

TEACHER EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND: POLICY VARIATIONS SINCE DEVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

Change has become a common theme in education across the United Kingdom, impacting on many different aspects of the system, including teacher education. In Northern Ireland, teacher education is currently the focus of a major review. The review is exploring the nature of the particular changes and challenges facing teacher education and in addition, considering how it might be best prepared to address these. This paper describes teacher education in Northern Ireland, highlighting its unique characteristics and the particular historical, contextual and structural factors which have influenced its development. The paper also outlines specific developments occurring within the wider education system and considers how these may impact on teacher education. To conclude, the authors reflect on the challenges of effecting change in education within the particular policy context in Northern Ireland, where alternate periods of devolution and direct rule have limited the potential for change.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education in the United Kingdom has experienced considerable reform over the last twenty years and this is widely documented in the literature (Hargreaves, 1990; Wideen and Grimmett, 1995; Newby, *et al.*, 2000; Livingston and Robertson, 2001; Johnson and Hallgarten, 2002; Kirk, 2003). Such reform has been brought about through a change in the culture of teacher education, effected largely by government through increased control and intervention. The system, which was previously characterized by autonomy and diversity is now governed by prescription and accountability. Policy changes have been accompanied by extensive debate addressing the conceptual foundations of teacher education and concerns about quality, efficiency, standards and performance (Lawlor, 1988; Furlong, *et al.*, 2000). While teacher education in Northern Ireland may not have been subjected to exactly the same changes occurring elsewhere, it has undergone significant review and re-organisation particularly during the last decade. It is important to note that many of the policy changes in education in Northern Ireland have tended to be highly derivative of English policy. One such example is the Education Reform (NI) Order, 1989, which is closely modelled on the Education Reform Order 1988. While there are generally adaptations in policy to allow for a consideration of the local context, these tend to be ideologically rooted in the government of the day, rather than emerging as genuine responses to the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland (Osborne, 2001).

This paper provides some insight into the particular characteristics of teacher education in Northern Ireland, outlining the current provisions and structures in place, highlighting distinctive elements of the system, and examining various historical and contextual factors which have contributed to shaping it. The changes currently facing teacher education in Northern Ireland are also explored as are the challenges these present to those involved.

TEACHER EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND: STRUCTURES, PROVISION AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Current Provision of Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Northern Ireland is currently provided through five institutions and, unlike England and Wales, but similar to Scotland, entrance to

teaching courses is limited to one of two principal routes – a four-year B.Ed degree or a one-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE)¹. Two university colleges, St. Mary's and Stranmillis, offer B.Ed courses and PGCE courses in Irish Medium (St. Mary's), early years education and educational psychology (Stranmillis) The two universities, the University of Ulster and the Queen's University, Belfast, provide PGCE courses in primary and post-primary teaching, and the Open University offers full-time and part-time PGCE courses in selected subjects at post-primary level. Entry to all courses is highly competitive and places in all institutions are oversubscribed, with up to five times more applicants than places available (OECD, 2002:19). Total enrolment across all the institutions for 2002/3 was 1,988 (comprising 1,494 B.Ed students and 494 PGCE students), and the intake for the same year was 845.

Teacher Education Partnership Model

Arrangements for teacher education in Northern Ireland were reviewed between 1994 and 1996, during which time a model was identified and agreed by the Northern Ireland Teacher Education Committee (NITEC)² and the various partners in teacher education including the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), schools and the Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS) provided by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs)³. Teachers and schools in Northern Ireland had resisted proposals put forward by the government for greater formal, contractual and financial arrangements to be introduced between the HEIs and schools. Similar arrangements introduced in England and Wales gave financial rewards to schools for their contributions to teacher education. However, teachers in Northern Ireland were reluctant to assume greater responsibility for the training and assessment of student teachers, expressing concerns about the potential legal implications of the arrangements and identifying possible tensions arising from their dual role of assisting and assessing students' progress (Moran, 1998). In the event, the Minister responsible for education at the time agreed that co-operation between HEIs and schools could 'continue to develop on an informal and voluntary basis to whatever extent both parties found acceptable' (Moran, 1997:82).

This decision led to the introduction of the integrated teacher partnership model, one of the most distinctive features of teacher education in Northern Ireland. Since 1996, this model has defined the approach adopted by HEIs and schools to teacher education. It consists of three phases – Initial Teacher Education (ITE), Induction and Early Professional Development (EPD). Following completion of these stages, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) then allows teachers to avail of ongoing opportunities for educational and professional development throughout their career. The aim of this integrated approach is to encourage the development of beginning teachers' professional practice through open, informed and critical dialogue with each of the different partners in teacher education, combined with the support of experienced practitioners (DENI, 1998).

Despite the positive support for the principles underpinning the partnership model, and a recognition that it represents a 'developmental, progressive and integrated vision of professional learning' (DE, 1998), questions have arisen regarding its success in practice (Caul and McWilliams, 2002). Caul and McWilliams suggest that while schools enter into voluntary partnerships with ITE providers, they consistently state that they do not regard their participation in teacher education as an imperative. Although schools are perceived as providing the best context for professional training, not all are prepared to accept responsibility for beginning teachers' professional development and so there are issues around accountability and quality of provision. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has highlighted issues concerning the general implementation of partnerships noting, 'the implications of truly effective partnerships, while espoused by all in theory, often falter in execution as one or other partner fails to honour its obligations, or more commonly looks to its own

narrower interests' (Matchett, 2003:14). As 50% of PGCE courses and around 25% of B.Ed courses are located in schools, this raises questions about the consistency of opportunity, support and professional development offered to student teachers by different school partners.

Teacher Competence Model

Similar to teacher education provision in other parts of the UK, a model of competences provides the basis for teacher education in Northern Ireland, with specific competences linked to each phase of the partnership model. While the competence framework employed in England and Wales was replaced with a standards model in 2002 (TTA, 2003), the Standard for Initial Teacher Education introduced in Scotland in 2000, continues to be characterised by competences issued in previous guidelines (SOEID, 1998; QAA, 2000; McNally and Oberski, 2003). In Northern Ireland, a decision was taken to retain the competence model for a number of reasons, including the belief that the language of competence is more appropriate, as it implies ongoing, life-long professional learning. The model has recently been the subject of a review, which led to a restructuring and a reduction in the number of competences (General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, (GTCNI) 2005a). The revised competences along with proposals for CPD (described below), were issued to the teaching profession for consultation in 2004 and the findings then submitted to the Department of Education for consideration.

Induction and Early Professional Development (EPD)

The Induction and EPD stages have recently been the focus of a survey by the ETI, and CPD has been reviewed by GTCNI. The current arrangements for Induction and EPD were judged to be effective and of good quality although the survey did identify areas where teacher education partners could offer greater support and improve the quality of provision. Recommendations advocated the provision of training for those responsible for induction in schools, the development of on-line support for beginning teachers and an improvement in the monitoring and evaluation of beginning teachers' progress and development (ETI, 2005). The CPD review proposed the establishment of a new Professional Development Framework in order to reflect teachers' personal and professional priorities as well as those identified by the education system. The introduction of two new 'professional milestones' of 'Chartered Teacher' and 'Advanced Chartered Teacher' are proposed in order to reflect individual teachers' advanced pedagogical skills and afford them opportunities to 'develop excellence in areas not solely predicated on preparation for a leadership role' (GTCNI, 2005a:30).

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland

Following the introduction of teaching councils elsewhere in the UK, a General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland was established in October 2002⁴. It has a membership of 33, consisting of teachers and others who represent the broader interests of the education community. The Council's main objective is defined as 'enhancing the status of teaching and promoting the highest standards of professional conduct and practice' (GTCNI, 2005b). It has responsibilities in four main areas, namely the registration of teachers, disciplinary functions relating to professional misconduct, the development of a Code of Professional Values and Practice, and the provision of advice to the Department of Education and the various employing authorities. The Council recently produced a 'Code of Values and Professional Practice' which will be incorporated into the teacher competence framework, and it conducted reviews of the teacher competences and CPD (GTCNI, 2005). The launch of GTCNI is regarded as an important and significant development, as the Council

seeks to articulate the needs of the teaching profession and contribute to the provision of quality educational and professional development opportunities.

GTCNI takes its place alongside the three existing General Teaching Councils, in England (GTCE), Scotland (GTCS) and Wales (GTCW). Clearly there are similarities between the Councils in terms of their objectives, functions and responsibilities, as each assumes certain advisory and regulatory roles and seeks to represent the interests of teachers and to enhance professional standards. Closer examination however, reveals significant differences in the range of powers and responsibilities held by each Council. GTCS, the longest established of the Councils (1965), evidently holds the greatest power and influence, assuming, for example, some of the tasks which are undertaken by both the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and GTCE. It has responsibility for the accreditation and approval of all teacher education programmes, oversees the management of a teacher's probationary period and has more extensive registration and disciplinary powers than the other Councils. It has been suggested that this may be attributed to the experience that GTCS has accumulated during its forty-year history and the high regard in which teachers in Scotland are held (UCET, 2001).

Other Relevant Developments

Two major developments in the education system, which it is anticipated will have significant influence on teacher education, are the introduction of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) and proposals for the restructuring of post-primary education. It is expected that the revised curriculum, just recently introduced, will have important implications for ITE in terms of B.Ed and PGCE course organisation, emphasis and delivery. The introduction of a skills-based curriculum, the expansion and development of early years' provision and a greater emphasis on values, personal, social and health education and citizenship will have an impact on the nature of teacher education provision. Potential implications for teacher education are explored in greater detail in a later section.

Following initial research on the impact of academic selection, (Gallagher and Smith, 2000), the review of the arrangements for post-primary education in Northern Ireland recommended an end to academic selection by 2008 (Burns Report, 2001; Costello Report, 2003). The proposals for the new arrangements are based on an entitlement framework for all pupils that will require schools to offer a wider, more flexible choice of courses including a mixture of academic and vocational programmes. All schools will be expected to collaborate through a collegiate system in order to make a full range of courses available. There are also plans to initiate a small-scale pilot of specialist schools in January 2006, adapting the model operating in England. Revised criteria for the establishment of new sixth forms in schools have recently been issued, to ensure there is sufficient breadth, balance and coherence in post-16 provision. This will present specific challenges for teachers (and by implication, for those educating teachers), where more differentiated teaching will be required, and more collaborative working practices introduced.

The two Departments which have responsibility for education in Northern Ireland (the Department of Education (DE) and Department of Employment and Learning (DEL)), convened two conferences in 2003 and 2004 as part of a review of teacher education in order to consider the nature of change facing teacher education and to highlight key areas where change is likely to have most impact. A number of research studies have since been commissioned, in order to inform future planning and decisions. These include demographic trends, costs of ITE and use of ITE estate, effects on ITE of diversification, the continuing appropriateness of the teacher competence model and of the balance between the institution and school-based elements of B.Ed and PGCE courses, arrangements for EPD and CPD, the potential impact of the revised NIC, and the longer term effects of the post-primary review and e-learning.

DISTINCTIVE ASPECTS OF TEACHER EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Whilst teacher education in Northern Ireland is similar in many respects to the systems in England, Wales and Scotland, from a policy perspective it also exhibits quite unique characteristics which have been determined by particular historical, contextual and structural factors. The next section explores these factors in some detail.

The Historical Context of Teacher Education

The development of teacher education in Northern Ireland has been strongly influenced by the distinctive nature of the school system. Following the partition of the island of Ireland in 1921, the new ministry of education in Northern Ireland sought to establish a public education system, which would largely resemble the system in place in Great Britain. However, proposals to bring all elementary schools under the control of the state in the 1923 Education Act and to promote a largely secular form of education were strongly opposed by the churches. The period following eventually saw the creation of a school system largely divided along denominational lines, with Protestant pupils attending state funded schools and most Catholic pupils attending voluntary schools which received partial funding from government. The two school systems quickly pursued quite different educational paths with Protestant schools (controlled) adopting the curriculum and culture of British schools and Catholic schools (maintained) identifying more readily with Irish culture and traditions.

The dual system of schooling which emerged in Northern Ireland in the 1920's, and which largely continues today, is supported by a teacher education system that is partially denominational in character. Since the creation of Northern Ireland, the vast majority of students undertaking preparation for primary teaching have attended institutions which reflect their particular religious affiliation. Most Catholic students attended St. Mary's College (female students) or St. Joseph's College⁵ (male students) and Protestant students enrolled at Stranmillis College. In common with the state schools, Stranmillis College was established as a public body seeking to include the entire community, however the Catholic authorities decided to retain St. Mary's and St. Joseph's Colleges as these had a distinct Catholic ethos.

Since the 1960's, students undertaking a one-year PGCE have attended one of the two universities in Northern Ireland, both of which have mixed religious intakes. The two university colleges offering the four-year B.Ed programme, however, have continued to attract students from either the Protestant or the Catholic community. In 1982, in its final report, the Chilver Committee which had been tasked with advising on the development of higher education in Northern Ireland, proposed the amalgamation of St. Mary's, St. Joseph's and Stranmillis Colleges with the Queen's University to create the Belfast Centre for Teacher Education. It was envisaged that this Centre would be a 'means to and the outward sign of the greater consolidation and co-operation which [was] essential for these institutions for the future' (Chilver Report, 1980:17). The proposals were immediately met by resistance from both the Catholic and Protestant churches, especially the Catholic authorities, who initiated a strong campaign and organised a petition (Dunn, 1990). Despite the existence of some support, the government bowed to the pressure from the churches, and although St. Mary's College did merge with St. Joseph's College, plans for a single institution that would bring together students of all faiths, were shelved. The issue of amalgamation has been mooted intermittently in the years since the Chilver Report, although it is clear that strong resistance to any such proposals still remains. In recent times, some educationalists have expressed a continuing desire to safeguard what are regarded as the unique characteristics of teacher education, as it is provided within the Catholic tradition (DE/DEL, 2003).

Profile of Enrolment to Teacher Education

An analysis of the student enrolment in teacher education reveals that the gender profile is similar to other parts of the UK, with a preponderance of females, particularly on primary education courses. The overall proportion of males entering teacher education is around 20% (OECD, 2002; Ross and Hutchings, 2003). Research suggests that the vast majority of students attending teacher education institutions in Northern Ireland have been educated at schools and universities within Northern Ireland and that many have attended grammar schools (Hagan, *et al.*, 2003; Montgomery, 2005)⁶. Most students enter teacher education immediately after 'A' levels or upon completion of a primary degree. In contrast to the situation in Britain, but similar to Scotland, there is intense competition for entry to teacher education courses and considerable over-subscription for places. Academic entry requirements are therefore high and statistics presented by the OECD indicate that the academic level of entrants to teacher education courses in Northern Ireland exceeds the level of the highest scoring courses in England (Ross and Hutchings 2003). In recruiting candidates for teacher education, considerable emphasis is, therefore placed, on 'A' level grades and degree classification, and academic standards are kept under close review.

The majority of those enrolled in teacher education are from one of the two dominant religious communities represented in Northern Ireland. The proportion of entrants from a minority ethnic background is exceptionally low. As might be expected, the majority of students reflect the demography of the region where minority ethnic groups constitute less than 1% of the population (NISRA, 2001). However, as recent research indicates, second generation immigrant communities in Northern Ireland have grown, and there has been an increase in the number of economic migrants, many of whom come from Eastern Europe (OFMDFM, 2001; McVeigh, 2002; Soares, 2002). This suggests that a future challenge will be to respond to the needs of an increasing diversity of pupils within the school system and to consider whether the teacher education system needs to recruit more student teachers from minority ethnic communities.

The Impact of Denominational Factors on Teacher Education

The university colleges tend to have partnerships with schools from the same religious tradition, for example, in terms of the networks which provide student teachers with school teaching experience. Indeed, across all the HEIs, it is generally the case that students undertake school experience in schools which have the same religious affiliation as themselves, though there are indications of a change in this pattern, with some students opting to 'cross over' and undertake teaching practice in the 'other' sector or in integrated schools where Catholic and Protestant children are educated together. Following ITE, the majority of beginning teachers then tend to apply for positions in schools which reflect their denominational background. It is also generally accepted that beginning teachers who wish to teach in primary schools are expected to hold a Religious Education (RE) certificate. This is particularly the case in the maintained sector where student teacher perceptions are that they are required to hold an RE certificate, recognised by the Catholic authorities – this is usually taken to mean from a Catholic teacher education institution. Protestant teachers are, therefore, more likely to seek employment in the 'controlled' or state sector (mainly Protestant schools) and Catholic teachers generally apply to the 'maintained' sector (Catholic schools). Furthermore, within the equality legislation in Northern Ireland, there is an exemption with regard to the employment of teachers. The 'teachers' exception' as it is commonly known, was introduced in 1976, in recognition of the *de facto* denominational divide between schools, and particularly the explicit recognition of the denominational character of schools under Catholic management (Fair Employment Act, 1976). In effect, this means that in recruiting teachers, schools may give preference to candidates whose religious beliefs are in

accordance with the tenets of the religious character of the school, and require a willingness on their part to teach RE. Recent research into this issue indicates that there is little support for any proposals to alter the existing arrangements. The authors note that the 'reluctance to support change is held in varying degrees by different groups; the authorities of Catholic schools see teacher exception as fundamental to the maintenance of separate schools, while many others seem resigned to it as an inevitable consequence of separate schooling' (Dunn and Gallagher, 2002).

This continuing pattern of recruitment to teacher education institutions and schools means that it is extremely likely that students completing B.Ed courses in Northern Ireland have had quite separate experiences of schooling, teacher education and, indeed, employment. They will most probably have attended schools in either the controlled or maintained sector, enrolled in a university college where the majority of the intake is from the same religious tradition and then applied to teach in the school sector in which they themselves were educated. The legacy of the early Education Acts passed in the years after Northern Ireland came into being clearly survives today, impacting on different aspects of the education system and influencing the educational, developmental and teaching experiences of teachers.

A Relatively 'Closed System'

While Northern Ireland students may choose to apply to institutions providing teacher education courses elsewhere in the UK, the vast majority enrol in courses in Northern Ireland and then take up teaching posts there. Teacher education may therefore be described as a relatively 'closed system' (Smith, 2003). Plans for the provision of teacher education places are based on this fact and DE employs the Teacher Demand Model in order to determine the numbers of teachers required by the education system and the level of intake of student teachers each year. In relation to teacher recruitment, recent census figures indicate that there is a steady decline in the school age population. Official projections predict that between 2001 and 2023 the number of children attending primary schools will decline by 15% (OECD, 2002). This will have implications for the provision and organisation of teacher education as the number of teachers required declines, and raises questions concerning the need to maintain an enrolment of around 800 teaching students each year.

Related to this, research into the employment status of beginning teachers in recent years, suggests that there are ongoing difficulties in finding employment for all those who have qualified to teach. In 2004, only 13.3% of beginning teachers in nursery, primary or special education obtained permanent posts immediately following their courses and almost 40% took up temporary posts which were for less than one year. For beginning teachers in post-primary education, just under 30% obtained permanent posts and approximately 31% secured temporary teaching for less than one year (ETI, 2005). Anecdotal evidence suggests that beginning teachers seeking employment for the 2005/6 academic year, are experiencing significant difficulties in obtaining any type of post, as fewer positions have been made available.

The 'closed' nature of the system means there is considerable homogeneity in the educational experiences of those enrolling on teacher education courses, where most students have been part of a selective and separate school system. It is possible that many student teachers may have had limited experiences encountering peers from social, religious and cultural backgrounds different to their own, and that their first opportunities for meaningful engagement may arise when they attend university. The opportunities for those who progress directly to a four-year B.Ed course after school appear to be more limited compared with virtually any other undergraduate course offered at the two universities in Northern Ireland.

Rationale and Content of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum: Implications for Teacher Education

The introduction of a revised curriculum for schools in Northern Ireland also brings with it particular challenges for teachers, and by implication, teacher educators. The rationale for the development of new and revised elements stems from findings emerging from research commissioned by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (NICCEA). This included studies highlighting concerns about an insufficient emphasis on values and personal, social and emotional development (Montgomery and Smith, 1997; Harland, *et al.*, 1999), and an acknowledgement of the contribution that the development of thinking skills could make to pupils' learning (McGuinness, 1999). A series of conferences addressing areas such as ICT, employability, and early years learning also informed curriculum developments.

The content of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) constitutes a shift away from a traditional subject-based model emphasising the acquisition of knowledge, towards a skills and topic-based approach which encourages flexibility and promotes pupils' autonomy in learning (NICCEA, 2000). Different areas of the curriculum are intended to develop a range of generic skills including personal, interpersonal, thinking and learning skills. The key objectives of the curriculum state that young people should be afforded learning opportunities to develop as individuals and as contributors to society, the economy and the environment. Underpinning these is a series of value statements emphasising the importance of the individual pupil's capacity for spiritual, moral, emotional, physical and intellectual growth; their ability to develop as participative citizens in an equal, just and democratic society; the value of the environment and the need to sustain it and each individual's right to work in accordance with personal preferences and attributes (NICCEA, 2000). Additional key changes include the introduction of an early years' curriculum and specific programmes in Personal Education and Citizenship. The inclusion of a programme of citizenship provides opportunities to educate young people about democracy, pluralism, justice and participation. This is particularly important in Northern Ireland, given the peace process and a move toward democratic politics, through the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Regarding recruitment to teacher education, the requirements of the new NIC raise issues around the appropriateness and effectiveness of the current selection criteria in identifying those who will be most suitable to 'teach' this type of curriculum. A high standard of academic achievement and a grammar school education may not necessarily provide student teachers with the broad range of skills, values and attitudes required to effectively mediate the revised NIC, or enable them to teach in more diverse classrooms envisaged in the arrangements for post-primary education. Many aspects of the revised NIC, will require teachers to adopt a more critical and reflective approach, and to develop more pupil-centred teaching strategies. If this is to be undertaken effectively, the nature of the learning processes and approaches employed in teacher education courses may require review. The areas of Personal Development and Citizenship in particular, potentially require educators to acquire specific knowledge and skills relating for example to human rights, active learning pedagogies and the handling of controversial issues.

Dealing with Controversial and Contentious Issues

The management of controversial issues in the classroom is perceived as an important dimension in the mediation of new and existing areas of the NIC. History, RE, Citizenship and Personal Development are all areas likely to generate discussions of a contentious or controversial nature. An evaluation of a pilot programme offered in one institution, provided valuable insights into potential issues and challenges arising for teacher educators and student teachers whilst engaging with controversial issues.

The teaching sessions employed a variety of active learning strategies designed to facilitate student teachers' engagement with a range of contentious political, cultural and social issues. Feedback from the students following the sessions revealed a mixed range of responses. Although some regarded these experiences as 'thought-provoking' and 'useful', greater numbers described the sessions as 'difficult' and 'uncomfortable' (Montgomery and McCully, 2000:60).

An unwillingness to share personal views and opinions in a group context combined with concerns about finding the 'correct' answer and a perception that personal and social development was less important than technical and subject competence, contributed to students' reluctance to participate and to their negative evaluations of the sessions. Similar responses have also emerged from other research (Haydon, 1997; Ornstein and Levine, 2002). Student teachers' responses highlight the relevance of various situational, methodological and contextual factors in effecting the success or failure of active learning sessions addressing contentious issues. They also raise issues relating to the timing of the introduction of such experiences, emphasising the need to consider the receptiveness and readiness of student and beginning teachers. An engagement with issues of this nature may be more effective, for example, at a later stage in teachers' professional development when they have become more confident in their teaching and more familiar with the curriculum. However, there is a concern that such issues may never be broached and therefore opportunities are not taken to explore important matters and to develop specific skills (Sikes, 1991; Loughran, *et al.*, 2001).

The Role of Religious Education

Religious Education (RE) is not a subject which was included for consideration in the recent review of the NIC. It is, however, a subject area which continues to provoke discussion and debate in terms of its statutory position in the curriculum and the content of the syllabus. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order (1989) stipulated that every grant-aided school should include provision for RE. While by law all teachers can exercise their right of conscience not to teach RE, at job interviews teachers may be asked to state a willingness to teach it or to provide evidence that they have an RE teaching certificate.

The RE syllabus was agreed by the four largest Christian churches in Northern Ireland (Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist). However, despite being the product of a collaborative venture between the churches, the syllabus did not give any attention to difference and dialogue between the different Christian traditions (Richardson, 2004). It has been criticised for being exclusively Christian and for failing to take account of other world religions (Barnes, 1997; Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum, 2001; Richardson, 2004). Barnes (1997) remarks that 'its narrow focus prevented the development of the necessary skill of assessing religious beliefs, experiences and commitments – a skill which is much needed in our increasingly plural world' (p.81). The increasingly diverse nature of Northern Ireland society raises issues about the recognition of diversity amongst the student teacher population and the provision made for students from other faiths. The requirement in primary ITE courses to complete an essentially Christian RE course, may for instance, dissuade such students from considering entering ITE. This, in turn could have a longer term impact on the degree of diversity achievable within the teaching population in Northern Ireland.

CONCLUSION

Part of the peace process in Northern Ireland included the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly in December 1999 to replace direct rule from Westminster. A 'power-sharing' dimension involved the election of 108 local politicians which was consistent with Labour government policy to introduce devolution in Scotland and

Wales. However, the Assembly has operated intermittently, having been suspended on four occasions as negotiations concerning the peace process have faltered. This has meant that periods of local government have been interspersed with periods of direct rule by Westminster politicians, operating under the auspices of a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that the 'political stasis' created by the intermittent operation of a devolved Assembly is a pervasive factor in creating a climate where the possibilities for change are limited. When direct rule is in operation, the responsible Ministers are those elected to Westminster by constituents in England, Scotland or Wales. Their position might be likened to 'caretakers', unaccountable to the Northern Ireland population, but unlikely to take risks with policy decisions because of their temporary tenure, should devolution be restored.

However, even when the Assembly has been in operation, local politicians may be reluctant to initiate policy changes which threaten the 'two communities' paradigm in Northern Ireland, whereby policies that do not threaten the balance of power between the two main communities are tolerated even where this might involve duplication of provision or higher economic costs. In Northern Ireland, it is civil servants who are expected to maintain the continuity between devolution and direct rule, yet they have neither the political mandate to initiate change nor the role of advocating particular policies. In such difficult circumstances, the main course of action has been to commission reviews and undertake public consultations on the findings.

Despite this difficult policy environment there have been a number of significant areas of education policy that have come under review since the introduction of devolution. The most visible of these have been policy reviews of early years provision, the system of academic selection, the Northern Ireland Curriculum and further education and training. A significant review of public administration is underway which is likely to have substantial impact on the structure of education administration in Northern Ireland. The model currently proposed, includes the introduction of a single educational service support body to replace the five ELBs, and bring together support services provided by other educational organisations. Also proposed, is a curriculum and teacher support body, which would assume professional support functions, currently carried out by various other educational organizations. It would also work closely with teacher education institutions. Less visible has been the three-year review of teacher education initiated by the DE and DEL launched through a conference entitled 'Teacher Education in a Climate of Change' (April 2003). The purpose of the review is to survey the range of challenges facing education, explore the state of readiness of teacher education to address these challenges and to indicate to the Departments what further action is required to ensure the teacher education system is organized and equipped to face the task ahead (DE and DEL, 2003). In considering the future structure of teacher education, there are a range of possibilities, from extended collaboration between providers through shared approaches and provision to a rationalization of existing provision. These are areas which may be explored at the third teacher education conference in November.

Not least amongst the challenges arising is a demographic downturn that raises questions around the current levels of provision in teacher education. Indeed it is described as 'perhaps the most significant challenge facing those who plan for the sector' by DE and DEL (Shannon and McGinn, 2003:4). With a falling birth rate and decline in demand for teachers, concerns have been voiced by the ETI about the viability of the five HEIs if there is a decline in school enrolments (Matchett, 2003:17). The cost-effectiveness of maintaining the existing levels of provision and the feasibility of individual courses are just two issues which would have to be addressed. The Departments have also questioned the impact of diversification in institutions, suggesting that it may result in a 'dilution of the teacher education aspects', and stating that it is not the 'whole answer' to the challenges facing ITE (Shannon and McGinn, 2004:5). It may also be regarded as a means of facilitating

the continued existence of separate institutions, thus helping to maintain the status quo in teacher education provision. Other significant challenges include the ending of academic selection in 2008, the introduction of the new Northern Ireland Curriculum and an ICT strategy for Northern Ireland.

Following the first conference, both Departments commissioned research into certain aspects of teacher education. (These were listed earlier). A second conference of teacher education partners and stakeholders was held in May 2004 to receive an update on progress and a third conference is planned for November 2005. However, as we enter the third year of the review process it seems likely that only limited changes in policy will take place. The initial report on the costs of teacher education has been frustratingly inconclusive. It could also be argued that the main changes that are likely (relating, for example, to the competences, the partnership model and proposals from GTCNI for changes to professional development and the recognition of teachers), whilst important and significant in their own right, are relatively 'morphological' changes to policy and the way teacher education operates, rather than deep, systemic changes. For the immediate future it would appear that the thornier issues, related mainly to the specific historical context of Northern Ireland with its particular commitment to denominational education, and the future viability of current structures, remain relatively untouched and unaddressed.

NOTES

- 1 As part of the recent review of ITE in Scotland, recommendations have been put forward to widen access to ITE. These include consideration of alternative modes for the provision of courses, such as distance and part-time learning (*Review of Initial Teacher Education Stage 2: Report of the Review Group*, May 2005) www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/05/26142053.
- 2 The Northern Ireland Teacher Education Committee (NITEC) was formed in 1994 to offer advice to the Department of Education about different aspects of teacher education.
- 3 The five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) in Northern Ireland serve as the local education authorities and library authorities for their areas. Each has a statutory responsibility to ensure that there are sufficient schools of all kinds to meet the needs of their area; to provide finance for the schools under their management; and to equip, maintain and meet other running costs of maintained schools (www.deni.gov.uk/about/d_ed_system.htm). The structure of educational administration in Northern Ireland is currently part of a wider review of public administration and it is anticipated that the ELBs will undergo change as a consequence of this (www.nics.gov.uk/press/ofmfdm/050322b-ofmfdm.htm).
- 4 www.gtcni.org.uk
- 5 Students attended St. Joseph's College up until 1985 when it then amalgamated with St. Mary's College.
- 6 Further research into the profile of the teacher education enrolment is currently in progress. This is part of a more substantial research study of teacher education in Northern Ireland, entitled 'A Values-based Approach to Teacher Education'. The project is funded through the ESRC-TLRP programme and based in the UNESCO Centre, School of Education at the University of Ulster.

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