

GETTING TO THE ROOTS OF IT: A GLOBAL YOUTH WORK APPROACH TOWARDS MEANINGFUL CHANGE

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Abstract: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2023) underpins recent Irish government policy commitments to children and young people: ‘Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services 2024-2028’ (DCEDIY, 2024) and ‘Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028’ (DCEDIY, 2023). This article explores how a global youth work approach, within a youth work context, supports young people in understanding how their rights are impacted by inequality, with a particular focus on poverty. This approach recognises that inequality is rooted in oppression and encourages young people and youth workers to explore how categories like class and race are affected by oppressive systems. This raises critical consciousness and fosters resistance to oppression, paving the way for solidarity and change.

Key Words: Human Rights; Inequality; Poverty; A Decolonial Approach; Anti-oppressive Practice; Youth Work; Critical Thinking; Critical Consciousness; A Global Youth Work Approach; Development Education.

Introduction

In February 2023, in ‘concluding observations’ on Ireland’s periodic reports regarding progress under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN recommended that the forthcoming document, ‘Young Ireland – National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028’ (DCEDIY, 2023) ‘includes a focus on mainstreaming children’s rights and a child rights-based approach to decision-making affecting children and on addressing inequality and discrimination’ (UNCRC, 2023: 2). Consequently, the vision statement for ‘Young Ireland’ is ‘an Ireland which fully respects and realises the

rights of children and young people' (DCEDIY, 2023: 2). The language of human rights is also present in subsequent relevant policy documents, with the exception of the Programme Plan (July 2023 - December 2025) of the newly established Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office (Department of Taoiseach, 2023) which does not mention inequality, discrimination or rights.

This is important because despite economic growth, Ireland remains deeply unequal (Social Justice Ireland, 2024). The Community Platform, an alliance of Irish organisations in the community and voluntary sector working to address poverty, social exclusion and inequality, highlights the need for a systemic, rights-based approach to poverty reduction, emphasising the need to 'prevent all forms of discrimination, promote equality and protect human rights' (O'Connor, 2023: 27).

The increased take-up of food banks and the stigma associated with poverty underscore the issue. The emergence of food banks and the expanded role they have played as inflation continues to rise, is well documented in recent years (Barnardos, 2024; Murray, 2022). Along with this, comes the issue of shame and stigma as part of the visible manifestation of poverty. 'When people first come into us, there's a lot of embarrassment because there's so much stigma around food poverty', according to Sharon Mullins, volunteer coordinator at Feed Cork (Sheridan, 2023). Meanwhile, for young people who are labelled under a criminal justice category, there are complex reasons that are often related to socio-economic status, including the impacts of childhood adversity (Kilkelly et al., 2022). Yet, the propensity to conflate poverty with other social issues such as unemployment, welfare receipt or criminality, or to refer to these conditions as explanations of poverty, is often linked to the tendency to portray poverty as a problem created by those experiencing it. It is also indicative of a more general tendency to downplay the significance of poverty altogether (Shildrick and Rucell, 2015). Without a systemic analysis, and without understanding poverty as a political choice and the outcome of a specific policy focus, the shame factor keeps poverty in the shadows.

This article argues that poverty, particularly its intersection with class, is under-represented within a non-formal education context in Ireland. To

counteract the epistemic inequality associated with class (Meade, 2024) it proposes that a global youth work approach, utilising development education tools, can empower young people to reflect on class as a site of struggle, challenge their own experiences of oppression, and connect with the experiences of others facing similar challenges, in proximate and more distant locations.

A crisis of politics and democracy?

While policies often emphasise rights and equality, the impact of their implementation can vary considerably for young people and children. This is particularly poignant in the context of today's challenging economic and political climate, where neoliberal and oppressive tendencies prevail. It's crucial to critically examine who is responsible for understanding and ensuring their rights are upheld in practice. According to Balakrishnan and Heintz (2015), it is the state which has the primary obligation to protect, respect and fulfil rights, but this depends on a state that operates with full democratic participation and transparency. Inequality, both in terms of income and wealth, affects formal and informal political processes in ways that dictate people's access to education, healthcare, jobs and social security.

Giroux argues that 'a crisis of politics and democracy has turned into an impending catastrophe' (2022: 178). It is a time of frustration and powerlessness for young people, compounded by inequality and discrimination, war and violence, and the climate crisis. As a consequence, they are either debilitated and frozen with anxiety, or ripe for the destructive influence of extremist ideas. In relation to poverty and the rights of children and young people, a dilemma presents itself. Commitments related to socially constructed groups, such as gender or race, are strongly incorporated into the human rights framework and so take priority, however, economic inequality which directly informs rights impacted by discrimination associated with class, is less of a priority.

In Ireland, inequality and high levels of poverty exist despite having the highest annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita growth in the European Union in 2022 (Central Statistics Office, 2024). The *Children's Rights Alliance Child Poverty Monitor 2023* reminds us that almost 90,000 children in Ireland are living in consistent poverty (Children's Rights Alliance, 2023: 3). This is

bolstered by a 2023 report by Barnardos relaying their concern that ‘cost-of-living increases are pulling more children in Ireland into deprivation and negatively affecting their health, wellbeing and development, particularly those living in low-income families’ (Barnardos, 2023: 4). Poverty has long-term and far-reaching consequences for children and young people. For example, ‘The Impact of Childhood Poverty Experiences on Adult Life 2023’ (CSO, 2023) states that an adult who has experienced poverty during their teenage years are at risk of continued poverty, their educational attainment and employment status are affected, and are more likely to report fair or bad health.

Class and the dominant narrative

Lynch (2020:2) maintains that social class is a taboo subject in Ireland, ‘unlike in England and mainland Europe where class inequalities are part and parcel of the political debate, “social class” is rarely used in Ireland’. Social class is generally understood to refer to an individual’s occupation, income or status, though, in Ireland, upper or lower class usually equates to rich or poor, powerful or ignored. The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 prohibit discrimination on the basis of the following nine grounds - gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community. Recently, efforts to include socio-economic status as a tenth ground for discrimination in Irish equality legislation are intensifying. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC, 2024:3) has called on the state to urgently update equality law, to make it illegal to discriminate against a person based on their socio-economic status, stating that ‘a lack of economic equality affects all marginalised groups and prevents the realisation of many fundamental rights, which Ireland is obliged to protect’. Poverty as a ‘moral failure’ directly informs the narrative propounded by an unequal system, a system of oppression. According to De St. Croix (2016: 22):

“Market mechanisms and values are coded as enterprise and ‘choice’; this rhetoric tells us that we can all be successful if we knuckle down, take risks, network, improve ourselves and aim for the top. The implicit message here is that we have only ourselves to blame if anything goes wrong”.

These assumptions were explicit in the narrative surrounding the Dublin riots, which broke out on November 23rd 2023, following the stabbing of three children and a care assistant outside a city centre primary school (Moore, 2024). Far-right groups used the stabbings to incite violence through social media accounts which resulted in one of the worst nights of public disorder and looting witnessed in the city. The critical concern that emerged in mainstream political and policy discourse following the 2023 riots was that of blame, and on individual responsibility (O'Brien, 2023).

A correlation of this narrative is to move the problem into an 'other' space, to emphasise the difference of those 'responsible'. Sabanova and Stout (2023) state that othering can be considered a process of boundary making using symbolic differences that compound and reproduce positions of control and subordination. The sense of the problem being understood as happening in an 'other' space is also evident where poverty has been normalised as the problem of a distant other in the cultural imagination, read through images shared as part of fundraising for international non-government organisations (INGOs). These images contain neo-colonial stereotypes about Africa as a primitive place dependent on Western aid, displaying continuity with the 'Black Baby Phenomenon' (Sheridan, Landy and Stout, 2019: 859). Such images have shaped a collective understanding of poverty, and arguably represent a poignant example of cultural hegemony, impacting the cultural imagination. Gramsci is best known for his theories of cultural hegemony, which effectively refers to 'how the state and ruling class instil values that are gradually accepted as "common sense"' (Garza, 2020: 224). For decades, images depicting poverty and destitution as part of a reified African identity have shaped an understanding of poverty as something that is relativised and dismissed at a domestic level (Sheridan, Landy and Stout, 2019).

In *Pedagogy of Resistance*, Giroux (2022: 22) states that a poverty narrative is told using a 'thinner' language that 'contributes to a political and civic illiteracy wedded to the forces of racism, neoliberal capitalism, anti-intellectualism, militarism, consumerism, sexism, cultism and the corporate state'. Neoliberalism seems to have conquered by stealth, and those who are most impacted by its consequences are the least likely to be aware of its impact. Meade (2024: 19)

states ‘if one does not have the epistemic insights to identify neoliberalism as the problem, then they can be more easily persuaded that the problem lies elsewhere’, providing another opportunity to reinforce the perspective of oppressive systems.

Counteracting epistemic injustice

The portrayal of poverty as a moral failing, young people as problematic and requiring targeted interventions, refugees as ‘unvetted males’ (Begley, 2024), and Africa as merely a recipient of aid for helpless poor people are all examples of narratives that sustain an oppressive system in need of fundamental change. We have arrived at a tipping point and the compass is pointing in the direction of radical change. There is an opportunity for development education to challenge the neoliberal interpretation of poverty within the context of globalisation and systems of oppression. For example, at the local level, information gathered through monitoring the use of foodbanks in Ireland and tracking the needs of those who avail of foodbanks should inform the practice of development educators. Poverty is present locally, as well as globally, and tackling it means drilling down to its root causes. McCloskey (2021: 110) maintains that:

“the foodbank is the current canary in the coalmine of neoliberalism and the foodbank network is sending out worrying evidence of a widening local contagion of poverty. We would be foolish to ignore it”.

When poverty is ignored or ‘othered’, disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories fill the knowledge void. A recent report entitled ‘Uisce Faoi Thalamh - An Investigation into the Online Mis- and Disinformation Ecosystem in Ireland’ (Gallagher, O’Connor and Visser, 2023:4) demonstrated how social media has been ‘successfully co-opted by far-right actors who...have diverted attention towards targeting vulnerable communities’. This supports the claim made by Giroux (2022: 177) that the current political, social and economic climate:

“makes all the clearer the need for critical thinking, collective resistance, and a notion of hope that inspires and energizes opportunities to rethink the connection between education and social change, and to deepen our

understanding of politics as part of a broader attempt to redefine and struggle for a future that does not repeat the present”.

Young’s (1999: 81) synopsis of critical thinking is the capacity to:

“identify and challenge assumptions; [to] recognise the importance of the social, political and historical contexts of events, assumptions, interpretations and behaviour; [to] imagine and explore alternatives; [and to] question claims to universal truths or ultimate explanations”.

It is vital that young people develop their critical thinking muscle in order to understand their own positioning and identity while grappling with the influence of dominant discourses about what is ‘right’, ‘appropriate’, or ‘normal’ (Tilsen, 2018: 16). This facilitates a realisation that social reality is: ‘a process of constructing and deconstructing’ in order to understand ‘their reality as a site of struggle’ and in order to come to terms ‘with oppression as a false consciousness, through which ‘inequality and neoliberal orthodoxy are normalised’ (Sallah 2014: 75).

This is also relevant to the concept ‘learning to unlearn’ (Andreotti and de Souza, 2008: 4) where the young person and their educators must learn ‘to perceive that what one considers as neutral and objective is a perspective and is related to where one is coming from socially, historically and culturally’. In *Learning to Read the World Through Other Eyes*, Andreotti and de Souza (2008) propose a framework for global citizenship education which categorises perspectives into four levels: Egocentric (individual); Ethnocentric (group-centric); Humancentric (other groups); and Worldcentric (diverse global perspectives). Similarly, Sallah’s anti-oppressive framework, understands that oppression and discrimination can take place ‘at the personal, local, national and global level and must be understood in this way’ (2014: 75), but also with an interactive global level that works in symbiosis with all the other levels.

By contrasting the narratives and representations at each level, these anti-oppressive frameworks encourage young people to critically examine how different perspectives shape roles and expectations. This analysis allows them to explore

and question existing systems like poverty, racism, discrimination, globalisation, and neoliberalism, ultimately reflecting on how these systems impact their own lives.

Anti-oppressive practice

Anti-oppressive practice is the means by which ‘blinkers’ can be removed in order to clearly see the impact of discrimination such as young people in poverty, even if they have never had that experience. Similarly, anti-oppressive practice supports young people who face discrimination, and the effects of inequality, to understand the roots of these injustices. Such a practice empowers them to advocate for the changes they believe are necessary to address inequality, rather than those changes that outsiders or activists, without their lived experience, may assume should be implemented. In the absence of an anti-oppressive practice we are destined to ‘suffer reality, not change it...to accept the future, not invent it’ (Galeano, 1998: 8).

For Sallah the potency of a global youth work approach within youth work is now more urgent than ever. The educational context here combines the core values and principles of youth work with development education, and displays a commitment to anti-oppressive practice (Sallah, 2014). Using an anti-oppressive framework as articulated by Andreotti and de Souza (2008) and Sallah (2014), the youth worker can support young people to deconstruct and construct their own reality and challenge oppressive systems. Youth workers, as educators, need to be cognisant of the idea proposed by Strier and Binjamin (2010: 1910), that ‘the understanding of poverty as oppression is related to the analysis of larger power relations in society’. According to this perspective, poverty is both the expression and the consequence of political, economic, ethnic or gender oppression. Poverty leads to ‘a partial or general deprivation of basic human and social rights. In this sense, poverty may be defined as a system of domination’ (Ibid.: 1910).

The ‘definer’ of the ‘problem’ of poverty, informs the systems and its structures, and the ‘definers’ are, likely, those with the power. In these circumstances, anti-oppressive practice embraces deliberative democratic methodologies, where those affected by the ‘problems’ co-produce the solutions,

consistent with Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992). To achieve the highest level of participation, 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults' (Ibid.: 8), it is essential to support young people in becoming critically conscious, informed about systems of oppression, and empowered to identify ways to address the impact of inequalities and discrimination in their lives.

The potency of a global youth work approach

The impact of globalisation and its link to poverty is most effectively understood when examined through a human rights perspective. In the words of Duffy et al. (2022: 16), looking through a human rights lens gives youth workers the opportunity to focus on rights rather than needs, and consider 'rights holders rather than charity seekers, and human rights violations rather than individual pathologies'. This perspective can help reframe pervasive narratives and is a key element in the development of a critical consciousness.

As an informal and nonformal education arena, youth work is ideally positioned to support young people to safely navigate new ideas, new ways of thinking, and new ways of negotiating their place in society. A global youth work approach offers a critical pedagogical tool in youth work. Youthwork provides the space where young people can safely question the origins of poverty and class-based discrimination and where they can be supported to challenge oppressive systems and become activists for local and global change. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (Department of Education, 2022) makes only limited reference to youth work, and doesn't engage with the transformative capacity of youth work as a pedagogical space. In addition, it does not centre the need to decolonise an ESD practice as indicated in this article. While the new youth work strategy, *Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services* (DCEDIY, 2024), references the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs), this SDG framework is not enough in itself, without being linked to an anti-oppressive practice, that challenges the root causes of inequality. The 2024 youth work strategy (DCEDIY, 2024) reflects a low prioritisation of efforts to cultivate a critical and questioning consciousness among young people. It points also to a clear opportunity to apply a decolonising approach to poverty in the non-formal

education context, and in a policy context. Dunford (2023: 195) explains a decolonial approach to poverty in the following way:

“with attention paid to the multiple ideas, worldviews and practices of people who have borne the brunt of colonialism and its continued presence, and a broader decolonisation through which wealthy regions, states and people cease from the practices of exploitation that condemn others to poverty”.

Meanwhile, an understanding of the application of a decolonial approach to poverty and anti-oppressive practice is already evident in the work of practitioners in the field. Sarah Kelleher (2023), CEO of Lourdes Youth and Community Service, argues that global citizenship education in a youth work setting ‘can affect most change in people’s thinking, it can give them agency and get them to feel that their voice can be heard’. The capacity for critical thinking is the engine of personal transformation, even for people with disproportionate experiences of disadvantage, who ‘can find ways to transform their lives that can be deeply and profoundly meaningful’ (hooks, 2005: 3: 52). This is an approach through which, in the words of Paulo Freire (1970: 53), youth worker and young person ‘become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow’.

The young people are the ‘educators’ in the documentary entitled ‘Active Youth Breaking Down Stereotypes,’ instigating dialogue by asking questions such as ‘if your country is always represented negatively in the media to the general public, how proud will you feel to be identified as coming from there?’ (Love and Care for People, 2023). In this particular process, it is the young people themselves, in a north Cork-based youth group, who examine and challenge stereotypes. They identify the indelible association with poverty which compounds the idea of a racial other and therefore limits their capacity to be seen and for the issues to be addressed. Similarly, the National Youth Council of Ireland Young People’s Committee (2022-23) analysis of poverty was created because they wanted to bring the topic of poverty into the light so that it is named, and the shame associated with it addressed (NYCI, 2023).

Promoting the active engagement of young people in directly challenging issues of systemic inequality is also evidenced in the work of Nafula Wafula-Gitonga (2024) and Benjamin Mwape (2024). For Wafula-Gitonga, it is imperative to speak in the language of the community, to spend time in building relationships and acknowledge the value of community experience. All of this should shape the research agenda towards challenging inequality (2024). For Mwape, based in Zambia, his work aims to make policy issues more youth friendly, using a highly interactive methodology to engage the young people with their duty bearers. Mwape advocates that when young people are engaged in policy, it must be through the whole cycle, and they are engaged because of the substance of what they are saying. In advance of this, they are supported with mentoring, critical thinking skills and public speaking skills, that allow them to engage meaningfully with duty bearers (Mwape, 2024).

These successful examples of youth work exemplify the ideal of youth participation, placing the youth voice at the core of all their campaigns. In this way raising critical consciousness is an act of resistance to oppression and can create pathways to solidarity and to change, and should be at the centre of a GCE/GYW commitment, as well as policy commitments in this area.

Conclusion

With rising inequality as one of the legacies of globalisation because of an unequal distribution of economic power (Duffy et al., 2022), the related phenomenon of epistemic inequality has contributed to an understanding of poverty as something to which moral judgement is attached. Yet, class is a site of struggle and systemic poverty requires us to seek out insights to make visible that which has been rendered invisible. Updating equality law, to make it illegal to discriminate against a person based on their socio-economic status is a way to situate pervasive narratives on poverty away from moral judgement, and towards systemic failure.

A global youth work approach is a critical component of youth work, with its focus on critical thinking, human rights, and decolonisation, it offers a powerful framework for supporting young people to understand and address the root causes of poverty and inequality. Furthermore, a global youth work approach offers a path towards shaping youth workers' understanding of poverty as a

systemic issue, and the result of policy decisions. Centring *class as a site of struggle*, offers young people the tools to challenge their own experiences of oppression, while also supporting connections with differently situated young people. In her address at the launch of the National Youth Council of Ireland *Dear Poverty* resource in 2023, Sarah Kelleher (2023) spoke about the power of the work, describing how a global youth work approach can impact the participant, as follows:

“a person from a point of thinking poverty will always be with us and there isn’t anything you can do to change that, to a point where they see it for what it is, that it’s actually...deliberately caused and that the only way to change it is if more people speak out about it”.

In the context of provoking critical consciousness, through applying a global youth work approach, and being intentional about a human rights lens in the practice of youth work, it is a clear commitment to centring people in the stories of their lives. Challenging the stereotyping of the poor as lacking in individual moral worth (McCloskey, 2011), is a commitment to anti-oppressive practice, empowering young people to advocate for the changes they believe are necessary to address inequality. There is currently a missed opportunity to make this explicit in policy documents that inform educational outcomes for young people.

Meanwhile, the cultural imagination continues to be shaped by a neo-colonial understanding of poverty, and an association of poverty with a distant other. A global youth work commitment that has an intentional decolonising approach to poverty, offers an opportunity for critical engagement, and supports young people to become curious about a wider neo-colonial discourse on the world around them. Young people are tomorrow’s empathetic, collective, future thinking, solution focused, critical thinking and innovative leaders, who have the potential to operate as global citizens in solidarity with their peers across the world. Macy (2021) maintains that we must bring all our efforts and resources to the ‘transition to a life-sustaining society’ in order to implement the necessary radical change *and* to support the development of the future leaders described above. Incorporating a global youth work approach acknowledges youth work as

a pedagogical space, a space of inquiry, learning and change. Consequently, the tools to challenge the current reality of inequality and persistent poverty can be developed and nurtured in these spaces of praxis facilitated by youthwork.

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