The National Youth Development Education Programme and the 2005 European Year of Citizenship

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“It is better to be part of a great whole than to be the whole of a small part”.

Frederick Douglass

2005 was dedicated by the Council of Europe as the European Year of Citizenship through Education. Ireland’s formal activities under this dedicated year were carried out under the banner of ‘Citizenship2005.ie’. The Year in Ireland, which was supported by the Department of Education and Science and Irish Aid (a directorate of the Department of Foreign Affairs) provided great scope for a ‘gathering in’ of the work that has been ongoing in citizenship education for some time now across education sectors, education jurisdictions and education levels. A concluding conference in September 2006 will be followed by the publication of a report providing a compilation of this work in Ireland and neighbouring jurisdictions.

The Year has provided a tremendous opportunity to develop a comprehensive panoramic view of citizenship education and its constituent parts across sectors and levels of education. Only in recent years has reference to citizenship education come into common parlance whilst readers will be very aware that constituent forms of citizenship education such as development education have long been established. The term citizenship education is used generally as an umbrella term for an array of ‘types of education’ that encourage human flourishing and that involve developing the capacity of learners to both enjoy rights and exercise responsibilities in various types of communities from the local to the global and endeavours to ensure that people have the ability and opportunity to participate in every aspect of the life of a society.

Citizenship education encompasses the methodologies and practices espoused within development education - it is based on active learning, exploration and reflection and where possible involves people who are best placed to inform on relevant issues and topics. When one looks from the panoramic view at the various sectors and levels of education whether that be at the youth sector or the formal education sector, the community sector
or the teacher education sector it quickly becomes apparent that very often there is enormous similarity in the issues and challenges facing the policy makers and in particular, the practitioners, of these forms of education. For example, issues such as developing the capacity and confidence of practitioners in addressing issues that may bring up sensitivities within the context of interculturalism.

Often the issues are less complex and revolve around getting access to relevant resources and training; or simply finding the time in an already overcrowded programme or timetable for social justice type education. As has been referred to previously the Year has given us an opportunity to view these common threads and issues and to make recommendations to policy as to how best to address these. From our part the Year has been trying to address these commonalities by bringing the formal and non-formal sectors and different education levels together through cross-sector activities.

Small grants were advertised and awarded to various organisations, groups and schools across the sectors and levels. A major international conference held in Dublin in November 2005 (the sixth annual conference on Education for Citizenship in England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) also provided the opportunity to not only bring neighbouring practitioners together but also to bring the different sectors and levels involved in citizenship education together to enrich each other’s practice and experience.

Other activities have supported this theme and so we were delighted to work with the National Youth Council of Ireland in providing a bridge between the non-formal youth sector and the formal education sector at second level. This was an attempt to bring practice in development education across sectors ‘together’ or as Douglass put it to “be part of a great whole than to be the whole of a small part”.

Every year for the past number of years the National Youth Development Education Programme produces excellent development education resources for use during One World Week and beyond. Up to now the packs have been developed for use within the non-formal youth sector and therefore make no explicit reference to the formal education curriculum. That said, numerous teachers use the resources to great effect in the classroom. In an effort to facilitate the use of this resource by a greater number of teachers the Youth Development Education Programme worked with ‘Citizenship2005.ie’ in promoting the use of Making a Difference: Young People Participating to Change their World within the formal second-level education sector. In doing so, this venture directly addressed three of the four objectives of the Year, namely:
• to raise awareness of how education, both formal and non-formal, can contribute to the development of democratic citizenship and participation
• to strengthen commitment to Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education
• to encourage the development of initiatives and partnerships that provide access to best practice and sharing of knowledge.

The theme of the pack is as the title suggests, centred on ‘youth participation’ and how young people are participating locally to tackle poverty globally. Selected as usual by young people the theme is perfect for addressing issues of citizenship within the formal curriculum. In order to support teachers in using the resource book of activities a special insert has been developed by curriculum support personnel in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. They have endeavoured to outline the curriculum links and benefits for teachers and students in using these activities in subjects such as civic, social and political education, geography, religion and local and global citizenship; and in Leaving Certificate Applied and Transition Year programmes. The pack was promoted during One World Week from (19 - 27 November 2005) and has been disseminated directly to teachers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and by curriculum support teams.

It is hoped that this small venture in bringing the formal and non-formal education sectors together will provide a platform from which continued bridging will emerge and whereby experience and expertise can be shared across education sectors.

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