

# **Student Teachers' Diverse Knowledge and Experiences of Religion – Implications for Culturally Responsive Teaching**

**Sally Elton-Chalcraft  
University of Cumbria**

Prof Sally Elton-Chalcraft – Director of the Learning Education and Development Research Centre, University of Cumbria, UK [sally.elton-chalcraft@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:sally.elton-chalcraft@cumbria.ac.uk)

*This case study explores how 97 student teachers, at an English University, describe their knowledge and experiences of Religion and Religious education and how this impacts on their ability to be culturally responsive teachers. Findings suggest while many students were unaware of issues of white, Western, patriarchal bias in education and despite a paucity of knowledge and/or experience of diverse religions and cultures, they were nevertheless positive towards teaching for diversity. Findings are used to create both, a theoretical model which captures students' diverse starting points, and a framework to inform targeted teacher education provision for culturally responsive teaching.*

*Keywords: teacher education, diversity, multi cultural education, religious education, culturally responsive education; racism*

## **CONTEXT**

This research makes a contribution to the debate concerning learning about Religion and Worldviews in order to cultivate culturally responsive education which promotes equality and fights prejudice and racism. The study is located in the English context where there is a major shift in Religious Education policy (CoRE 2018) towards a focus on accurate knowledge about Religions and Worldviews with, arguably, less emphasis on how an individual child responds to worldviews which are different to her/his own, and exploring issues of anti racism. In the current world climate of intolerance where schooling can be a vehicle to counter extremism (Shirazi 2017), it is even more important for teachers and teacher educators to consider their own attitudes towards those of a different culture; and how they adhere to the United Nations declaration of Human Rights in respecting freedom of thought, religion, opinion and expression, (Darling-Hammond et al (2002); United Nations 2019 articles 18 and 19).

The case study explores the self-assessed knowledge and experiences of Religion and RE (Religious education) of a sample of student teachers at an English University with a predominantly white student population, and the implications for teacher educators in nurturing culturally responsive pedagogy. At the beginning of their one year teacher education (four to eleven year olds) course, a sample of student teachers (n=97) volunteered to self-assess in a questionnaire their competence and ability to teach for diversity. Towards the end of their course a sample of these student teachers (n=6) were interviewed. Findings suggest that some students were unaware of issues of diversity and some acknowledged that during the research process, and during University sessions, 'their eyes were opened' to the complexity of issues such as 'racisms', diversity and working inclusively with children from diverse cultures.

This case study investigated student teacher's knowledge of and adherence to belief systems and their perceptions of teaching for diversity in order to inform future teacher education practice which nurtures culturally responsive teachers.

There are numerous studies on Black and minority ethnic student teachers' and children's experiences of racism (for example Flintoff et al 2008, Howard 2004, Roberts, 2007); and also studies on white students' attitudes towards race and ethnicity (Lander, 2011, Wilkins, 2001). However, there is limited research concerning the background knowledge and understanding of predominantly white student teachers, their attitudes towards teaching for diversity and the implications for initial teacher education (ITE). Over the past twenty years or so in England there has been repeated governmental intervention in teacher education to ensure future teachers are prepared to meet the needs of minority ethnic learners (TDA 2011, 2016) and adhere to the Equality act 2010 celebrating diversity, eliminating prejudice and discrimination. Recent UK policies such as the Prevent duty, to limit radicalisation and promote British values, has had mixed responses from teacher educators and academics (Thomas 2016). For example Maylor (2016), Bryan and Revell (2016) and Farrell (2016) call for an inclusive curriculum with culturally responsive teaching because their research with minority ethnic communities and student teachers reveals these policies inculcate an Anglo centric curriculum with the promotion of Fundamental British Values in British schools today which is at odds with culturally responsive teaching (DfE 2014). Many teachers seem keener to prevent radicalisation rather than celebrate diversity as Elton-Chalcraft et al (2017) found in their study which appraised the views of student teachers towards fundamental British values promotion in schools. Also *Religious Education* in England and Wales is in the process of being renamed as *Religions and Worldviews* if the Commission on RE final report (2018) becomes statutory. The proposed National entitlement for RE will thus become more subject knowledge focused (CoRE 2018) which has advantages but also limitations (Schweitzer 2019). This research seeks to uncover the extent to which student teachers are aware of the complexity of teaching for diversity and the implications of this for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision.

Teaching for diversity, or culturally responsive teaching as it is known elsewhere in the world (Gay 2013, 2018), has been defined in the Ajegbo et al (2007) report firstly as ensuring all children fulfil their potential whatever their culture and background. Secondly ensuring that the teacher's perspective (and the taught curriculum) is broad and not monocultural (Ubani 2012, Whitworth 2017; Lim, Tan and Saito 2019). Gay (2013) discusses specific actions which lead to culturally responsive teaching including

restructuring teacher attitudes and beliefs about cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity;  
resisting resistance to cultural diversity in teacher education and classroom instruction;  
centering culture and difference in the teaching process; and establishing pedagogical connections between culturally responsive teaching and subjects and skills routinely taught in schools. (Gay 2013:48)

This research project is rooted in the premise that children should not be disadvantaged because of a 'one size fits all' curriculum which is aimed at the majority (OCED 2010).

The article begins with a discussion of some approaches to culturally responsive teaching and some of the challenges in teaching for diversity, followed by the presentation of a typology of multiculturalisms (fig 1) adapted by the author from Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) and used both in her own teaching for diversity sessions and also in the interview data collection. Next the article outlines the case study research design illustrating how the ninety seven questionnaires provided a snap shot of student teachers knowledge, understandings and attitudes towards teaching for diversity which was then supplemented by data from six individual interviews. The findings from the questionnaires and interviews are discussed in turn and a theoretical model (fig 6), developed by the author, is used to map the intersection of student teacher knowledge/ experience and attitudes towards diversity. The article concludes by presenting a way forward for teacher educators summed up in a framework (fig 7) for facilitating culturally responsive teachers which is informed by the research findings.

## **Barriers and Solutions to Effective Teaching for Diversity**

Preparing student teachers to address issues of diversity in the classroom has long been recognised as a complex and difficult task for several reasons outlined below.

### *Unfamiliarity, Blindness to Own Privilege, Deficiency of the 'Contact Hypothesis'*

Many student teachers are unfamiliar with the cultures of the children in their classes and possess a limited base of subject knowledge about culture and identity as discussed by Cockrell et al (1999). Whitworth's (2017) research suggests that children's attainment and achievement is higher when teachers have an understanding of their pupil's cultural background and draw on this in the curriculum. Ambe (2006) discusses the 'cultural discontinuity' where there is a mismatch between the children's home culture and that of the school. Santoro and Allard (2005) claim many white students are blind to their own privilege and misunderstand multiculturalism's aims, and King (2004) attributes white students with 'dysconscious racism'- a state of mind that justifies inequity by accepting the current ways of doing and believing as correct.

Santoro and Allard (2005) posit that mere 'exposure' to a range of different cultures does not necessarily equip student teachers with the "skills, knowledge and understanding to work with cultural and social differences in productive and constructive ways" (2005: 864). In the same way the 'contact hypothesis' failed to eradicate racism and prejudice in the school classroom- just putting groups of ethnically diverse people together will not miraculously produce anti-racist attitudes as Troyna and Hatcher's (1992) research in ethnically diverse schools revealed almost thirty years ago. In fact Davies and Crozier (2006) have shown in their research with student teachers the contact hypothesis can sometimes be counterproductive.

### *Good Practice in Teaching for Diversity Versus the 'Deficit' Model*

Despite these barriers several studies pose solutions, Davies and Crozier (2006) cite lack of time and lack of expertise in HEI providers, coupled with an over reliance on staff deemed to be experts. They provide four detailed and helpful case studies, including using visits wisely and avoiding tokenism.

Conteh et al (2008, 2018) and Ambe (2006) encourage teachers to view children as a resource rather than adopting a 'deficit model' view of children who speak English as an additional language. Ambe (2006:692) cites a number of scholars who have written about a 'culturally responsive pedagogy', viewing cultural diversity as a strength. Many OCED report chapters (2010) argue that diversity is not to be seen as a 'problem' which at best should go away or at worst be solved, but rather it is to be seen as an 'asset' and 'rich resource' (2010:13). However, I would argue that this is not a straightforward task and my research unravels some of the complexity inherent in the 'asset' model adoption.

Thus educating student teachers about EAL and cultural awareness issues includes moving away from a deficit and superficial model, or tips for teachers, or 'naïve egalitarianism' (Santoro and Allard 2005:868) to a deep understanding of the wider issues and context (Davies and Crozier 2006, OCED 2010, Warner and Elton-Chalcraft 2018). However, the current teacher education standards in England have been considered derogatory and a backward step by Elton-Chalcraft et al (2017) in their research with student teachers, because, they claim that the cultural background of children is viewed in policy documents to be an inhibitor to learning rather than an enrichment.

'Contact theory' research by Jackson Royal et al (2018) encourages meaningful interaction with cross group peers which addresses the concerns of the Troyna and Hatcher (1992) and Davis and Crozier (2006) mentioned in the previous section.

Gordon et al (2007) designed a quantitative study focussing on how preservice and in service teachers learn rather than how they teach. They wanted to encourage teacher educators to consider student teachers self-regulatory aptitudes and appraise the benefits of interpersonal relations between students and teachers which are close and friendly, where self-discipline and self-regulation are emphasized instead of strict teacher control. (Gordon et al 2007: 38). While their study provides some helpful pointers about encouraging teacher educators to pay more attention to how teachers learn in their teacher education

courses (Gordon et al 2007:44) my study focuses on the experiences and attitudes which shape a student teacher's mindset and then their ability to learn.

### *The Impact of Religious Education, Governmental Directives and Critical Multiculturalism*

Teece (2005, 2015) and Elton-Chalcraft (2015) in their discussion of RE pedagogy in England and Wales, consider the subject, (in its current state), to be an effective vehicle to promote anti-racism and foster an understanding of religions, beliefs and cultures which are unfamiliar, as exemplified by Farrell (2017) in his study with student teachers. However, some have argued that the transformative power of RE can either promote positive values or fuel conflict, as evidenced in three large scale research projects – the major European REDCo project (Weiss 2011, Alvez Venegra 2011), the UK project 'Does Religious Education work?' (Baumfield et al 2012;) and the Teenage Religions and Values survey (Robbins and Francis 2010).

Revell (2012) in her appraisal of teaching resources warns against the misrepresentation of religion, particularly Islam, in RE teaching. She argues that fears and misconceptions are often perpetuated rather than challenged by RE teaching and Islam is represented as both a 'subject area and a site of controversy and complexity' in both RE textbooks, and governmental policies which are 'imbued with Western interpretations of Islam rather than originating from the Muslim communities themselves' (Revell 2012: xi).

Governmental directives have also pervaded the teaching standards which Elton-Chalcraft et al (2017) argue are politically motivated drawing on the governmental Prevent Strategy agenda. Thus RE teaching could potentially either enhance or undermine teaching for diversity.

Kincheloe and Steinberg posit types of multiculturalisms adapted in Warner and Elton-Chalcraft (2018) in their professional textbook chapter which is based on their respective research projects with student teachers and school children. Warner and Elton-Chalcraft's (2018) typology (fig 1), is used in teacher education provision to assess attitudes towards different cultures and this typology has been pioneered in the current case study as a theoretical model to gauge students' self-assessment of their own stance towards diversity, as described in the methodology section below.

**FIGURE 1**  
**TYPOLOGY OF MULTICULTURALISM**

1 Conservative multiculturalists (mono culturalism)	are 'tokenist'. They attempt to address multicultural issues but, deep down, they believe in the superiority of Western (white) patriarchal (male dominated) culture. <i><b>co researcher and participant discussion:</b> This stance is a starting place but it is superficial- there needs to be genuine celebration of diversity</i>
2 Liberal multiculturalists	are dedicated towards working to 'one race'. They attempt to gloss over differences in an attempt to make everyone equal and the 'same' ('they' are the 'same' as 'us' – they just happen to be a different colour). <i><b>co researcher and participant discussion:</b> This stance pretends to assume 'equality in action' but is actually adopting a 'colour blind' stance, denying diversity exists</i>
3 Pluralist multiculturalists	believe pluralism is a virtue, where diversity is pursued and exoticised. There is cultural 'tourism' where 'they', as opposed to 'us', live in an exotic parallel world. For example, Hanukkah is seen as the Jewish 'Christmas'. <i><b>co researcher and participant discussion:</b> This stance attempt to celebrate diversity but they use their 'own' cultural language to describe the 'other' (inferior) culture. There is not genuine equality – Hannukha is a Jewish festival</i>
4 Left essentialist multiculturalists	are extreme in promoting the minority culture, to the extent that the dominant culture is seen as 'bad' and the marginalised as 'good'.

	<b><i>co researcher and participant discussion:</i></b> <i>This stance is the opposite of pluralist – here the teacher elevates the ‘other’ culture and demotes the dominant culture – again there is not genuine equality</i>
5 Critical multiculturalists	believe in the promotion of an individual’s consciousness as a social being. They promote an awareness (self-reflection) of how and why his/her opinions and roles are shaped by dominant perspectives. <b><i>co researcher and participant discussion:</i></b> <i>This stance appreciates that there are differences within, as well as between, cultures and there is open discussion of the dominance of one culture over another, while celebrating diversity and equality.</i>

(Warner and Elton-Chalcraft 2018, adapted from Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997)

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to explore the relationship between English student teachers’ experiences of Religion and Religious education (from a personal and academic perspective) and their attitudes towards teaching for diversity and working with children from a range of cultures, the research team adopted a case study approach. We worked within the interpretivist paradigm (Savin-Baden and Major 2013) because we were accessing student teachers’ beliefs and opinions. The lead researcher teaches a module ‘Religious Education in the Primary school’ for the PG primary one year course and so this cohort was chosen as the case study (Flyvbjerg 2011). While Robson (2002:7) discusses the dangers of undertaking ‘insider’ research some student teachers from another course were co-opted as co researchers to strengthen the internal validity of the findings (Hewitt 2008).

Two data collection methods were used, firstly at the start of their course, an audit questionnaire was completed with a high return rate of 97, out of a possible 120 student teachers, to self- assess their subject knowledge in the six world religions and their learning journeys concerning RE and Religion. Secondly at the end of their one year course a group of 6 students, from the same cohort, volunteered to be interviewed. Ethical approval was gained from the lead researcher’s institution and ethical guidelines adhered to throughout the research process (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). Robson warns about the issue of ‘social desirability’, participants responding in a way that shows them in a ‘good light’ (2002:233) however, the questionnaires were anonymous thus reducing the desire to please their tutor, and interviews were undertaken by co researchers who were able to elicit more honest opinions. The co researchers used the typology (figure 1) to raise issues with participants. Throughout the interview the co researchers were able to empathise with an interviewee’s lack of understanding of terms and stances when using the ‘typology of multiculturalisms’ (see figure 1) as the extract below demonstrates:

**Emma (interviewer, real name)** – Ok, I mean I’m going to be very honest here and say that before I did the multicultural module with Sally [lead researcher], I was probably a conservative multiculturalist. [fig 1] Looking back [I held ] very superficial views, and it was almost something that had to be ticked off because I wasn’t aware of any of the issues....

**Sarah** (participant pseudonym) – Yeah, you see I wouldn’t have thought about that either, and I wonder if schools do.

The typology (figure 1) allowed the research team to explore concepts with interviewees by explaining different stances, while endeavouring to not influence their responses.

The data were analysed for initial themes by three members of the research team and the lead researcher. However the subsequent constant comparison and thematic analysis (Savin Baden and Major 2013), and writing up was undertaken solely by the lead researcher who mapped findings from the case study onto a theoretical quadrants model (fig 6) to illuminate the intersection between student teachers subject

knowledge and attitude towards teaching for diversity. The case study findings were also used to develop a framework for teacher educators (fig 7) in facilitating culturally responsive teaches. The following sections present and discuss, firstly, findings from the ninety seven questionnaires followed by the findings from the six interviews, and the article concludes by drawing on both sets of data in the case study to discuss implications for teacher education.

## Presentation and Discussion of Findings from Questionnaire

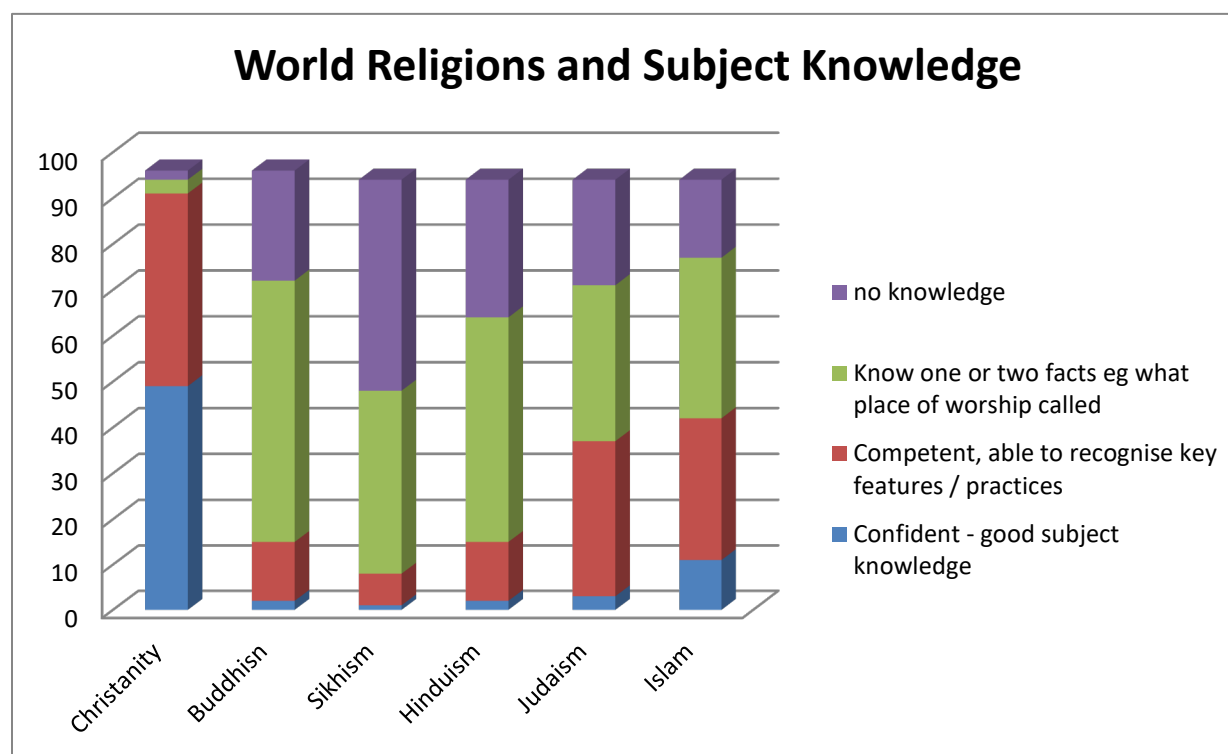
### *Self-appraisal of Subject Knowledge and Impact of This on Teaching for Diversity*

I discuss student teacher's self-assessment of their subject knowledge of the six major world religions, then relate this to their attitudes towards teaching about diversity and being a culturally responsive teacher.

I recognise that one student's perception of 'good' subject knowledge might not necessarily equate with another's, nevertheless figure 2 offers a crude indication of the whole cohort's self-assessment.

The majority of students felt more competent in their knowledge of Christianity and least knowledgeable in Sikhism as exemplified in figure 2.

**FIGURE 2**  
**COMPARISON OF STUDENT TEACHER'S SELF-ASSESSMENT OF THEIR WORLD RELIGIONS SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE**



94% (n91) of the sample felt their subject knowledge in Christianity to be competent. 51% (n49) of students felt confident (high level) with good subject knowledge and 43% (n42) said they were competent (above average) and able to recognise main features of Christianity. This is in stark contrast to the eastern religions where only 15% believed they had competent or good subject knowledge in Buddhism, 8% for Sikhism and 15% for Hinduism. The other two religions (often taught alongside Christianity in primary schools in England) fared better – proficient knowledge in Judaism was 38% (n37), although only 3

participants of the 97 believed themselves to have good subject knowledge of Judaism. 43% (n42) believed their subject knowledge of Islam to be good or competent – although 5 of the 11 participants claiming good knowledge were practising Muslims. Only 3% felt their knowledge of Christianity was sparse, and only 2% felt they had no knowledge. Participant 71 claimed very good knowledge of Catholicism but no knowledge of other Christian denominations, interestingly participant 71 stated she gained an A (advanced) level and GCSE (general certificate in secondary education) in RE but she records little or no knowledge for all the religions apart from Catholicism. She described herself as a practising Catholic having attended both a Roman Catholic primary and secondary school. The other participant, (74) who recorded ‘no knowledge for Christianity’, admitted no knowledge of any of the six religions and she had no qualifications in RE commented:

[I] remember going to church in primary school on a weekly basis. Remember saying prayers. Not a strong point of mine, feel it was not promoted in my [secondary] school (participant 74, white female)

Almost 90% of participants felt least secure in Sikhism, 47% (n46) felt they knew only one or two facts and 47% claimed to have no knowledge. Buddhism came a close second with just over 80% feeling insecure, while 57% (n59) felt they knew only one or two facts about Buddhism and 24% claimed they had no knowledge.

This subject knowledge confidence in Christianity and to a lesser extent Islam and Judaism together with a lack of subject knowledge in the Eastern religions may be due to several factors. Firstly, the HEI (Higher Education Institution) in which the sample was drawn is located in the North West of England with very few minority ethnic communities – mainly Pakistani Muslims in areas around one of the nearby cities. The majority of schools tend to choose Islam as one of the faiths to be studied alongside the statutory Christianity. Many of the students attending the University are from the local area which is mainly white and has numerous Roman Catholic and Church of England schools. There are only a few communities with Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists in this North West locality and consequently very few schools study these eastern religions, although a few Buddhist temples in the area are very popular for primary and secondary school visits.

When discussing their attitudes towards teaching about diversity and working with children from a variety of cultures several students worried that their lack of subject knowledge might lead to them unintentionally offending others or being racist, for example:

I would be concerned with ‘treading carefully’ so as not to ‘offend’ their culture because of my own ignorance. (participant 7, white female)

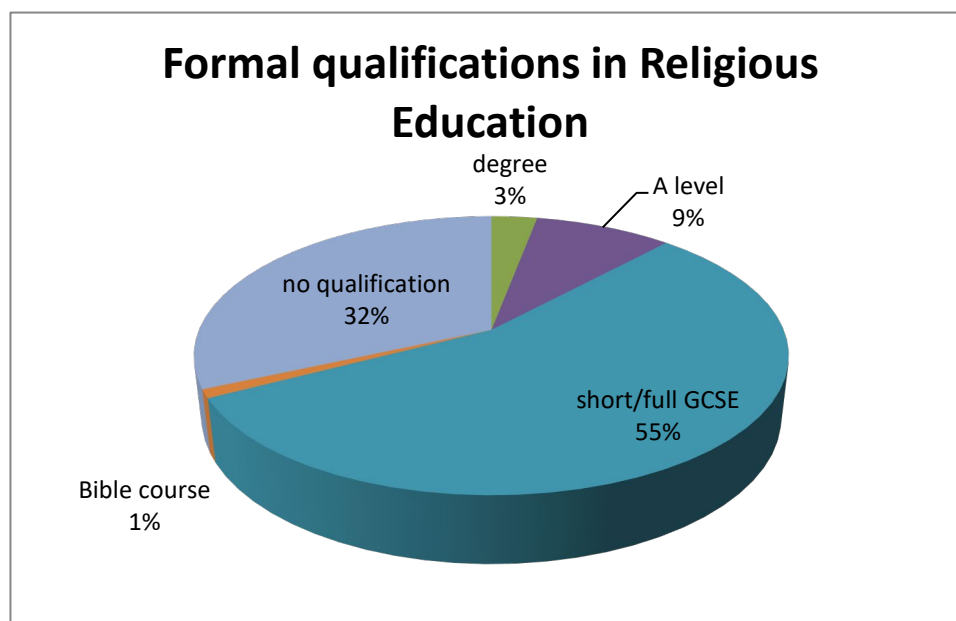
Learning from the children themselves was mentioned explicitly in some form or other by 41% of students, using children as a resource to enrich the curriculum, which could be defined as the foundations for a ‘culturally responsive pedagogy’ (Ambe 2006:629). Almost half the students viewed their role not as transmitter of information, given their paucity of subject knowledge, but rather facilitator drawing on the children as a resource. However, drawing on the knowledge of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) children in lessons, to compensate for a student teachers’ lack of subject knowledge would not be a feasible solution in predominantly white schools as pointed out by Gaine (2005). Also this is not necessarily an appropriate solution because a child adherent may not necessarily be conversant in all aspects of their religion, or they may not wish to be used as a spokesperson for their religion (Elton-Chalcraft 2015).

### *Qualifications and Experience of RE and Their Influence on Teaching*

Almost two thirds of the students had a formal qualification in RE, figure 3. Many of the participants attended school when enrolment for short or full course GCSE was commonplace in England, given the obligatory status of RE at the time of data collection. However, since the establishment of academies and RE not named in the baccalaureate, there has been a decline in uptake of GCSE programmes of study

(NATRE 2011, REC 2017). 3% of the participants had a degree in some form of Religious studies or related area, (Christianity Islam and History, Philosophy and Theology). 9% had an A level and 55% had a full or half GCSE (8% said they gained grade A or A\* the top grades). 1% said they had attended a Bible course and 33% said they had no qualification in RE at all.

**FIGURE 3**  
**FORMAL QUALIFICATIONS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**



Some participants commented favourably on their primary and secondary education while others expressed negative views. For example, participant 39 described her school experiences:

Primary: Strict Catholic school. Pushed on it [religion] too much. The priest was out of touch with reality refused to marry my parents, as my mum was a protestant and my dad a catholic.

Secondary: Excellent We had a brilliant bishop ..... and he is so much fun, down to earth and had children our age. (Participant 39, white female)

In total 19% of participants expressed overtly negative comments about their RE education including being forced against their will to study RE, being in a naughty class, disliking the teacher, or being subjected to uninspiring lessons. Four of the participants criticised their schools for forcing Christianity on them and two participants disliked the emphasis on Islam. Participant 60 described her secondary school experience as:

Appalling! We completed schemes of work in silence....no group discussion. (participant 60, white female)

However, 5% of participants described overtly positive experiences of their education. Also the only Hindu in the sample stated that:



I enjoyed it [secondary school RE], purely because the teacher was good and I had a good knowledge about Hinduism. (participant 83, Indian female)

28% said they studied mainly Christianity at primary school and a further 13% said it was just Catholicism, with only 10% stating they studied key features of all or some of the other major six religions. In contrast the secondary school picture is more favourable with 41% describing their RE at secondary school as covering key features of some or all the major world religions. 17% said the RE at secondary level was predominantly discussion of morals and ethics and 12% said they attended Catholic schools where the emphasis was on Catholicism. 3% remembered little or no RE, 9% said there was little detail and 4% said they could not recall doing any. 19% could not recall undertaking any RE at primary school. However, despite the RE at secondary school being more memorable and covering a wider range of religions there was less outright criticism of the primary school experience – only 2% describe RE at primary as being boring or biased. Participant 16, white female, described her Primary school RE as “quaint and cosy”. 18% mentioned assemblies, collective worship or hymn singing as being the only ‘religious’ element of their primary school education.

No participant explicitly highlighted anti-racism being covered in school RE however this does not necessarily mean that it was not discussed in the moral/ ethics sessions which numerous participants mentioned in their questionnaires. Also the questionnaire data can only be seen as a snap shot in time limited to the memory and recall of significance attributed by members of the sample.

31% said they had not seen RE taught in placement school which I consider low despite these PGCE students having one term’s QTS plus pre course experience. Some negative comments included RE which was biased towards a particular faith– particularly in Catholic schools:

The boundaries between collective worship and RE were very blurred; it was one of the very few negative aspects of my school experience. (participant 57, white female)

Similarly:

Observed both a Catholic and Cof E [Church of England] school’s [RE]. Found the Catholic school to be almost oppressive in its teaching of RE. (participant 63, white male)

28% described the RE they observed to be mainly Christian and a further 13% said it was predominantly Catholic (they were in Catholic schools). Participant 2 said RE was ‘pushed to the side’ in the timetable. However, some participants commented on good practice:

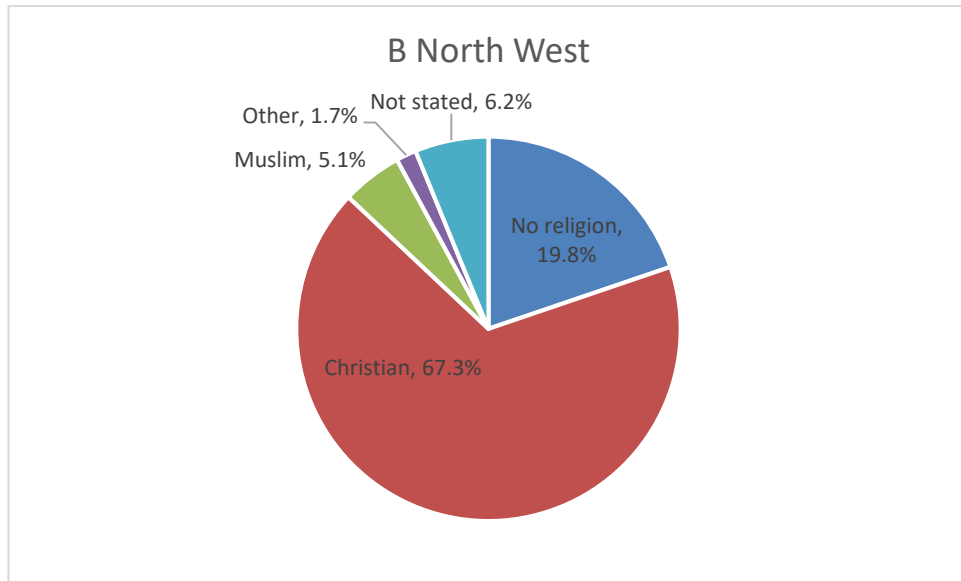
Some very good lessons on Islam given by an ex PGCE student! (who was Muslim). ....  
So again passion and personal experience came across. (participant 86, white female)

No clear link can be drawn between a positive attitude towards teaching for diversity and the level of qualification held by the student. Conversely several of the students felt their personal knowledge, or lack of it, had more impact on their teaching as will be explored in the next section.

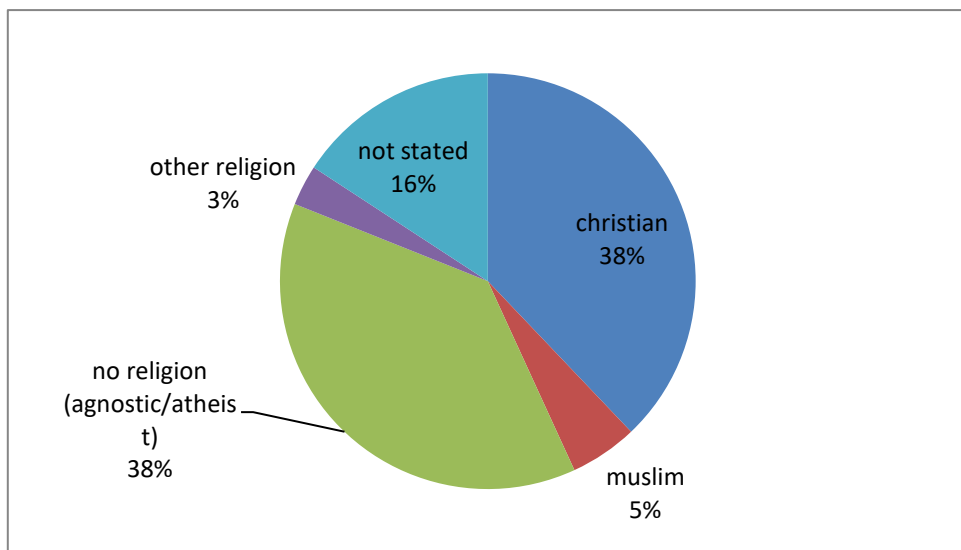
### *Personal Experiences of Religion and Impact on Teaching for Diversity*

When asked to comment on their own experiences of religion 16% of participants chose not to comment, see figure 11. 46% professed to have some adherence to religion which I considered to be quite a low percentage compared with the census (census data 2011) see figures 4 and 5 below. In the census for the North West 19.8% claim to have no religion compared to my sample where 38% claimed to be agnostic or atheist, also 38% professed to be Christian (fig 5) which is almost half that of the census for the North West where 67.3% self- identified as Christian (fig 4). The number of Muslims 5.1% in the census (2011) and my study 5% is similar.

**FIGURE 4**  
**DATA FROM CENSUS (CENSUS 2011)**  
**SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN BELIEF – NORTH WEST**



**FIGURE 5**  
**STUDENTS SELF IDENTIFICATION OF BELIEF**



The census does not give detailed information about whether the adherent is practising or not however belief and attendance is a complex issue, as noted by Francis in his research with adolescents (2006). Of my participants claiming adherence 10% said they classed themselves as Christian but did not attend church regularly, 12% said they were Catholic, 1% Methodist, and 5% a believer in Islam or moderately practising Muslim, and 1% brought up strong atheist but now practising Christian. 16% of students did not answer this question, which is higher than the census figure of 6.2% in the North West who did not state their beliefs. Again, neither the census nor my data are able to capture the complexities of an individual's belief which may change over the years. Participant 6 said she was

Brought up RC, now think I am humanist, grandma [is] RC, sister spiritualist, husband atheist (participant 6, white female)

19% said they were agnostic, undecided or had no affiliation to a particular religion. 12% stated they were atheist. The remainder of those who gave an answer said Pagan 1%, spiritual 2%, humanist 1%, and 1% 'believe in God but don't follow or agree with religions.

Several participants mentioned friends or family who were adherents of a range of faiths for example

I have friends of a variety of religions: Wicca, Christianity, Judaism, Atheism, Buddhism, Agnosticism, and Islam. I am agnostic but find faith/ belief and religious narrative/myth fascinating. (participant 57, white female).

In the REDCo project Alvarez Veinguer et al (2011) report on their work with Spanish teenagers some of whom thought a non-religious teacher would not be convincing. However, in my study many students saw their atheism as an advantage because it allowed them to present a non-biased treatment of a variety of religions, arguably more akin to the critical multiculturalist stance (fig 1). The Spanish children however, in a predominantly religious context, considered it more authentic for their teacher to be a faith adherent.

The only negative comments tended to be very balanced, as both these white females attest:

[Religion is] very political and back stabbing in some cases, although with either friends and relatives it has made a very positive impact on their lives and this shines through. (participant 91)

And also

I was really very anti – religion during my teenage/young adult life as at the same time as my parents split up my father became very devoted to his Christian faith and it seemed to me not very devoted to his family – practice what you preach! I have become more accepting of religion as I have become more excepting [sic] of people in general as I have matured. (participant 4)

While admitting that the answers are mostly brief, many participants chose to record some key elements of their faith journey which offer a backdrop to contextualise their attitudes towards diversity which are explored below.

In some cases, the students' attitudes linked closely with their own experiences and values. Participant 13 disagreed with the way religion had been forced on him, particularly at secondary school:

[I would] be happy to teach it [diversity]. Though I personally disagree with the concept of educating children about any particular faith. (participant 13, white male)

Similarly, participant 41, white female said

I hated RE at secondary school. We were only taught about Islam for 2 years and I remember being bored and angry we didn't cover any other religion. I would have enjoyed it if there was some variety. (participant 41)

Participant 52, white female, considers herself to be pagan but respectful of all religions, however she felt religion was 'almost forced' and she had 'only ever been taught or seen Christianity being taught'. She judged herself to have 'no knowledge' of Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism and Judaism, knew 'one or two facts' about Islam and only considered herself competent in her subject knowledge of Christianity.

This lack of knowledge made her feel unprepared and she 'would be nervous apprehensive....but sure I will learn eventually... [teaching for diversity] may reduce stigma or even wars '. So participant 52 displays a positive attitude towards teaching diversity, in spite of her lack of subject knowledge:

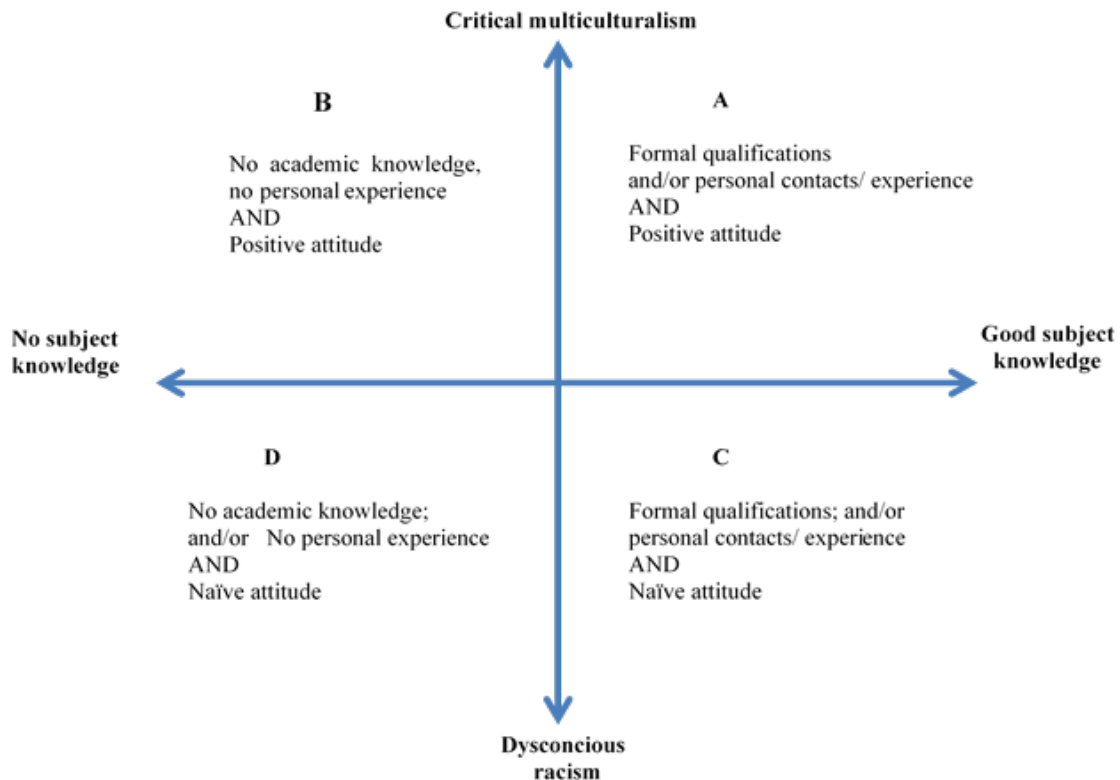
71 % (n69) of students state explicitly in some way that they feel diversity is important and should be explored in school. Some students made the point that diversity encompasses religion, culture and ways of looking at the world.

In his books *No problem here* (1987), *still no Problem here* (1995) and *We're all white thanks* (2005) Gaine argues that extra effort is required to teach about diversity where there are few minority ethnic communities. But, ironically, some schools believe that if there is little diversity in their student population then diversity does not need discussing. Most students, in my research believed teaching for diversity ought to be encouraged in both state and faith schools and also in both predominantly white and high proportion minority ethnic schools. However a minority expressed ambivalent opinions or views which could be interpreted as negative expressing a 'dysconscious racism' (King 2004) stance as they said there would be 'no issues' (participant 15) and 'no problem, welcome it' (participant 56, white female). I presume these students merely meant that they would adopt an all-inclusive approach however, these seemingly innocent phrases could also be interpreted as a colour blindness approach (Gaine 2005) where teachers claim they are not racist because they see all children as the same. Warner and Elton-Chalcraft (2018) argue that this is a liberal multiculturalist approach, (see fig 1 typology) and the critical multiculturalist would claim that such sentiments are misplaced because in denying difference there is an eradication of an important part of a child's identity (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997, Warner and Elton-Chalcraft 2018). Data from the questionnaires provides a multidimensional picture of students' qualifications, key experiences and a snapshot picture of their attitudes, and suggests that a colour blindness position was present. While the in depth interviews data provided a more nuanced and comprehensive picture from a smaller sample of students and used together with the questionnaire data to present a theoretical model figure 6.

### **Presentation of Findings and Discussion of Interviews**

The interviews built on the questionnaire findings and provided a more detailed insight into six students' feelings about working within the diversity and inclusion field. After analysis the researcher developed the theoretical model shown in figure 6 to map the intersection between subject knowledge and attitudes towards culturally responsive teaching. The theoretical model fig 6 shows similarities with and differences to Lander's (2011) categories in her small scale study of student teachers' attitudes to diversity.

**FIGURE 6**  
**THEORETICAL MODEL WITH QUADRANTS SHOWING INTERSECTION BETWEEN**  
**STUDENT TEACHER'S SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDE**  
**TOWARDS TEACHING FOR DIVERSITY**



*Quadrant A: Wealth of Experience, Informed Positive Attitude*

The quadrants in figure 6 are not used to precisely chart an interviewee's attitudes and knowledge – rather they form a continuum along which to compare the intersection between different types of knowledge and plot this against attitudes towards diversity. So for example William, interview 2, described his wealth of knowledge gained from travelling and working abroad, despite his limited formal qualifications. He also seems to hold a very positive attitude towards teaching about diversity. However, William is concerned about the practicalities of how to teach for diversity 'I've lived in different countries...experienced different people'. William is one of the 32% of students in the sample with no formal qualifications in RE and, in his questionnaire answers (which he chose to share with us) revealed limited or no knowledge in four of the six world religions see figure 2.

Nevertheless, William described himself as a critical multiculturalist, figure 1, (Warner and Elton-Chalcraft 2018) despite feeling ill equipped to teach about different cultures, which is why he is located in quadrant A not B.

Holly, in interview 4, discussed her friendship with a Sikh girl, which provided her with knowledge of Sikhism and she also described herself as a critical multiculturalist, figure 1, (Warner and Elton-Chalcraft 2018). However, she does this modestly implying that to subscribe to a critical multiculturalist stance in a predominantly white locality is not the norm.

Holly: I've got a lot of friends from a Sikh background or Hindu background so I've had experience of a lot of cultures and...I don't want to sound big headed and say that I'm five [critical multiculturalism]. But I'm possibly a bit five because like...my friend got married and it was like a Sikh ceremony but I was made to feel included so I got to really appreciate it ... and the meanings of everything... I think it makes you aware that there's not just one way really, is there? (interview 4)

Holly describes herself as a practising Christian but also she believes it is important to present all views as equal and to start early to eradicate racism,

I'm not a Priest, I'm not there to instruct them, I'm here to educate them about what's out there and the people they'll meet and when they meet them there's nothing...to be prejudiced about. And I think that if you teach about racism at an early age you don't have to go back and teach it at a later stage. (Holly Interview 4)

In the initial teacher education RE sessions students were introduced to the use of Persona Dolls to challenge prejudice and they agreed with Brown's argument that children are not born prejudiced but rather this is learned (Brown 2008, Elton-Chalcraft 2009).

Similar to William and Holly, Sarah's stance, interview 5 also fits into quadrant A because she understands the complexity of juxtaposing racism and class:

Sarah: even though I believe that everyone is equal, I also think that there needs to be understanding to[of] peoples' backgrounds and why they are being racist ...[An] old couple I know who had work[ed] in the factories all their life and live on this estate .. they are in their 70s now...they try really hard with their neighbours and stuff, but over the past 50 years [their estate] turned from being mixed race to them being the only white people there. They have people knocking on their door saying my cousin wants your house when you leave here. ..I think it's easy to be liberal when you are affluent. (Sarah interview 5)

Sarah's personal experiences informed her attitudes, she says she has travelled and had an informed education – she is able to put herself into the shoes of the racist and understand why they think that way, despite disagreeing with them she thinks the reason why some people were voting BNP was because they felt that 'they are the only ones representing their voice'. She felt many student views were entrenched and difficult, but not impossible, to change (interview 5).

Emma: –How has university prepared you?

Sarah: ...There are people in my class who come across as quite racist and make jokes about people or off-hand comments ..... some people can be taught a bit about it and write an essay but it's not going to change their fundamental beliefs and if you have a closed mind, it might be due to your background or just that you're not willing to change... I don't think any lectures are ever going to change that. I don't think that uni has changed my perspective but meeting other people has (Sarah interview 5)

Sarah, like the 'getting there with guilt' and also the 'get it but frustrated' students in Lander's study (2011), admits that some of her peers are racist and racism in schools is not always handled effectively,

nevertheless she maintains a positive stance. Thus Sarah, William and Holly could all be described as ‘critical multiculturalists’ see figure 1, and can be located in quadrant A, figure 3.

*Quadrant B: Doubly Disadvantaged No Personal contact nor Academic Knowledge but Positive and Informed Attitude*

While also aware of the complexities of teaching for diversity (Santoro and Allard 2005) Mary, in contrast with William, Sarah and Holly, is more representative of the majority of the questionnaire participants because she feels limited by her lack of subject knowledge (Cockrell et al 1999).

Mary: I don’t have a religious background .....and I don’t have the academic knowledge...so I am doubly disadvantaged’ ( interview 3).

Nevertheless throughout the interview Mary seemed to adopt a critical multiculturalist stance, figure 1, and was able to identify tokenism. Mary felt she had ‘learnt a lot of skills that I didn’t have, or tools I didn’t have before’ (interview 3). She felt uncomfortable adopting her teacher’s plans which she viewed as faith nurture.

Mary sees her agnostic background as an advantage to teaching for equality, and she felt uncomfortable about teaching from confessional perspective which she believed (rightly or wrongly) she was being required to do. Whilst not knowing the word ‘dysconscious racism’ (King 2004) Mary admitted ignorance of her privileged position as a white middle class intending teacher, yet she appreciated the complexities of teaching for diversity and the danger of making assumptions. However, she felt that she would ‘be more sensitive’ if she had Muslims in the class – thus suggesting that if the class were predominantly white it would not matter if erroneous information was taught.

By contrast, Salma, the only BME (black/minority ethnic) student in the interviewee sample, a practising Muslim, acknowledged her detailed knowledge of Islam but was concerned by her paucity of knowledge of other world religions

Salma: But I do find it very difficult to teach other religions because it’s scary not knowing everything about it, and I don’t want to give out the wrong information. I remember once I was teaching about bones and joints and realised later that I’d said something wrong, but it didn’t bother me too much. But when talking about religion I feel would be much more serious and it’s hard to ensure all the facts are right, as you have to respect it and so cannot give out wrong information

*Quadrant C: Background Knowledge Is Important, Naïve Attitude at First*

None of the interviewees fitted in quadrant C. It could be argued that those who volunteered already had a commitment to teaching for diversity. However, it could be argued that some students who completed the questionnaire are knowledgeable but also exhibit a ‘dysconscious’ racist stance (King 2004) or a pluralist or liberal essentialist viewpoint, figure 1 (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997, Warner and Elton-Chalcraft 2018). But further research is needed to confirm this.

*Quadrant D: Lack of Knowledge, Overwhelmed When Eyes Are Opened to Ignorance*

Like Lander’s (2011) ‘naïve but well intentioned’ students, one of our interviewees, Estelle, a practising Catholic from a Catholic family, seemed overwhelmed when her eyes were opened to her ignorance of diversity issues. Estelle indicated on her questionnaire, which she shared with us, that she had limited or no knowledge of the principle world religions and ‘felt scared about offending other religions’ and ‘worried that I won’t have enough knowledge.’ But during the course of the interview she realised that she also displayed ‘dysconscious racism’ (King 2004) because her interviewer, Amy, explained the underlying hegemony of using BC and AD (before Christ and Anno Domini) rather than BCE and CE (before the common era and common era); and using Anglo centric maps. Estelle remarks

I see, so there is a lot of underlying stuff that people are unaware of that can actually be, possibly offensive, and not quite politically correct.....I would never have thought about that until you told me about it' (interview 1).

Estelle admits that it is more difficult to cover everything in a one year course and she hopes that schools can play more of a role especially if students are placed within 'multicultural environments' (interview 1). Nevertheless, Estelle is aware that teachers do not always increase their knowledge rather they only 'focus on the ones [cultures] that they know and brush over the others' (interview 1). Throughout the interview Estelle moves from 'Naïve egalitarianism' (Santoro and Allard 2005:868), a quadrant D stance, figure 6, to a position of acknowledgement of her own dysconscious racism (King 2004). Thus the interview process allows her the opportunity to challenge her own opinions but she finds this stressful given her lack of subject knowledge

Amy: ..... how prepared do you feel to deal with these sorts of issues?

Estelle: Totally unprepared. ....and now you thrown some more things at me!

Amy: Sorry I didn't mean to confuse you! But that is what this research is about, how the university can prepare you. If I hadn't done that elective, I would struggle.

Estelle: I we should have more experience in diverse schools, there is a lot of focus on SEN [special educational needs] pupils, but I think there should be a lot more focus on EAL [English as an additional language] and how to deal with that...

Estelle is a white student who, despite an awareness of her own dysconscious racism (King 2004) continues to think that 'time in school' can provide a 'quick fix' to teaching for diversity which she seems to view as problematic. During the course of the interview Amy, the 4<sup>th</sup> year interviewer sympathetically challenged these views resulting in Estelle reappraising her viewpoint. This chimes with Gordon et al's research which recommended more emphasis in on how preservice and in service teachers *learn* rather than how they *teach* (2007) and my study shows that in addition teacher educators also need to be aware of a student's experiences and mindset.

## CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This case study investigated the intersection between a small sample of student teachers' knowledge and experiences of Religion and Religious education and their perceived attitudes towards teaching for diversity, through both questionnaires (n=97) and in depth interviews (n=6), which have been used to generate some recommendations for future practice. Despite being a small-scale case study, as Flyvbjerg (2006) asserts, it is possible to generalise from a single case because a case study can contribute to social scientific development. He also claims that formal generalisations are overvalued, and 'the force of example' and transferability is underestimated (Flyvbjerg 2006: 221).

These case study findings show that the majority of students had received some form of RE with many undertaking some form of formal qualification. The majority were most familiar with Christianity, although many were not aware of different Christian denominations and in many cases their knowledge was confined to Catholicism or Anglicanism, especially if they had attended a faith school of that denomination. Students' self-assessment of subject knowledge in Islam and Judaism was markedly higher than the 'Eastern religions', Buddhism, Hindu traditions and Sikhism, with the latter reported as the least well known. Just under half the students claimed adherence to a particular faith with many students explaining that this had changed over time. The majority of students said that while they felt positive about teaching for diversity they felt lack of subject knowledge and limited competence in pedagogical strategies might impede their ability to teach children from diverse backgrounds and also teach for equality. More detailed data from interviews revealed a variety of stances towards teaching for diversity. For example, one student felt



‘doubly disadvantaged’ with her perceived absence of knowledge about religions and world views coupled with a naïve attitude towards the issues inherent in teaching for diversity. While at the other end of the spectrum another student felt confident in subject knowledge gained through formal qualifications and personal contacts coupled with a positive attitude and awareness of the complexities in teaching for diversity. Findings reveal that the research process itself enabled some students to move from a dysconscious racist stance (King 2004) to a more enlightened understanding about teaching for diversity. Findings suggest that this unenlightened stance is not unusual in teacher education particularly in predominantly white areas.

A framework (Fig 7) has been generated by the lead researcher as a result of this case study findings which provides recommendations for teacher educators arising from implications raised by this research. The framework begins with attention to *mindset* (fig 7) where student teachers could be nurtured to acknowledge the existence of inequality in a profound and enlightened fashion rather than a superficial and limited understanding. The framework, (fig 7) explains *why* this is important and *how* skilled teacher educators can facilitate small student group discussions to tease out the complexities of colour blindness. The second part of the framework refers to *knowledge and understanding* of a range of cultures, fig 7. In busy teacher education courses it is recognised that limited time necessitates students to increase their subject *knowledge* through personal study into recommended sources (reputable websites, professional journal articles and books; trusted adherents of particular world views, and so on) see fig 7. The commission for RE in their final report (CoRE2018) call for more teaching time in English Initial Teacher education courses to address the lack of subject knowledge and pedagogical understanding.

The final recommendation raised by this research calls for teacher educators to ensure their student teachers’ enlightened mind-set and increased subject knowledge are put into practice in their *teaching*, fig 7. The framework suggests that the *learning* environment for pupils needs to mirror the critical multicultural mind-set, namely an acknowledgement of the inequality which exists with a commitment to redressing this imbalance by celebrating diversity and avoiding the reinforcement of prejudice. This is only achievable by teachers who are aware that inequalities exist.

**FIGURE 7**  
**FRAMEWORK FOR FACILITATING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHERS – WHAT, WHY AND HOW (DEVELOPED IN RESPONSE TO CASE STUDY FINDINGS)**

	WHAT needs to be done	WHY	HOW
MINDSET	‘Open eyes’ to existence of inequality, challenge ‘dysconscious racism’ (King 2004)	Teasing out complexities of colour blindness, white hegemony etc. (Gaine 2005)	Small group discussion – safe, open environment (Davies and Crozier 2006)
KNOWLEDGE UNDERSTANDING	Develop knowledge base and understanding of differences and the impact this can have on the learner (Conteh et al 2008)	Informed understanding of how and why opinions and roles are shaped by the dominant perspective (Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997)	Through academic research and personal experiences/ ethnographic approach (Jackson 1997; Elton-Chalcraft 2015)
TEACHING AND LEARNING	Increase competence in organising the learning environment to raise and address issues of inequality (Dadzie 2000)	Recognise and celebrate diversity within as well as between cultures (avoid reinforcing prejudice) (Elton-Chalcraft 2009)	Teaching and learning strategies e.g. managed visits, inclusive classroom practice etc. (Knowles and Ridley

			2005, McCreery et al 2008)
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Unfortunately, barriers to achieving the recommendations outlined in the framework fig 7 are manifold especially in the English context- including a lack of time in crowded teacher preparation courses, and a lack of expertise, despite the recommendations in the CoRE final report (2018). With the English initiative (Ofsted 2012) to include more embedded teacher education, which is sited in schools, opportunities abound for drawing on classroom practice, however the concern is whether these opportunities are matched with expertise of suitably qualified individuals to guide students through the complex framework for effective culturally responsive teaching. Also in England the current QTS standards requiring teachers to ‘not undermine fundamental British beliefs’ seem to resonate more with a conservative, monoculture belief figure 1, than a critical multiculturalist stance. Thus it is even more important for skilled and knowledgeable teacher educators to interrogate approaches to teaching for diversity given the varied learning journeys of student teachers as outlined in this research.

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