

COMMON GROUND: CONNECTING COMMUNITY RELATIONS, DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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“The thinking of those at the broad focus of each field (development education, human rights education, peace education and environmental education) is increasingly marked by a shift away from a compartmentalized view of reality to an acceptance of the interconnectedness of all things and what has been called the permeability of boundaries” (Greig, Pike & Selby, 1997:30).

This article aims to initiate a debate to help practitioners map out the common ground and connections between community relations, development education and human rights. The investigation is based on conversations from a seminar that invited key practitioners from relevant fields to discuss what these concepts meant from their perspective, what the underpinning values were and where the connections were placed. Input was given to the group from three different perspectives: community relations practice in Northern Ireland (NI), the trade union global solidarity movement and the formal education system in NI. Key findings from the discussion will be documented below, however, no names will be provided.

The speakers gave a range of examples that demonstrated how the three concepts of community relations, development education and human rights are connected in practice. The trade union movement was highlighted as a case that can be connected to all three concepts as it is an international movement that promotes global solidarity and shared values between people all over the world. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), for example, provides training courses for its members in the areas of human rights, trade, poverty, community relations and women and development. Unions affiliated to Congress also promote international linking and exchange to tackle common issues faced worldwide and share ideas and experiences. The boycotting of South African goods during the apartheid era by local Dunnes Stores’ workers in Ireland was cited as local example of global solidarity.

Community relations work in Northern Ireland previously focused on promoting good relations between the two main traditions in NI. Seminar

delegates discussed how issues such as globalisation, war and increased migration have widened the remit of community relations work and recently there has been a deliberate inclusion of issues around gender equality and racism.

Within the formal education system in NI, the local and global citizenship curriculum is constructed around the following core themes: equality and social justice; diversity and inclusion; human rights and social responsibility; and democracy and active participation (CCEA, 2003). The revised curriculum at Key Stage 3 has mutual understanding, cultural awareness, ethical awareness and education for sustainable development as key elements. The attitudes and dispositions to be developed through the revised curriculum include personal responsibility, concern for others, community spirit, tolerance, respect and integrity. All three concepts - community relations, development education and human rights - share values and feature prominently in the revised curriculum.

Other examples of connecting themes included trading patterns, economics, climate change, migration, war and the notion that the world is a shared space where we are all dependent on each other. An analogy of a boomerang was used to highlight the role of individuals as global citizens living in an interdependent world.

The seminar participants raised many dilemmas:

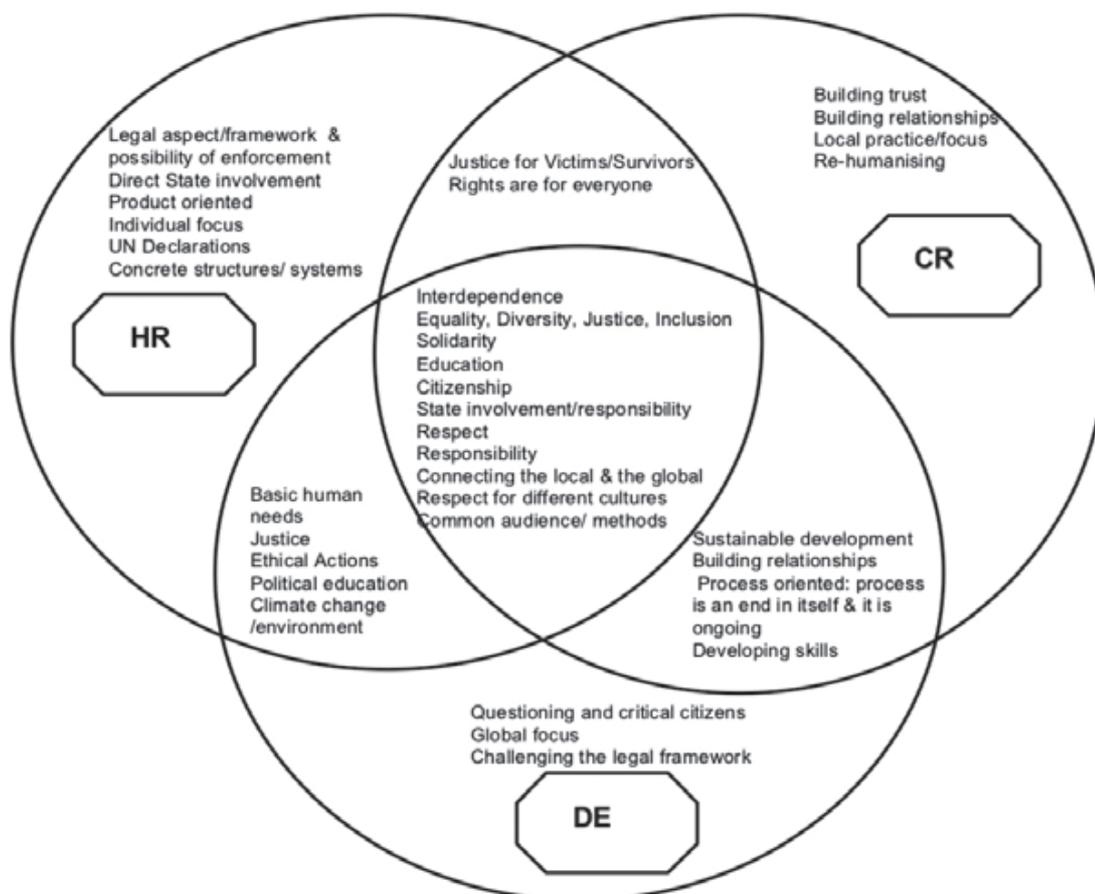
- The different language and terminology used in the three sectors was a major barrier and there was a lack of a shared definition for each of the concepts. For example, the term ‘development education’ was perceived as being misleading and did not represent what it actually was about. This can lead to misunderstandings when debating these issues.
- The compartmentalisation of concepts and practice can leave room or gaps for the avoidance of contentious issues. The specific case of community relations work with victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland was raised. Human rights and justice are perceived as very contentious in this context and have often been avoided as a result. It is unclear what category the work with victims and survivors falls into and it is at risk of falling between concepts and not being addressed.
- It was recognized that there were huge benefits to be gained from working across these fields and sharing learning, and as one participant suggested:

“We have an enormous moral responsibility to join up thinking in order that what we are trying to do has a context and a bigger picture...and is grounded in the global human well-being and dignity of all”.

However, the challenges of developing links between the sectors is not to be underestimated given that many individuals and organisations work in isolation and the practical problems that operating outside a specialist field can sometimes present.

The practitioners present were asked to explore the concepts (human rights, development education and community relations) by articulating their underlying values and identifying common areas/themes. Please see the vend diagram (Fig. 1) for findings:

Fig 1. Vend diagram of development education, community relations and human rights.



After this exercise the participants were surprised at how much these concepts had in common and how difficult it was to find values and issues that were unique to each concept. There was a strong recognition that these concepts were inextricably connected while retaining varying degrees of emphasis on different aspects of practice.

The central area of the Vend diagram contains some of the overlapping areas or ‘common ground’ between all three concepts. Interdependence was a recurring theme throughout the debate, emphasising the mutual dependence of the concepts and the fact that they can not be viewed in isolation. For all three concepts a core set of underlying values were visible, including: equality, justice, diversity, inclusion, respect, solidarity and responsibility. These common values form a solid foundation for further debate and practice in this area with the seminar participants recognising the common methods employed in all three fields. These methods and pedagogy may be informed through the underlying values of group learning/sharing, participation, action, reflective practice, inclusion and respect.

Citizenship was included in the middle of the Vend diagram and could be viewed as an umbrella concept that includes human rights, development education and community relations. The model developed by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2003) for ‘local and global citizenship’ could be used as a theoretical template to connect community relations (via diversity and inclusion), human rights (via human rights and social responsibility) and development education (via equality and social justice, and democracy and active participation). A model of citizenship that creates informed, critical, empowered citizens who have the confidence, skills, values and will to participate in positive change processes is vital to reach the common goal for all three concepts.

The seminar and this article aim to initiate a debate on the interconnectedness of the concepts and to identify a common goal or aim for the three sectors. How can we include other related concepts such as citizenship education, education for sustainable development, education for mutual understanding and community development into this debate? What are the practicalities of working holistically and joining up practice as well as thinking? Is there a natural order of practical steps that we can follow for this work? Should the journey start with the self, challenging one’s values, beliefs and actions? As McCully suggested, for this debate to develop:

“There is a need to challenge one’s own vested interests. For example, community relations, citizenship and human rights practitioners will be

labelled as such and will start to defend [their] own territory without realising that we are moving in the same direction” (McCully, 2004).

Should you wish to respond to this article or contribute to this debate please contact Helen Henderson at helen.henderson@childrenincrossfire.org.

References

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