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A Personal Case Story

My name is Emma O’Kane. I am a religion and history specialist with an interest in cross community relations. Since I graduated from St. Mary’s University College I have been teaching for the last five years in six different schools in various roles and locations within Northern Ireland. Permanent jobs are as rare as hen’s teeth so I deem myself fortunate to have had annual posts in which I have had the opportunity to immerse myself in each schools’ ethos, goals. Above all, I have gained valuable experience through working with diverse settings, people and beliefs. I feel this variety of working environments is strength in my resume and teaching style. To have experienced and witnessed what works well and what should be avoided, allows me to share good practice with my colleagues in every school I teach in and it has led me to continuously re evaluate my own professional values and practice.

One of the most challenging years in my teaching career to date was last year when I was successful in achieving the post as RE and PIRCH reconciliation teacher in St. Josephs College Coleraine. PIRCH is a cross community initiative which the IFI funded and was designed to bring together schools from different faiths and traditions in a curriculum setting, mainly through history, citizenship

and the Arts. The project was still in its infancy and experienced teething problems as did I! I expected the project to come together easily and everyone to get on like the Waltons and live happily ever after but after a short time I quickly realised the nature of cross community work is extremely challenging for both pupils and adults. Cross Community work demands resilience, tenacity, determination and a lot of support. There were times I felt I was taking two steps forward and one step back so it was essential I had someone to say- 'but you're still moving forward'.

This support came from various sources and organisations such as Scoutlink and NICIE. It was the SCDL courses I attended with NICIE that I found the most affirming and helpful. To be with people who reminded me of the great value and importance of this work was a tonic in itself. The range of facilitation techniques invigorated me to work through the obstacles and see the benefit this would have for the students involved and how it would possibly impact how they would in turn raise their children as a result. Small but helpful points transformed my approach to the job. For example I learned the importance of always having a contract with learners. Without it you have nothing to provide a backbone when you run into difficulty. My other colleagues were unaware of the aims of PIRCH and ways in which they could support and contribute to my work which naturally led to frustration and irritation. The SCDL facilitators

suggested I offer a staff presentation of my work explaining how everyone needed to buy into it in order to make it a success. This worked wonders for me! I welcomed ideas about how to get pupils, staff and parents on board and progress was made little by little.

When I finished my year in St. Josephs I was proud of both what the schools in Coleraine had achieved and my contribution to the project- it was an intense learning curve and I am very grateful for the experience. I am convinced the work made a difference to the pupils and communities involved and challenged them on their perceptions about pupils from other faiths, schools and socio economic backgrounds. One pupil told me they had never spoken to a member of another religion, even though her next door neighbour was from another denomination, was her age and sat behind her on the school bus! However, now because of the schools interaction through PIRCH they finally had common ground or an 'excuse' to speak to each other. When I organised the cross community folk group to sing at a local supermarket, members of the public were surprised and supportive as one woman said; 'I have lived in Coleraine an awful long time and never thought I would see those two uniforms standing side by side for a common purpose'.

This year I am teaching in my old school St. Patrick's College Maghera. Being a rural school there is little opportunity for students to meet and interact with pupils from different backgrounds and religions but the school does nurture an ethos of inclusiveness through other methods, such as welcoming and cherishing all abilities all talents, of which I am very proud.

I teach year 13 and 14 general RE and facilitate various work shops on topics relevant to them. Over the past few months I have cultivated more and more information from them about the transition to sixth form. Many of the 'new' students from other schools described the transition as a 'tough time' during which they were often feeling uneasy. I asked them if it stopped them from fully taking part and enjoying their learning experience and one student said 'One hundred percent; if you're not comfortable you'll definitely not be comfortable to put up your hand and ask the teacher to explain something or offer your opinion'.

I was taken back to my own self conscious sixth form years and remembered how hard it was even as a student there for seven years to take part so how must it have felt for a new person coming into this environment? They felt work shops, ice breakers and general team building opportunities would undoubtedly make a difference and make them feel part of the bigger picture, a few days of

these activities could really gel a group together, improve their learning environment and ultimately raise achievement and skills.

It dawned on me that perhaps I had more in common with these students than I first thought. There are many parallels between a substitute teacher and that of a student making a transition into a new school. Many people find it hard to believe; but I have a good idea about what kind of a year I will have in the school by the way I am welcomed and inducted. Pupils will feel the same but will perhaps lack the maturity to pull themselves out of a negative first impression or lack the confidence to figure out and act on how to 'settle in better'. Simple things like a map and a teacher mentor as a point of contact is priceless to a substitute teacher and as it turns out, even more important for a 16 year old going into a strange environment.

Whilst being on courses with other sub teachers, their stories and experiences gave a great insight into this parallel as one substitute teacher recalled being 17, coming from a secondary school and going to a grammar school for some of her A levels. "The teacher didn't use my name the whole year - I don't even know if he knew it. Only one teacher from the school asked me how I was getting on and that's because she knew my mum, the rest of us didn't get asked, I don't have fond memories of that time".

The SCDL project has listened to students in many schools and heard both positive and negative experiences of pupils in shared classrooms. Hearing other students ask, "What are they doing in our school?" was one pupil's unfortunate first experience of going to a 'Shared Classroom' in order to be able to take a chosen subject at Key Stage 4.

Now in my twenties, sometimes I still find school transitions stressful, overwhelming and daunting. Might it also be the same for our students in this position? I feel it is my responsibility to advocate for students in such situations; we have a duty of care to enforce a pastoral policy that highlights and makes provisions for students and teachers. Shared classrooms is not exclusive to religion; it can be about pupils coming in from other schools and areas or coming from different socio economic backgrounds, grammar pupils being taught alongside secondary pupils. There are many divisions which could constitute a classroom as being 'shared' as I found out here in St. Patrick's.

Despite all its challenges, I chose to see being a sub teacher or being a teacher in a shared classroom as very similar and very positive experiences. I have learned and honed the skill of being 'open' - open to people, pupils, ideas, mindsets, techniques and above all open to learning. I hope to continue to

participate and perhaps even facilitate further 'Shared Classrooms Deepening Learning' workshops and explore the possibility of doing a masters as many of the courses award points towards such a qualification. More than ever, this work of acknowledging and bridging divisions in our society and attitudes is needed. Headlines and news stations are dominated yet again by the contentious issues that the flag protests have brought to the surface. It is highlighted both how far we have come on the road to peace but also how deep divisions can still open up suddenly and violently. These are issue that affect many young people in our schools and communities and if they want to talk about it, we need to be equipped to facilitate such discussions sensitively and honestly. I do feel able to to let young people explore these issues if they want to and help create an inclusive environment where they feel safe to learn, engage, participate, feel valued and above all be themselves.