to better understand whether and how teachers decide to teach about the contentious issues related to the conflict deserves further attention. This paper will therefore examine these issues by drawing on qualitative data from 18 Key Stage 3 LGC teachers in Northern Ireland. The paper begins with an analysis of research evidence on the role of schools and curricula in challenging division before a presentation of the methods, findings and analysis.

The role of schools in the divided society

Prior to the 1960s the idea that schools in western democracies should attend to racial or sectarian division was not accorded the emphasis that it is today. Rather minority groups were largely expected to defer to the dominant group as the assimilationist policies evident in public and social policy similarly permeated the classroom (Banks 1993; Nieto 2017). The shift away from assimilationist policies towards a recognition of the inherent value and positive contribution of diverse cultures was precipitated in the USA and Europe by Civil Rights campaigns where black and minority groups agitated for rights, equality and equitable treatment within the state (Banks 1993; Nieto 2017). 'Multi-cultural education' in the US and 'intercultural education' in Europe stimulated theoretical debate and practical responses to the inequities that minority communities were experiencing within schools and other educational contexts. The focus was on reorienting school curricula and teacher practice to recognise the legitimacy of different group perspectives and to ensure that schools did not either consciously or unconsciously discriminate against minority communities (Banks 1993). Whilst not a specific policy, as a broad educational movement and philosophy, multi-cultural education intended to highlight the role of schools in challenging racism, discrimination and poor relations and ultimately contributing to social cohesion by encouraging children to recognise the value of diversity (Banks 1993; Nieto 2017). Early versions of multi-cultural education emphasised the need for children to learn about the rich and positive aspects of diversity and focused on institutionalising in-school celebrations so as to enhance esteem in

minority cultures whilst acquainting all students with their own and other cultures through exchange of folk rhymes, literature, art, dance, food, clothing and religion (Kehoe 1994). A concomitant emphasis on understanding the psychological factors that may prevent the development of positive relations between divided groups was similarly given prominence.

These perspectives have had a notable effect on [education] policy in Northern Ireland. Rolston (2014) for example has argued that multiculturalism has entrenched a view of conflict in Northern Ireland which is grounded in cultural difference rather than in concepts of political and structural inequity. Hence the development of Integrated Education and more recently Shared Education can be understood in this context. Both initiatives reflect the underlying assumption that the conflict was, at least in part, caused by cultural intolerance and that contact between the pupils from divided groups would help ameliorate negative attitudes and ultimately contribute to social cohesion. Similarly, the curricular emphasis on EMU and CH lent emphasis to understanding cultural difference and accorded value to nationalist and unionists' customs and traditions (McEvoy et al. 2006). As noted earlier such concepts are also evident in the more recent LGC curriculum both in the emphasis on developing positive responses to diversity and in the framing of conflict as an inter-personal problem.

The common-sense appeal of such initiatives however tends to belie the challenges embedded in them. It is argued that when the 'solution' to societal tension and conflict is framed only in terms of improving inter-group attitudes, creating opportunities for contact and enhancing cultural understanding, then it is clear that the causes of conflict are located at the individual or group level and the broader structural and political factors that underpin such struggles are not subject to question or critique. Moreover, research has also shown that poor intergroup attitudes may be a *consequence* of inequality and conflict rather than the cause (May and Sleeter 2010). As multi-cultural education has evolved, these critiques and specifically the need for teachers to focus on the political and structural causes of group conflict have gained more traction. It is argued that schools and teachers should seek to harness the critical capacities of young people who can be taught to engage in a more meaningful way with the political perspectives of groups in conflict. This, it is argued, will allow students to develop a deeper appreciation of the structural causes of intergroup tension and political conflict (Banks and McGee Banks 2016). The broad framing of the citizenship curriculum in Northern Ireland, offers teachers an opportunity to explore the political aspects of conflict but presenting structural inequities as the cause of conflict implies a significant change in the way that conflict is conceptualised by teachers; it requires that teachers encourage young people to engage with issues that have the potential to inspire some controversy - something, as noted below, that is likely to pose challenges.

How do teachers teach controversial issues?

Research generally suggests that teachers have a tendency to express some reticence when addressing potentially controversial and contentious issues in the classroom (Oulton, Day, Dillon and Grace 2004; Hess 2008; Bickmore 2007) and, in the case of conflict and post-conflict societies, where the past continues to be very much part of the present, many teachers live with the fear of classroom discussion on controversial issues deteriorating into tension and conflict in the classroom (Weinstein, Freedman and Hughson 2007). Where teachers do attempt to explore the roots of intergroup division and political conflict literature suggests that they often struggle with self-positioning in regard to the issues under discussion leading some to either present themselves as neutral or to offer one-sided perspectives (Kelly 1986). Although teacher self-disclosure is recognised as a

critical component of teaching controversial issues as it creates empathy with pupils and affords opportunities for teachers to model the sharing of politically controversial perspectives (Kelly 1986; Barton and McCully 2005) there are concerns that in presenting their own views teachers will re-shape the views of pupils and risk their indoctrination (Gindi and Erlich 2018).

Whilst the evidence pertaining to teaching controversial issues is replete with the pedagogical challenges encountered by teachers there remains little *detailed* understanding of factors that shape and motivate teachers' decisions to teach [or not] about conflict (Kello, 2016; Gindi and Erlich, 2018). Thus, although there is an acknowledgement that avoidance is linked to fear of causing disharmony in the classroom there is little consideration of the factors that lead teachers to avoid discussing [or engaging with] political conflict. The need for qualitative research which sheds light on teachers' 'experience and motives for behaviour' has thus been acknowledged by Gindi and Erlich, (2018, 66) who argue that such analysis would highlight the factors which influence the teaching of conflict-related issues in divided societies. The need for further research is particularly pronounced in Northern Ireland where evidence suggests that there are a variety of approaches to teaching citizenship. For example, Donnelly and Burns (2017) have found that citizenship teaching varies across Protestant and Catholic schools whilst Loader and Hughes (2017) highlight the existence of a 'hierarchy of taboo subjects' amongst teachers in shared education classes. But although this research has focused on the school ethos and context as key determinants of teacher practice in citizenship, exploring the underpinning motivations of teachers, their experiences and rationale for teaching about the conflict (or not) should help us better understand what motivates their avoidance or engagement with such issues and ultimately ensure that professional development is more effectively tailored to teacher need.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to explore the choices that citizenship teachers make when teaching about the past in Northern Ireland. With its emphasis on explicating the lived experience and understanding the complexities of dealing with difference in a deeply divided society, qualitative methods were the obvious approach to explore this question. As natives or long-term residents of Northern Ireland we were acutely aware of the sensitivities involved in examining the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants in Northern Ireland relating to issues that are not commonly discussed in explicit terms. Indeed, the conflict is normally avoided in 'polite' conversation especially in mixed company (Heaney 1975) and so as qualitative researchers we were particularly cognisant of the need to build a rapport with teachers in advance of the research, and we believe that this went some way to creating a sense of safety for the open discussion of the issues during interview (Denscombe 1998).

The data was collected over a period of eight months during 2014/15 a period of relative calm and stability in Northern Ireland. Eighteen teachers participated in the study across nine post-primary schools¹. It is important to note that schools in Northern Ireland are separated according to community background and academic ability; hence protestant

¹ *Data collection also took place prior to the 2016 Brexit Referendum and the breakdown of devolution (2017-2020). Whilst this time period has witnessed dissension between nationalist and Unionist communities and parties it has, more recently resulted, in a growing rejection of traditional identity categories- something that emerged strongly in the data below (see Hayward, & McManus, 2018).*

children are normally taught in state schools which are predominantly staffed by Protestant teachers whilst Catholic children are normally taught in Catholic schools mainly by Catholic teachers (Milliken, Bates and Smith, 2020). Entry to academically selective schools for children from both communities is based on performance in an examination taken at the beginning of the final year of primary school; expectedly, this system of selection inspires much controversy and is regularly critiqued for reinforcing social class division (Gardner, 2016). A small number of formally integrated schools exist for children whose parents wish for them to be educated alongside children of other religious/identity backgrounds and none. Although we were not undertaking a comparative analysis of the different school types, we wished to include the range of schools in the study so that we could capture the variety of experiences and perspectives that might pertain across the different school contexts. Hence four Catholic (two selective and two non-selective) four Protestant (two selective and two non-selective) and one Integrated school participated. Two teachers were interviewed in each school. Only teachers of citizenship at Key Stage 3 were invited to take part although all of these teachers taught other subjects and six also taught history and/or politics where issues allied to the conflict are either prescribed as part of the curriculum in Key Stage 3 (History) or are part of the syllabi for examinations (History and Politics) (CCEA 2017). Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was conducted by researchers drawn from the two main communities in Northern Ireland and one from outside of Northern Ireland.

Reflexivity: the identity of the researchers

The identity of the researchers is important in Northern Ireland, yet prior research on the conflict has suggested that researchers tend to present themselves as neutral rather than reveal their political aspirations, religious beliefs and cultural proclivities (Finlay 2001). However, in qualitative research the researcher's perspectives assume significance because the researcher is the instrument of data collection and in this regard is not separate from but deeply embedded in the research process (Flick 2007). We were keen therefore, given the purpose of the research, not to avoid or negate the importance of our own identities, rather we were constantly aware of the salience of our identity and perceived identity groups during data collection and analysis. Cognisance of our own perspectives and the contrasting ways in which our membership of the respective groups in Northern Ireland or as someone who is a long-term resident in Northern Ireland, was sharpened as the research progressed. Rather than seeking to underplay our values and positionality, we perceived the diversity of the research team as a strength and the presence of a researcher who was raised outside of Northern Ireland was particularly helpful in that it heightened the 'local' researchers' awareness of their perspectives on the data. Robust discussions between all the researchers afforded us a depth of perspective that we believe would not have been possible had the research been undertaken by a single investigator.

Data analysis and ethics

The data was analysed in a broadly thematic way reflecting Clarke and Braun's advice (2013). Hence we searched for recurring themes and patterns in the interview transcripts and attempted to understand these themes and their significance in regard to the debates on teaching about conflict outlined above. Concepts such as criticality and avoidance frequently emerged in interview transcripts and these similarly featured in the literature. Consonant with the tradition of qualitative research the themes were also 'data driven' in that we identified patterns relating to the motivations for avoidance. Hence, whilst the literature offered a frame and sensitised us to the significant concepts emerging within

the data, the interviews opened the discussion of issues that were important to teachers and this allowed for a deeper understanding. As noted, we also brought our own 'interpretive lens' to the data analysis, and this inevitably exerted an influence on the issues that we attached significance to.

In keeping with the ethical protocol of Universities, and reflecting the ethical frameworks advised in the literature the data was only collected when ethical approval was granted. All institutions and participants were provided with an information letter and consent form and agreed to voluntarily take part. All were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any point up until the data was anonymised (no participant chose to do so). All participants were assured of confidentiality and that they would not be identified in any written report or article emanating from the research. The data was not used for any purpose other than the current research and is stored in line with the data protection legislation. We pledged to retain the data for at least five years after which it will be destroyed.

Findings

Given that they are encouraged (rather than obliged) to teach about the recent past in Northern Ireland as part of the citizenship curriculum, teachers were asked about whether and how they taught about the conflict and group differences in the context of Northern Ireland. The majority reported that they did not teach explicitly about the *local* conflict during the citizenship class hence further questions sought to explore the factors that underpinned the decision to avoid such discussion. Whilst avoidance as a pedagogical response to conflict and political division in Northern Ireland has already been rehearsed in the local and international literature, the data offer nuanced insights into the way that teachers interpreted the local conflict and the ways in which this, in turn, influenced their decision to avoid discussing the conflict:

Why do citizenship teachers avoid reference to the past?

Most teachers explained their decision to avoid by pointing to the growing irrelevance of the conflict as a matter of debate in schools. They consistently described Northern Ireland as a society that had largely 'moved on' from its violent past. This point was most frequently made in schools where teachers perceived the conflict to have had little impact on the area in which the school was located. Despite the presence of several faith-based schools it was common for teachers to state that the catchment area of their school was 'largely integrated'. They argued that the area had not traditionally been affected by the extent of violence experienced in other areas of Northern Ireland, and that students were 'desensitised' to local political issues; indeed, they suggested that to explore Northern Ireland's recent political history might repel rather than invite their interest in the overall citizenship curriculum:

There's a different history as well. It's always been this integrated here, the issue around here. Just different. It wasn't at the sharp end, maybe, of the conflict. (Catholic teacher)

.. I guess we did ten years ago or maybe if you live in Belfast you would have the parades issue might be more of an issue but here in (name of town) there isn't really that parades issue as such, so the youngsters tend to talk more if we are talking about 'isms' and diversity. They talk more about racism rather than sectarianism you know; they don't link it too

much to sectarianism or to loyalism or nationalism; it isn't the norm to really talk about this either. (Protestant teacher)

But I don't know if we have the biggest problems... maybe I'm glossing over them but I, you know, I think everyone is very mature and very intelligent about it here. we aren't caught up in that kind of thing. (Catholic teacher)

It isn't like other areas like in the (name of city) but would suspect there are very few people here would not know Catholic children but in the town they mix all the time. They mix in football teams and Gaelic [football] teams you know. (Protestant teacher)

Despite these assessments though when teachers in the more urban and conflict-affected areas were asked about their approach to teaching about the conflict, they too reported that they avoided conflict-related issues, although the motivation for doing so was different:

If you are teaching about, you know, something quite recent and something to do with Northern Ireland then, I think, it's very, very difficult when you still have stuff going on around the area, it isn't really possible to get into that as it is risky in terms of inflaming things, making it worse. I wouldn't, as I said, I wouldn't like to try it. (Catholic teacher)

The pupils are maybe coming at it from a different point of view because they haven't lived through it, they might find it easier to be more removed from it, but I can't. (Catholic teacher)

Regardless of where their school was located all of these teachers dismissed the value of discussing the conflict during citizenship class because it was 'too time consuming' (teacher) and could detract from the teaching of other aspects of the citizenship curriculum. There was also a widespread belief amongst all teachers that discussing conflict related issues during citizenship class would hold little interest for students who they believed already regarded citizenship as having little purchase in the job market:

...Ultimately as a teacher, and this might seem a bit cynical, my job is to get the children the best grade that they can get in their LLW or whatever exam. So what is happening is that teachers may have to buy into, and tell the children, "If you want to get your 'A' grade, you must follow this text book, and write that answer down."... (Protestant teacher)

... As time has moved on, the economy has become more of an issue for them, so the whole idea of Irish unity/British identity may not be just as big a player for the children. (Catholic teacher)

But what I would say is that people are so focussed on jobs that school is a different animal than it was 10 or 15 years ago. Old fogeys will remark that when you go into a class you don't get the opportunity to open up the debate as much as you used to. ...Now, dare I say because of the government, everything is so didactic, you walk in, you teach the syllabus,

you prime the children to do the exams; the kids do well. If you look at exam results, we are a great school. And you've got children who are on that conveyor belt. (Catholic teacher)

As noted earlier, avoidance is a common response to dealing with politically sensitive and controversial aspects of the curriculum and it is one that is not unique to schools or teachers in Northern Ireland (May and Sleeter 2010; Milner and Howard 2004). The data above however casts an important light on the complex interplay of factors which lead a teacher to avoid the discussion of potentially controversial issues. Firstly, it shows that avoidance is an almost instinctive response to discussing the conflict; the teachers' comments seem therefore to be consistent with a wider societal culture which normalises the avoidance of conflict-related issues in conversation (Donnelly 2008). The references to 'intelligence' as a reason to avoid conflict resolution is also notable and perhaps reflects a 'classist' interpretation of the causes of conflict; something already alluded to by MacGinty (2014) who, has suggested that conflict resolution programmes are often infused with classist assumptions about conflict and sectarianism which reinforce a belief that sectarianism is the sole preserve of those from working class communities. Secondly, it is clear that avoidance is also motivated by teachers' interpretations of the current socio-political context. As in earlier research, teachers expressed a reluctance to discuss the conflict in areas that are continuing to experience the effects of violence so as to avoid the risk of introducing contentious issues that they believe may create distress and disharmony (see Niens et al. 2013; Hughes and Loader 2015; Barton and McCully 2005) Yet what is perhaps less well documented is that the *absence* of conflict in recent years is also presented as a reason to avoid its discussion. Many teachers were motivated to avoid because they believed that the conflict has now been 'resolved' and reflecting perhaps a predilection towards psychological interpretations of conflict, they used the extent of intergroup mixing in the locality as evidence that the conflict was over and a reason to avoid its discussion. Indeed, any remnants of conflict were deemed to be the preserve of communities who are materially different and socially /geographically distant from them.

This is an interesting perspective which reflects an emergent trend in the post-conflict era where concerns with national identity issues have become increasingly supplanted by economic ambition (Murtagh 2011; Murtagh and Shirlow 2012); and at first glance it seems to be a positive development. In a context where strict adherence to identity and a preoccupation with conflict related issues has provoked serious and sustained political violence any apparent dilution of national identifications might be regarded as progress (Hayes et al. 2007). Alternatively, the ready dismissal of identity politics and the inclination towards presenting the conflict as largely resolved allows for the structural and historical causes of conflict to be underplayed and replaced by a vision of society that is integrated and problem free. In such a context any recourse to traditional identity categories is easily framed as inherently sectarian and malign (Tonge 2005; Patterson 2019) when in reality it represents a legitimate expression of values and aspirations. In schools, and, particularly amongst teachers who are charged with teaching young people about conflict and its causes, the prevalence of such perspectives will necessarily limit the exchange of honest views and inevitably thwart the transmission of the knowledge and critical skills which allow students to develop understanding and challenge powerful community narratives (Sleeter 2010; Barton and McCully 2010).

Finally, for all teachers the natural propensity towards avoidance is offered legitimacy by teachers' (and pupils') apparent absorption of instrumentalist and neo-liberal values. Ball has convincingly argued, that what happens in schools is inevitably driven by a powerful culture of performativity which requires 'individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations. To set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation. ...' (2003, 1) The data above showed that most of the teachers suggested that they [and reportedly their pupils] had calculated that certain subject knowledge has a direct economic value. Hence some subjects are deemed to be inherently more important to pupils than citizenship education. It is this perceived lack of credibility which has pushed citizenship education to the fringes of the curriculum in many schools (Worden and Smith 2017). In this regard, the culture of performativity lends credence to avoidance by subtly, yet powerfully, rendering knowledge about the conflict as less important than that which is gained in other subjects. Hence, inviting the interest of pupils in a past that they haven't experienced, don't readily identify with, and see its discussion as economically redundant, is perhaps a challenge for teachers who are also easily persuaded to see 'the past' as an irrelevance in their lives and a burden in the classroom.

Encouraging critical thinking: the teacher as neutral arbiter or critical thinker

Although the majority of participants decided not to teach about conflict, this was not a universal response. Six of the citizenship teachers, who also taught history and politics, acknowledged the need to teach openly about the causes of the conflict and were keen to offer students opportunities to explore and critique different perspectives on the past. That these teachers, who had been explicitly prepared to teach subjects which invite debate and discussion around controversial and politically charged issues were less uncomfortable than the others (who were variously prepared to teach religion, geography and technology and design) to teach about the past is important. They had not (as others had indicated) been 'given citizenship classes to teach to fill their timetable' (Catholic teacher). Instead they explained that they relied on their natural interest and professional skill when teaching the subject - a point also noted by Worden and Smith (2017).

However, and reflecting concerns about self-positioning already raised by Kelly, (1986) and Gindi and Elrich, (2018), three of these teachers (two Protestant and one Catholic) reported on their struggles around how best to openly explore the political history of Northern Ireland within the classroom. The reconciliation of personal perspectives with their understanding of professionalism presented particular challenges. To be 'professional' they argued inevitably demanded that they remain 'neutral' in the classroom; their comments however are illustrative of the difficulties that emerge when teachers seek to silence their personal views around issues on which they clearly have a perspective:

Do your own experiences influence teaching about the conflict?

It can't. It can't. Really. Because it would be very unfair. I've never believed in people bringing beliefs, whatever they are, into the classroom, because you are in a very privileged position. You have your audience whether they like it or not... when you've got young children at desks in front of you, you have their attention. So, you cannot impose, even subtly, I don't think, and you have to remove your own views. (Catholic teacher)

The teacher went on to explain that they sought to explain issues ‘honestly’ although didn’t explicitly acknowledge ‘truth’ as a subjective concept:

The biggest challenge probably is to make sure that you are honest with children in such a way that you are honest, but you are not biased. In other words, you are answering truthfully but not in a way that will affect them negatively. There have been instances over the years where you felt like saying, ‘Jeez , I wish this would happen or that would happen,’ but you can’t (Catholic teacher).

These three teachers sought to provide ‘evidence’ for children to evaluate. Their interpretation of ‘critical’ drew on notions of critical evaluation [rather than the exposition of power relations]; it focused on the independent evaluation of texts; hence it was deemed important that young people would arrive at their own conclusion about the causes of the conflict by offering opportunities for them to independently review the literature. Their comments coalesce with debates on the ideals promoted in the NI citizenship curricular guidance which require that teachers create spaces for children to independently, actively and systematically evaluate arguments without exerting any influence on pupil views (CCEA 2017). Their professional training and personal interest in history clearly motivated their decision to engage with ‘the past’. Yet the data pointed to the struggles that emerge when teachers seek to harness students’ critical capacity around the causes of conflict and demonstrates the limits of encouraging teachers to encourage independent critical thinking without also considering how the teacher will create space for debate around different view-points. That they would inadvertently ‘leak’ their perspective on the conflict and somehow indoctrinate students was a constant fear and led these teachers to sanitise the content so that they could offer skills in critical evaluation whilst removing any ‘hot’ topics from discussion.

So whilst Kelly and Brandes (2001, 1) urge teachers to ‘shift out of neutral’ this is clearly a challenge which is perhaps not helped by the fact that rather euphemistic references to teaching ‘about the past’ which potentially invite teachers to avoid the tricky discussions.

However, the practices of three other teachers (one from each of the school types including one in an urban context deeply affected by the conflict) seemed to capture the essence of Kelly and Brandes’s advice. Although each teacher had similarly reflected on the challenges of teaching about the conflict, all had participated in what one described as ‘really useful’ citizenship training which had been delivered as part of Shared Education Training Programmes. They explained that this had prompted a new-found confidence. Their responses, typified in the comment below, suggest that when teachers’ personal interpretations of conflict were developed and challenged and when they were educated to become more *critically conscious*, they made different decisions; they felt more skilled to teach about issues that they had previously avoided. The fear of causing dissension had been diluted as the training programme[s] had offered new approaches and methodologies for teaching controversial issues:

My own view has changed over the last while. In the past when I started teaching citizenship I would avoid the conflict really because I just didn’t know what to do. I knew it was important but I truly was extremely fearful of engaging with children around their personal experiences of sectarianism and their own views on conflict; I just didn’t feel equipped

and generally didn't see it as that important. But recently after a few training courses I have really revised my thinking. I don't think that I need to do that – my job isn't to talk about our own personal views although I can where appropriate - it is about looking at frameworks which help us better appreciate why any conflict happens and how that can be addressed and how we can start to shift inequality. So, I started to be confident to use techniques like silent thinking and walking debates. In fact, I have shifted my own understanding. Looking at things like inequality, inequity and poverty and lack of attention to human rights, make you think about your own views and you start to think differently; the other thing I would say is that time is really important too. I have been looking at local political parties and their views on the Northern Ireland constitutional question for example, and then I think, gosh, I wouldn't have even touched that even five years ago – the society the community it has to be stable to make you confident. So training and timing I would say and I certainly don't feel as unsure as before. (Protestant teacher)

The data presented earlier highlights how the absence of conflict explains, at least in part, teachers' decision to avoid the discussion of politically controversial issues in the classroom. This data offers an alternative perspective. For these teachers the opportunity to partake in an education programme which enhanced their capacity to think critically and extended their knowledge of the conflict *combined* with the more stable political context was perceived to create a new space to introduce discussions that they had hitherto determined as 'out of bounds'. What is significant is that this training was explicitly focused on teaching controversial issues and was clearly motivated by a political and critical literature rather than underpinned by the more benign multicultural literature that generally underpins conflict resolution teacher training programmes (Ladson-Billings 1995; May and Sleeter, 2010). The reported value of this training was difficult to overstate: it encouraged all three teachers to sharpen their understanding of the conflict, to appreciate how unequal power relations can cause conflict and most importantly to adopt a variety of pedagogical strategies to convey these issues to the students. Moreover, as the teacher above explains, when they developed a more structural or political conception of conflict, teachers confronted their own understandings of conflict and re-interpreted their classroom practices. They felt less burdened by the task of teaching about conflict mainly because they did not see the need to interrogate and correct individual intolerance- a key theme in diversity training. Instead, they began to understand how to harness in students an appreciation of the political antecedents of conflict using theoretical lenses and active pedagogical strategies. As they had now begun to recognise and critically reflect on their own values and perspectives they were able to invite students to similarly engage in a process of critical dialogue, consistent with the ideals of critical multiculturalism articulated earlier (Banks and McGee Banks 2016). The perceived obligation to reduce pupil prejudice was relegated as the teachers acquired a self-assurance to explore the political and structural causes of conflict. Education/training in political theory, human rights and the use of active pedagogies may thus offer teachers the confidence to engage fully with the demands of teaching controversial issues related to ongoing or past conflicts.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine how teachers responsible for teaching citizenship education in Northern Ireland teach about the conflict. The statutory

citizenship curriculum encourages rather than mandates teachers to teach about ‘the past’ in NI hence it seemed pertinent to explore whether and how teachers decide to teach about the contentious issues related to the conflict. Drawing on theories of multicultural education the paper has shown that despite the curricular impetus to do so, only a minority of teachers reported that they openly discussed the past during citizenship class; for the majority, reference to ‘the past’ and the conflict was avoided. The qualitative findings highlight several important trends related to teacher motivations to teach about the past that have resonance in any context where teachers are required to teach about controversial and political issues related to conflict.

Firstly, the paper suggests that teachers’ personal framing of the conflict and its causes can result in its avoidance in classroom discussion. Most teachers tended to frame the causes of conflict in psychological and cultural terms; thus, it was defined in terms of individual intolerance, a lack of mixing and cultural incompatibility. Their focus on these issues led to an underplaying or negating of the structural and political issues which would extend student knowledge and capacity for critical thought. Those teachers who were educated to understand the conflict as also a product of political and structural inequalities reported feeling more confident to teach such issues because they were better able to de-personalise the conflict and frame discussions within theoretical debates about rights, power relations and politics.

Secondly and following on from this, the findings show how social and political trends relating to the framing of identity and conflict can assert themselves in the classroom, with potentially negative consequences. Evidence has recently begun to highlight a trend towards the disavowal of identity politics amongst certain groups in Northern Ireland (ARK 2019; Patterson 2019). Whilst further research is required, these trends seem also to be presenting within the citizenship classroom and they can persuade teachers to underplay the importance of teaching about the conflict. Some teachers regarded any reference to the conflict, and particularly national identity, as inherently negative, unrelated to their own experiences and of little importance in their school. The framing of themselves and their school community as ‘mature’ ‘intelligent and ‘integrated’ and, importantly, ‘different’ to those who retained a traditional identity allegiance seemed to be used to absolve them of any need to investigate the past in the classroom.

Finally, and relatedly, the paper highlights the vital role of ongoing teacher education in affording teachers the skills and confidence to teach controversial issues. Whilst gaps in teacher education were identified in earlier research on teaching controversial issues, this paper offers insights into the *types* of education that teachers may benefit from. Importantly it has shown that it cannot be assumed that teachers possess the critical skills that they are expected to harness in their students. Those teachers who had partaken in an education programme, where the content was situated in a political and critical literature, reported having acquired a deeper knowledge of the structural causes of conflict, acknowledged the value of critical perspectives and stated that they felt more confident to address the controversial issues they had hitherto avoided. It is significant too that teachers perceived the training to have been professionally liberating in that their agency was no longer bounded by the burden of challenging and changing children’s personal stereotypes and intolerances but rather they reported being able to confidently and safely examine different literatures on the past, clarify their own perspective on the conflict and invite discussion on collective action and political change. The challenge for policy makers and Initial /Continuing Teacher Education providers is

to design courses that offer teachers space to reflect on their own views on conflict and to develop active pedagogical skills. The data here suggests that such education can provide professionals with the potential to build their own critical capacity; this can only encourage the transformative potential of citizenship education to be realised.

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