

# Resource Reviews

## *LEARNING TO READ THE WORLD? TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS*

Review by Fionnuala Waldron

*Learning to Read the World? Teaching and Learning about Global Citizenship and International Development in Post Primary Schools* is a multifaceted and in-depth study of development education in the context of second-level education in the Republic of Ireland. Funded by Irish Aid (Government of Ireland official development assistance programme), the study provides a timely and insightful account of the state of development education in the post-primary education sector. It is timely because engaging young people in global justice education has never been more necessary. In a context where the recent economic turmoil lessens the possibility of any meaningful engagement by the West with global issues, such as the potential of climate change to significantly and increasingly exacerbate existing global inequalities, ensuring that students experience high quality development education becomes critically important.

It is timely also because the education sector in Ireland is currently experiencing a process of change. Recent developments within Irish education such as the proposed curriculum reform at Junior Cycle level (the first three years of second level education), the extension of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and the new criteria for initial teacher education stipulated by the Teaching Council of Ireland, have created spaces in which global justice education can potentially take root. This is the time, then, to take a critical look at existing practices, to identify contradictions, opportunities, constraints and challenges. The study presented in this report provides just such a critique of practice at second-level in the Republic of Ireland. Informed by post-colonial theory and by post-structuralism, it interrogates the discourses and practices that underpin development education in curriculum documents, in the reported practices of schools and classrooms and in the experiences and views of teachers and student-teachers. Conceptually, the study is premised on a critical model of development education, one that recognises the current, as well as the historical, structural implication of the West in global injustice and relations of exploitation (Andreotti, 2006).

This qualitative study is characterised by rigour, conceptual clarity and deep analysis. Chapter one sets out the aims and objectives of the study and presents a focused review of the literature in global citizenship education which locates the research within its national and international contexts. In chapter two, the authors give a clear and comprehensive account of their research approach, the methodologies used and the rationale underpinning the selection of data sources. The research focuses primarily on development education in the context of formal education and draws on multiple sources of data: textbooks used across a range of curricular areas; lesson plans and lesson evaluations generated by student teachers on a second-level Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) initial teacher education course and interviews with classroom teachers.

The analysis of textbooks presented in the report concentrates, in particular, on three subject areas that focus most explicitly on development and on development-related themes at both Junior and Senior Cycle levels (Senior Cycle represents the final three years of second-level education): Geography, Religious Education and Civic, Social and Political Education (Social, Personal and Health Education at Junior Cycle). Texts were subjected to a recurring and iterative process of reading and interpretation through critical discourse analysis. Textbook images were analysed to identify their explicit purpose, along with the implicit messages they conveyed to the students viewing them. The views of development education embedded in student teachers' lesson plans and the practices, experiences and dispositions revealed in their subsequent evaluations were subjected to a similar process of analysis. Finally, using a purposive sampling approach to identify particular populations of teachers, twenty-six teachers currently teaching in post-primary settings were selected for in-depth interviews.

Echoing the Freirean concept of critical literacy as learning to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), the report presents an analysis that is respectful towards the aims of actors (the textbook authors, student teachers and teachers) while maintaining a stance that critiques and interrogates emerging practices and discourses. The word – in this case the textbook representations of development – is deconstructed by the authors with considerable insight and scholarship in chapters three, four and five. Informed by a deep understanding of development and development education, Bryan and Bracken excavate layers of meaning in text, sub texts and imagery, revealing intended and unintended meanings and identifying silenced voices and narratives. Critical questions relating to representation, for example, are posed with regard to a wide range of images used in the textbooks to accompany and

illustrate text, questions that go right to the heart of the equal right of all people to human dignity, to individuality and to own their own story.

Texts that fail to go beyond a discourse of modernisation that privileges a Western model of economic growth, or to *problematise* what is meant by development in the first instance, are interrogated and their ideological underpinnings laid bare. The authors present texts that facilitate rather than deconstruct binaries of ‘them’ and ‘us’, of ‘helpers’ and ‘helped’ of ‘aid givers’ and ‘aid receivers’, that conceptualise ‘action’ as individualised rather than collective, and that draw on life stories of celebrity humanitarians for inspirational role models for young people. And yet, as the study reveals, there were also examples of texts that presented a more critical view of issues of development and global injustice, that strove to represent the complexity and diversity of experiences in both the global South and the global North, demonstrating that complex ideas relating to development could be represented in texts in ways that are accessible and appropriate for students, in ways that generate dialogue and prompt reflection.

While the authors are not deterministic in their view of the role of textbooks in the construction of knowledge, they acknowledge their capacity to influence how students see the world, occupying a space named by Apple (2000) as ‘the real curriculum’. Students’ engagement with textbooks provides one of the most interesting sites for future research identified by Bryan and Bracken in the concluding chapter of the report. Drawing on Michael Apple’s distinction between dominant, negotiated and oppositional interpretations of texts, the authors suggest the need to explore further the conditions which allow students to challenge the meanings of texts, and those that constrain such critical readings.

One of the distinguishing features of this study is the space given to the voices of participant teachers and student teachers, and the insight those voices and the accompanying analysis gives into the current state of development education in Irish second level schools, and into the strengths and limitations of teacher education. In chapter six, student teacher voices are represented through the analysis of lesson plans and evaluations drawn from their teaching portfolios. The analysis presented in the report reveals a range of understandings and practices relating to development education amongst the student teachers involved in the study. In some cases, the pre-service students’ texts revealed conceptualisations of development and of development education that included critical engagement with global justice issues and participative and dialogical pedagogical practice.

The majority, however, privileged an approach which sought to promote understanding and empathy in their students through highlighting the differences between their lives and those of their peers in the Global South in deficit terms. In their analysis of this data, however, Bryan and Bracken acknowledge the positive intent of the student teachers who agreed to participate in the study along with the challenges and dilemmas which student teachers face in trying to integrate development education into their practice.

The interviews of in-service teachers conducted by the authors provide substantial data relating to current practice in schools which are explored in chapters seven, eight and nine. Teachers' views of the status of development education within formal education and within their own schools suggest the influence of school ethos, socio-economic context and leadership on the visibility of development education within individual schools. The study indicates that schools in which development education was less visible tended to prioritise the need to focus on their students' academic performance in state examinations rather than on a more holistic approach to education; development education seemed to be, in the view of such schools, a luxury their students could not afford.

The interviews with teachers were wide-ranging and the analysis presented provides considerable insight into how teachers experience global citizenship education, the understandings of development that underpin their work and the challenges they identify in teaching development education. Given that the growing diversity in Irish society is a relatively recent phenomenon it is, perhaps, not surprising that some teachers identified the increased diversity of Irish classrooms as a challenge. This diversity is experienced differently across the country, with urban disadvantaged schools more likely to have very high proportions of "newcomer" children (Smyth et al, 2009). Among the factors found by Bryan and Bracken that constrained critical engagement with development education in schools were teachers' anxieties and lack of comfort around teaching development education in multicultural contexts and the report identifies the need for intercultural education for teachers as a pre-requisite for critical development education in Irish classrooms.

A range of classroom and school practices emerge from the analysis, some of which provide students with challenging and dynamic experiences, others which are more problematic, all of which are well-intentioned. The study *problematizes*, for example, practices around North/South school partnerships which have the potential to promote mutual and reciprocal learning but which in some cases are characterised by an 'us and them' donor relationship. A

similar dynamic is identified in relation to the conceptualisation of ‘action’ as part of development education within Irish schools where student action is commonly identified with fund-raising, echoing the development-as-charity motif that characterised many of the textbooks surveyed, and working against the kind of engagement with the issues that would promote a more critical understanding.

One of the conclusions of the study, that the strength of development education within a school is dependent on the commitment and interest of individual teachers, suggests that, while progress has been made in Ireland in recent years in finding a foothold for development education within the formal curriculum, that foothold is more likely to be at the level of the individual school rather than systemic; the study also found that despite opportunities to integrate development education across the curriculum, teachers perceived those opportunities to be marginal, underdeveloped and inadequate. Development education then, at curricular and school level, occupies spaces that are precarious, vulnerable and replete with contradictions. In many cases, as the authors remind us, teachers are very aware of the contradictions that are inherent in their practice, and would welcome the possibility of resolving them.

The recommendations arising from this report for key stakeholders in education in the Republic of Ireland, and for future research, are well-grounded, substantial and persuasive. They include, for example, recommendations relating to the need for teacher education programmes to promote sustained engagement with development education and to enable student teachers and in-service teachers to develop critical literacy skills. State agencies, such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, are advised to engage with textbook publishers to promote more critical engagement with development and to ensure that the images produced in the textbooks are coherent with the goals of development education. Schools are urged to decouple development education from fundraising and to provide contexts within which the dominant narratives embedded in ‘official knowledge’ can be challenged and deconstructed (Apple, 2000). Should the recommendations outlined in the final chapter of this report be implemented, Irish students would experience an approach to global education that was critical and open-ended, that interrogated received narratives, that *problematized* existing global structures and relations and that afforded opportunities for students to reflect on their own positionality.

In conclusion, while this report addresses the specific context of second-level education in the Republic of Ireland, it identifies significant issues and questions that have international relevance. The study deserves a wide

readership and I recommend it to you. The clarity and reflexivity of the writing, the honouring of research participants' voices, the criticality of its analysis and the substantial nature of its findings, make it a compelling and highly readable text, and one that may challenge your thinking about development, about education, and about how you read the world.

Audrey Bryan and Meliosa Bracken (2011) *Learning to Read the World? Teaching and Learning about Global Citizenship and International Development in Post-Primary Schools*, Dublin: Irish Aid/Identikit.

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### References

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For information on the formal sector developments discussed in this article, see

[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/PostPrimary\\_Education/Junior\\_Cycle/Junior\\_cycle\\_developments/](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/PostPrimary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Junior_cycle_developments/) and <http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/>.

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