Focus

Teaching and learning about the world in the classroom: Development education in culturally diverse settings

In this article, **Matthias Fiedler** discusses the importance of a global and social justice perspective when educating children about our rapidly changing and complex world. He states that knowledge should be viewed by teachers and students as a process or activity, rather than a product to be accumulated. Development education and intercultural education are presented as educational responses to the need to empower young children to think critically and independently about both local and global issues. He acknowledges the growing cultural diversity in Irish schools, and argues the importance of a global perspective in addressing some of the challenges of intercultural education.

Introduction

If we accept that 'good' education prepares children to critically engage with the world and society in a meaningful way, then it is important to frame education according to the needs of the 21st-century learner. But what exactly are those needs and how can educators best cater for them? In approaching this question, this article engages with two different, yet related discourses. It will first argue for the inclusion of a global and social justice perspective in the discourse about the so-called knowledge society. In a second step, it will examine the challenges of teaching development education in culturally diverse settings in Ireland. The article concludes by combing these two discourses and arguing that the integration of a global perspective in education in general can help to address some of the challenges faced by intercultural education today.

Framing 'good' education in the knowledge society

The integration of a global and social justice perspective into 21st century teaching is happening in the context of rapid change, persisting global inequalities and increasingly diversified societies. While many people worldwide experience the benefits of prosperity, millions of others live in poverty and hunger, suffering from malnutrition and with little or no access to clean water, healthcare or education, deprived of basic human rights. Nor has Ireland been immune to global trends: the benefits of recent economic success here have not been equally distributed across society. Moreover, having become one of the world's wealthiest countries, Ireland attracts immigrants from many parts of the world, bringing a rapid expansion of cultural diversity to Irish society.

These developments place special demands on the education system and emphasise the need to equip children in the 21st century with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to live and act as global citizens in an increasingly interdependent world. Drowning in information but gasping for knowledge, today's learners are confronted with a level of complexity, uncertainty and diversity that necessitates a clear orientation in schools. With modern media such as the internet, schools are no longer the main providers of information but remain important factors in relation to how this information is processed. In a changing global context schools too have to change, making it critical for Western education systems to develop new frameworks for learning in order to adapt to these changes. Practitioners and researchers in development education (DE) and intercultural education (ICE) have gone a long way over the past four decades in developing ideas and approaches as to how to address global and social justice issues in culturally diversified settings. Discussions on how education systems should adapt to changing global and societal environments should therefore be informed by these ideas and approaches.

A prominent feature of liberal literature on education in the 20th century was to emphasise the role of education in imbuing children with the values of a society and the consequent power of education to bring about societal change (Baere & Slaughter, 1993). Poststructuralist concepts like critical literacy have qualified this emphasis by highlighting the connection between education and social justice. In the preface to the first volume of *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices*, Lynn Mario De Souza, sees literacy as a cultural practice 'involving the ongoing negotiation of meaning in continuously contested sites of meaning construction' (2007:4). Approaches of this nature provide a framework for readjusting education to the rapidly changing context, both globally and in Irish society. However, before an

investigation into the frameworks can begin, it is important to clarify the changing context.

In *Catching the Knowledge Wave*, the educational researcher Jane Gilbert refers to this context as the 'knowledge society'. In line with postmodern thinking, she describes this society as one which forms 'people's social identities' (Gilbert, 2005:29) through discourses and patterns of consumptions rather than through a fixed set of values and socio-economic status. In terms of culture, she maintains:

> "We live in a culture dominated by images, sound bites, and fragmentary ideas that, because of their rapid turnover, can never settle or be properly processed. Differences, novelty, change, and choice are valued over standardisation, stability, and external authority" (Gilbert, 2005:29).

This societal 'paradigm shift', Gilbert argues, has altered our understanding of two concepts of Western civilisation upon which our education system is founded: knowledge and individuality. Our present education system 'is a product of the industrial age' (Gilbert, 2005:47), where knowledge was seen as 'a thing, a product' (2005:71) and perceived as a factual and true outcome of a thinking process that can be 'stored' in our minds and that builds the foundation of what we have learnt to know as academic disciplines. In this view, knowledge is an objective and exists independently of people as a factual 'thing' that can be accumulated, i.e. learnt over time.

This perception of knowledge results in what Gilbert calls the 'production-line model of education' (2005:68) in which learning is perceived as a 'process by which knowledge gets stored in minds, [and can be] broken down into parts and introduced as a series of steps' (2005:70). While this type of education system served its purpose during the industrial age by preparing students for industrial age society and workplaces, this is no longer the case. The focus of today's society is on 'contexts, processes, and systems in which a thing functions or is used in order to find *new* functions or uses for it' (Gilbert, 2005:30). Consequently, we have to adapt our education system to the changing realities and needs of our postmodern and post-industrialised society.

The other concept that has been affected by the knowledge society is our understanding of individuality. Again linking it to the very foundations of our present system of education and in line with postmodern political theory, Gilbert argues that 'we should move away from the one-size-fits-all model of individuality and equality…and look for new and different ways of thinking about individuality, ways that allow difference to be expressed *as* difference rather than deficiency, lack, or exclusion' (2005:109). She argues

that 'because the system is to turn out standardised products … it has no way of dealing with individuals' (2005:58). Based on the concept of ability, Gilbert describes the flaws of the present education system in most Western societies:

> "Success at school is defined via the education system's quality control checks, known as assessment, the results of which are used to sort students by ability. A high-ability student, that is, a quality product, is sent on for further processing, designed to prepare them for professional and/or managerial jobs. Those students deemed to be of lower ability are rejected by the system and allowed to drop off the production line. However, by the time they have been rejected, they will have developed basic skills and habits needed to work on one of the industrial age's many low-skill jobs" (Gilbert, 2005:59).

This vivid description of how 'product orientated' our education system is reminds us also of the fact that education is always political and that any analysis of education has to take institutionalised power relations into account. This is especially so because current discourse about the knowledge society clearly tells us that power relations are shifting. But how has education to change in order to adapt to these new realities? In many ways, schools of thought like the critical literacy movement or research and practice in DE and ICE have already paved the way for new approaches to education. It is now more a matter of convincing decision-makers in the education sector to go down that avenue.

A first step in the right direction would be to prioritise further research on key principles of DE and ICE, like the multiplicity and diversity of identities and interdependence and complexity, as important cornerstones of any new educational framework. This would entail the conceptualisation of knowledge as a process or as an activity, rather then seeing it as a product that can be accumulated by learning. An education system that takes this on board would focus more on learning and less on teaching. Such a new framework would also allow us to do justice to multiple forms of intelligence, which are summarised by physiologist Howard Gardener in eight different categories:

> "verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, physical-kinaesthetic, visual-spatial, musical, natural-environmental, interpersonal (understanding of other people) and intrapersonal (self-understanding)" (cited in Gilbert, 2005:80).

It is easy to see that our present education system only caters for some of these categories. If it is true that, as Jane Gilbert claims, 'knowledge based societies emphasise creativity and innovation' (2005:68), we therefore have to accept that the existent education systems of most European countries do not adequately prepare students for the reality of the workplace. Teamwork, problem solving, innovative ideas, change, and lifelong learning are the new words buzzing around in the marketplace. But they are much more than buzz words; they are messengers telling us of a paradigm shift that has already taken place and which most education systems have failed to acknowledge. In order to prepare children for a postmodern society in which fragmentation and diversity are common features and to prepare students for a post-industrialised marketplace in which homogeneity is replaced by plurality and interdependence, we need to develop new ways of framing education. In other words, we need an education that emphasises 'connectedness over autonomy, processes over products, and systems over details' (Gilbert, 2005:118).

DE and ICE can both be seen as educational responses to this need to empower young people to think critically, independently and systemically. With their strong emphasis on values and perceptions, they also prepare learners to participate effectively in society, both locally and globally, so as to bring about positive change for a more just and equal world. In relation to DE, these challenges are echoed in the definition of this term by the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA):

> "Development education is an educational process aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live. It seeks to engage people in analysis, reflection and action for local and global citizenship and participation. It is about supporting people in understanding, and in acting to transform the social, cultural, political and economic structures which affect their lives and others at personal, community, national and international levels" (http://www.ideaonline.ie).

Process, analysis, reflection, action, understanding and transformation – all these key words emphasise the dynamic nature of this educational approach. As such, DE contains a number of elements summarised by Roland Tormey in his introduction to *Teaching Social Justice*:

> "It [DE] is education *as* personal development, facilitating the development of critical thinking skills, analytical skills, emphatic capacity and the ability to be an effective person who can take action

to achieve desired development outcomes. It is education *for* local, national and global development, encouraging learners in developing a sense that they can play a role in working for (or against) social justice and development issues. It is education *about* development, focused on social justice, human rights, poverty, and inequality and on development issues locally, nationally, and internationally" (Tormey, 2003:2).

If we look at various definitions of what intercultural education entails, the similarities are striking. Echoing the dynamic understanding of development education, Sedano, for instance, identifies a framework in which intercultural education should operate:

"Understanding of the cultural diversity of contemporary society; increasing the possibility of communication between people of different cultures; creating positive attitudes towards cultural diversity; increasing social interaction between culturally different people and groups" (Sedano, 2002:268).

Both Sedano and Tormey refer in their definitions to another skill that is key to DE and ICE: the ability to think systemically. In a diverse and multifaceted world such as ours, where one needs to make meaningful connections between a multiplicity of things and systems, this seems to be one of the key 'survival skills'. And it is, again, an argument for a more integrated way of teaching different subjects.

Indeed, the fact that both DE and ICE transgress the traditional boundaries of academic subjects makes them a prime example of how teaching in the knowledge society may be furthered in the future. Thus, both DE and ICE should be seen as much more than 'just' additions to the existing curriculum. With their existent repertoire of teaching methodologies, research and thinking about education in general, DE and ICE should play a pivotal role in crafting an education system that is capable of educating our children for a knowledge-based society. As many practitioners in DE and ICE have argued over the years, this imperative also necessitates a further development of the research dimension in DE and ICE (Andreotti, 2006a:7). As Andreotti convincingly argues in her PhD thesis (Andreotti, 2006b), one research dimension that is yet to be fully explored in its added value for development education is that of post-colonial theory. In order to advance the theoretical grounding of DE, post-colonial theory should be seen as both a method and a tool for a critical examination of existing notions of cultural supremacy and Eurocentrism within DE. Post-colonial theory can also provide guidance to navigate the way through contested fields of

today's knowledge society by providing a framework to deal with notions of diversity and hybridity.

Finally, there is another, probably even more important, reason why DE and ICE should be at the heart of any realignment of our education system. Most of the writing and thinking about the knowledge society has so far been driven by the economic interests of the business world, and hence a capitalist marketplace. The added value of including the expertise of practitioners and researchers in DE and ICE in this process is therefore almost self-explanatory: with its commitment to values such as sustainable development, human rights and global and social justice, both DE and ICE are perfectly positioned to educate children as socially responsible global citizens. And an education that claims to be focused on the future cannot miss the opportunity to ensure that we educate our children to live a just and sustainable life as conscientious global citizens. Thus, the required change is about a different kind of education that allows us to make connections and links the way we learn and teach to the realities of our globalised world.

Development education in culturally diverse settings

One of these realities in Ireland is the experience of diversity in schools, and the question arises how these theoretical deliberations about teaching with a global and social justice perspective in the knowledge society could be translated into the realties of today's classroom. In order to find some orientation I suggest looking at two of the five key themes of intercultural education as identified in *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* (NCCA, 2005): (1) identity and belonging and (2) similarity and difference. The other three themes are: human rights and responsibilities; discrimination and equality; conflict and conflict resolution (NCCA, 2005:53f).

The examination of such themes central to interculturalism can be a first step to an informed navigation through culturally diverse settings, as they offer a conceptual framework to negotiate the local and global dimensions of these settings. In the following, they are used as lenses to chart some challenges of pedagogical practices within development education in culturally diverse classrooms.

According to recent research in development education, the themes of identity and belonging are about:

> "...knowing who one is socially, culturally and politically. It means being aware of oneself as a citizen of Irish, European and global communities. Learning about the diversity of Irish culture and heritage, and of the different identities within Irish society, helps develop awareness of and

respect for the multiplicity of identities, each equally valuable. Identities are seen to be interconnected and not mutually exclusive, each with the right to be heard and respected. Learning about the European aspect of one's identity and how languages are linked to others allows a sense of connections, while knowledge about the contribution of Irish people globally develops a wider context for the sense of identity" (DICE, 2008:29).

Making connections between 'myself and the wider world' by showing the interdependence between the local and the global is one of the cornerstones of integrating a global and social justice perspective into teaching. As we have seen in the deliberations about the knowledge society, learning about the complexity of this interdependence is a necessity for the 21st-century learner. From a global and social justice perspective, it is important to note that a sense of identity and belonging is central to the process of educating students as informed and responsible global citizens. The challenge for educators, however, is to support learning that develops a sense of identity and belonging without imparting an essentialist concept of identity. According to Katherine Zappone, 'having multiple identities allows a person to relate to different people in different situations and contexts in different ways at different times' (2003:15).

In order to be able to relate to others, we have to find our position in the world, in society and in our personal environment. At the same time, however, this position must be perceived as flexible and dynamic enough to allow real engagement with others. The teaching and learning about the complexity of different and multiple identities, as well as the fact that identities are not fixed but fluid and dynamic, is one of the big challenges for educators in their attempt to create a sense of belonging. It requires a learning process that constantly negotiates between the Self and the Other without fixing one to a position from which a dynamic and changing engagement is rendered impossible. Such an approach to teaching is asking a lot of educators but is one of the key concepts on which intercultural education should be based.

In this respect, the integration of a global dimension in intercultural education helps to address some of these challenges, as learning about the world will ultimately help to critically engage children with the world in their classroom. Using such a model to engage with identity and belonging from a global perspective should be based on a concept of 'cosmopolitan citizenship', as developed by Audrey Osler and Kerry Vincent in their study, *Citizenship and the Challenge of Global Education,* in which children are expected to learn about their own place in the world from a local, national, European and global perspective. They claim that citizenship requires a sense

of belonging because 'without such a sense it is unlikely that individuals will be able to contribute or achieve what Braithwaite referred to as 'full responsible citizenship' (Osler & Vincent, 2002:126).

There is, however, a caveat to be made in relation to the concept of citizenship as it is framed by Osler and Vincent. I have argued earlier that development education could benefit hugely from an inclusion of post-colonial theory and Osler and Vincent's concept of citizenship is a prime example of why such a theoretical framework is necessary. With its emphasis on questioning the fixed nature of Western ideas and concepts such as identity, nation, culture, knowledge or meaning, post-colonial theory offers a critical reading of notions such as global or cosmopolitan citizenship. Rather than creating a sense of belonging through an attachment to fixed entities such as the nation or a specific, clearly defined culture, post-colonial theory argues for a critical engagement with such concepts by advocating positive notions of hybridity and diversity.

The challenge for teachers to integrate a global and social justice perspective in their teaching, therefore, is not just to impart 'skills and attitudes which allow them to make connections between different contexts and situations, and to respond to change' (Osler & Vincent, 2002:124), it is also about questioning the underlying presumptions of these contexts. Learning about citizenship, therefore, is a prime example of how combining existing knowledge and methods in development education and intercultural education with premises of post-colonial theory can enhance teaching and learning about new ways of knowing in the knowledge society. It does however put an onus on individual teachers to investigate their own assumptions and presuppositions in relation to their own identity and, more importantly, about diversity.

According to Ann Louise Gilligan there is a general 'willingness and openness within the Irish education system to accommodate difference', but she claims that 'we as educators have had little opportunity to examine our own presuppositions, or reflect on our inherent conceptualisations of difference' (2007:39). I would argue that a critical engagement with difference from a post-colonial perspective should be central for any educator in today's knowledge society. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) accounts for this by promoting similarity and difference as one of the five key themes of intercultural education. And yet, as Gilligan points out, there are a number of different understandings of what difference means or entails.

Some people still see difference as a set of binary oppositions such as black/white or male/female and very often such a viewpoint is accompanied by a vision of the world divided into different entities of different values.

Another way of looking at difference is, as Gilligan notes, to put it into opposition with sameness 'that is to make little of [difference] and assimilate it into the *same*' (2007:40). The latter can often be seen as the foundation of liberal ideas of equality and fairness, in which a common set of rules, laws and regulations is defined by a majority group, for everybody to adhere to. As Gilligan points out, such a view is problematic because 'when sameness is normative the expectation can grow that those who are different must leave their difference behind and pretend to be the same, especially if you are going to "make it" in society' (Gilligan, 2007:40). With this in mind, she goes on to suggest that the 'recognition and public celebration of group difference is at the heart of building a truly equitable society' (2007:41). In order to investigate the complexity of difference, it is important to examine how this concept is linked to different group identities.

> "Different groups have different needs and groups are also made up of individuals with differing needs. However, recognising similarities means that individuals can come to know that they often have something in common with individuals from other groups. Everyone is a member of a wide variety of groups, but no one group solely defines a person. Learning about the diversity within groups helps break down the propensity to stereotype. Identities are complex and layered: and every individual has differences from others within their groups, as well as commonalties with those from different groupings. Exploring the diversity in cultures and lifestyles shows that no one way of life is 'normal'. Through observing how images are used to portray aspects of being Irish, being male or female, being Catholic or Protestant, and how others are portrayed by others, we learn to recognise bias and stereotyping images and texts" (DICE, 2008:29–30).

But there is another building block to be added to our investigation of difference. Difference does not happen abstractly; it is a reality in the interaction between different groups, and between different groups there are power differentials. An investigation that fails to analyse power relations between groups will therefore not be able to engage fully with all aspects of difference.

As with teaching and learning about multiple identities, the integration of a global perspective can facilitate a deeper understanding of the underlying premises of difference. The investigation of global inequalities is one of the building blocks of development education and there is an abundance of knowledge, resources and methods to investigate unequal power relations in the world. Combined with the theoretical framework

offered by post-colonial theory, these different forms of engagement with the Other could help to structure intercultural dialogue in the classroom. There is, however, a cautionary note to be made before relating the learning about global connections to the intercultural encounter in the classroom; a note that shows the importance of integrating the power aspect in every facet of our work in education.

Many handbooks and resources in development education offer the methods of making children from other ethnic backgrounds experts in the learning process about other cultures or global issues. Anecdotal evidence, however, shows that this method often fails, or worse, has a negative effect on the child. In a classroom with minority and majority groups, children from other cultures often aspire to be part of the mainstream, not to be seen as different, and inherently adapt assimilationist thinking. The reaction is a telling one and confirms that Western society is still based on a normative notion of sameness and that intercultural dialogue is often not a conversation between equals.

What this scenario also tells us is that, despite all the talk about the global village, unequal power relations between the global North and South, as well as the historical baggage of many centuries of conflict and colonialism, are still engrained in the intercultural encounters we have today. Ignoring or overseeing this aspect of modern life in the 21st century does not seem to be an option if we are to build a sustainable future through education. Thus, it does not seem to be enough to recognise and celebrate our differences. It is more, as Ann Louise Gilligan notes, that 'true celebration of difference should alter the power relations and challenge majority groupings to share their power and privilege in new ways' (2007:41).

Conclusion

In order for such a 'balance of power' (Gilligan, 2007:41) to develop, we have to create what I have elsewhere called 'postcolonial learning spaces' (Fiedler, 2008). Such spaces could 'facilitate a process in which the fixed nature of Western ideas and concepts such as identity, culture, knowledge or meaning are questioned by positive notions of hybridity and diversity' (Fiedler, 2008:56). Integrating a global perspective in such learning spaces can enhance our work as educators by addressing the challenges of culturally diverse settings and combine them with those of today's knowledge society. Integrating a global and social justice perspective in teaching could therefore be seen as a necessity in meeting the needs of 21st century learners in Ireland.

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Matthias Fiedler is currently Coordinator of the DICE (Development and Intercultural Education) project, an Irish Aid funded project that aims to integrate development education and intercultural education in initial teacher education in Ireland. Originally from Germany, he moved with his family to Ireland in 2001. From 2001 to 2006 he was a lecturer of German at University College Dublin. He studied German, history and anthropology at the University of Göttingen, Germany, and holds a doctorate in philosophy with a thesis on German colonial discourses in the 18th and 19th centuries. He has worked as a teacher in Germany and Cameroon. He has published articles on development education, intercultural education, postcolonial theory and German colonialism.