

CREATING PARADISE: A TRIBUTE TO BRIAN RUANE

Fionnuala Waldron

In the concluding passage to her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks writes:

“The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom” (1994: 207).

For Brian Ruane, the classroom provided such a space – a space for authentic dialogue, for creative and critical engagement with key issues of global justice, human rights and sustainability, a space where views were shared, certainties challenged and knowledge constructed and deconstructed, a relational space characterised by conversation, trust, love, care, humour and openness to others. In the Spring of 2016, Brian was diagnosed with motor neurone disease and passed away on January 7, 2018. A gifted teacher, expert human rights educator and visionary teacher educator, Brian’s influence in the field has been extensive and profound.

Brian was optimistic about the fundamental goodness of human beings and intent on challenging manifestations of oppression and discrimination in all its forms. He believed profoundly in the transformative power of education and in the power of human rights education to make a difference in the lives of people, empowering them to claim their rights and contributing to the development of a culture in which the rights of all are protected and respected. Brian argued for the

embedding of rights-respecting practice, processes and relationships in all aspects of state, including education, justice, policing and health. In particular, he was committed to the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child across all sectors, particularly education. Brian's work was premised on a view of children and young people as agentic, creative and capable of engaging with complex ideas and difficult knowledge, and he championed their right to participate, to make meaningful decisions and to have their views heard.

A graduate of Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Brian's commitment to human rights and global justice education was evident from his early years as a primary teacher in Cork and, later, in his contribution to the Curriculum Development Unit (MIC), where he co-ordinated the Development Education Project from 1997 to 1999. A notable publication from that period is Ruane et al., 2000, *The World in the Classroom: Development Education in the Primary Curriculum*, MIC, which offered an early and influential exploration of the potential for embedding development education within the newly revised Irish Primary Curriculum (NCCA, 1999). Brian went on to work with Trócaire (1999-2001) and with Amnesty International (Ireland) (2001 – 2007) where he gained a national and international reputation as a leader in the field of human rights education. During his time as Human Rights Education Manager with Amnesty, Brian led a range of significant projects. Of particular note is the Cross Border Primary Human Rights Education Initiative, a collaborative project which brought together teachers from the Republic and from Northern Ireland to create a series of human rights education resources for primary schools, the first of which, *Lift Off*, was published in 2003. As an educational response to the Good Friday Agreement, and funded by the Irish and UK governments, *Lift Off* represented a triumph of collaboration, involving the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Ulster Teachers' Union, Education International and Amnesty International (UK and Ireland). Positively evaluated by Morgan and Kitching (2006), it demonstrated Brian's

capacity for leadership, for teamwork and for innovative curriculum design.

In 2004, working on behalf of Amnesty, Brian co-founded the Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education (CHRCE) with colleagues from St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. Dedicated to progressing policy and practice in human rights and global justice education and to the integration of human rights education into education at all levels, the CHRCE became central to Brian's vision for transformative education, engaged pedagogy and innovative research. When Brian left Amnesty to join the staff of St Patrick's College, he devoted himself to progressing that vision. As a teacher educator, Brian spanned the fields of human rights education, global citizenship and history education. Passionate about all three areas, he saw them as essential to the creation of an informed, critical, democratic and agentic citizenry, committed to such human values as equality, justice, respect, solidarity and care for the environment. He loved his students and was loved in return. Warm and good humoured, he had an insatiable interest in their views and ideas and liked nothing better than teaching a seminar on controversial issues or mentoring a student teacher on placement.

Brian was generous with his support of a range of projects. He played a leading role in the Irish Aid funded DICE Project, which seeks to embed Development and Intercultural Education in initial teacher education, and in the Réalt programme, an inter-college programme that offers primary student teachers an opportunity to undertake voluntary work in partnership with schools and communities in Uganda, where he built a strong network of friends and colleagues. He played an active role as Chair of the Management Committee of Balbriggan Educate Together National School for many years. Brian was a strong advocate of ethical education and, together with colleagues in St Patrick's College, he worked closely with Educate Together to develop and roll out the first accredited programme in ethical education for Irish teachers.

Brian was an insightful and innovative researcher who enjoyed writing and loved both the generation of theory and the application of research to practice. Much of his work was collaborative, as was his nature, and he gave generously of his time in support of others. His areas of research included human rights education (Waldron and Ruane, 2010), teachers' perceptions of human rights and human rights education (Ruane et al., 2010), the idea of student voice in school placement (Ní Aingléis, Murphy and Ruane, 2012), young children's understanding of global justice issues (Ruane et al., 2010), citizenship education (Waldron, Ruane and Oberman, 2014) and climate change education (Waldron, Ruane, Oberman and Morris, 2016). Brian's interest in translating research into practice found expression through a wide range of projects focusing on the creation of innovative teaching resources, such as those developed to mark the 25th anniversary of Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC (Mallon et al., 2017). His final piece of writing was an editorial for *Policy & Practice* (Issue 25), on the relationship between development education and human rights (Ruane, 2017). Written shortly before he died, it exemplifies his passion for justice, his care for the future and his ongoing interest in global issues. Despite his illness, he remained committed to his vision for a better world and determined to play his part in achieving it.

Brian had a passion for all things Cork, for horse racing and quizzes and for friendship, forming deep and lasting friendships throughout his life. He had a gift for conversation, and for laughter, gifts which sustained his beloved family and his many friends throughout his heroic struggle over the past two years. The deep sadness that surrounds his passing is leavened with gratitude for having known him and for the legacy he leaves behind, a legacy which reminds us of the possibility of education as the practice of freedom and our responsibility to work towards that better world.

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Fionnuala Waldron is Professor of Education and Chair of the Centre for Human Rights and Citizenship Education, Institute of Education, Dublin City University.