

MAPPING THE PAST, CHARTING THE FUTURE: A REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION RESEARCH IN IRELAND AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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In this article, education consultant **Annette Honan** reflects upon the outcomes of a recent study commissioned by Irish Aid which examined the Irish government's engagement with development education (DE) and carried out a meta-analysis of DE research in the island of Ireland. The article points to significant progress in engaging interest in global justice issues over the past decade but also points to significant gaps and opportunities in relation to future research that should not be ignored by the development education sector.

Introduction

A valuable piece of research, entitled *Mapping the Past, Charting the Future* (Bracken, Bryan & Fiedler, 2011), was published earlier this year. The research is broken into two distinct components – the first looking at the history of the Irish government's involvement in development education (DE) and the second providing a meta-analysis of existing development education research in Ireland (north and south) aimed at providing 'a baseline from which future research strategy and priorities can be identified'. This article provides a personal perspective on some of the main findings of the meta-analysis, considers its implications for the development education sector, and makes some suggestions that might inform future practice.

The meta-analysis is based on 57 development education studies produced between 2000 and 2010 and therefore does not claim to provide an exhaustive survey of all the DE research undertaken in this period. However it does provide useful insights into the current state of development education in Ireland and as such the picture it paints is one that cannot be ignored by those of us interested in promoting a global justice agenda within education.

What's the state of Development Education?

Broadly, the report shows that there is a lot of interest in global justice issues and teachers generally express support for bringing the social justice dimension into teaching. However they also point to barriers that inhibit a deeper and more comprehensive engagement with development education. These barriers can be broadly summarised as attitudinal (I don't feel confident enough to teach

about complex and controversial issues), structural (I feel education for justice has a low status within the system) and curricular (I don't have time for this due to the pressures of time and an over-crowded curriculum). The report also suggests that 'the presence of development education within the classroom appears largely dependent upon the willingness or capacity of individual teachers to bring development in'.

So, what are the key messages coming through in the research in relation to each sector of education? While research in relation to development education within early childhood and primary education settings is scant, this report suggests that 'young children have the capacity to engage with global and justice issues provided the strategies employed are appropriate to their age and cognitive development, and that they are capable of empathy with others' feelings and needs when presented in familiar realms'. On the other hand, the research also suggests that young children still carry stereotyped and charity-based views about 'poor people' and 'developing countries' and there is limited evidence of critical thinking amongst younger children. While there is a lot of research which looks at the nature and status of development education within primary and post-primary education, the picture it presents is at best mixed. Some research highlights the gains and opportunities for development education within the curriculum and affirms the fact that 'development education has come in from the cold'. Other research concludes that there is little evidence to suggest that development education is recognised as an integral part of students' formal educational experiences'. In fact, post-primary teachers surveyed in one piece of research 'tended to see development education as an underdeveloped or underexploited dimension of the curriculum and ultimately 'up to individual teachers whether they chose to integrate development themes or not'. Research findings also suggest that development education opportunities (within post-primary) 'are hindered by a system that marginalises global themes, privileges recall and outputs over learning, and provides little time or space for self-reflective interrogation'.

Looking to pre-service teachers' attitudes and experience of development education provides little comfort as the report states that pre-service teachers 'seem to possess a somewhat superficial understanding of the causes of global poverty – understandings that are reflective of "soft" rather than critical versions of development education'. They noted that while 'the majority of student teachers appeared open to and supportive of integrating development education into their teaching practice and made considerable effort to create interesting and detailed lesson plans...difficulties did emerge around

student teachers' willingness or capacity to deviate from standard curricular content or implement active and participatory methodologies'.

Finally, the survey highlights the dearth of research into development education within the non-formal sector with most research in the adult and community sector focused on attitudes and perceptions of development issues rather than examining the practice of development education itself within the non-formal sector.

Some personal reflections on the research

So the meta-analysis presents at best a mixed picture and begs the question what has been achieved in embedding development education within Irish education over the past 50 years? It also challenges us to consider new and more effective ways of working. This is not to devalue the real progress and impact that *has* been achieved particularly in the following key areas.

Inroads in the curriculum

Opportunities for engaging in global education are clearly stitched into the formal curriculum from early childhood to senior cycle education. Of equal importance is the fact that the vision and values of education being articulated at policy level are consistent with the values of development education such as equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy. These values underpin the proposed 'Framework for a new Junior Cycle Education' (NCCA) and are also evident in the 'Early Childhood Curriculum Framework' (Aistear).

Initial teacher education

All colleges of education and education departments within universities are now offering courses in citizenship and/or development education to pre-service teachers. However the research suggests that many teachers starting out on their career are more concerned with sustaining employment than with innovating. They therefore may be reluctant to deviate from the standard curriculum and ways of teaching and hence 'teacher development on such areas as development education may work best within an in-service rather than a pre-service context'.

Increased professionalism of the development education sector

Those engaged in development education are now becoming increasingly skilled and professional in their work and are also working more effectively together to share good practice, influence policy and evaluate the work. The role of IDEA in supporting the sector in these areas must be acknowledged. However, these

and other achievements must be considered side by side with the challenges that remain. I suggest that the three main challenges are as follows: development education is still not regarded as the core business of most schools; development education is still not understood as a process that will enhance classroom learning and school culture; and teaching and learning methodologies in Irish classrooms are not generally conducive to educating for global citizenship (Cosgrove et al, 2011 and Gilleece et al, 2009).

Implications arising from the research

In order to move from a situation whereby development education is dependent on the goodwill and interest of individual teachers I propose that a new model of professional development is needed – one that involves working on a whole-school approach or failing that with teams of teachers within a school. Schools must be seen as sites for change ('Leading and Supporting Change', NCCA, 2010) and supported with over time to see how development education content and methodologies can enhance all aspects of teaching and learning. The old model of plucking individual teachers out of school for a few hours and expecting long-term impact must be questioned. Embedding development education within schools (both at the level of the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum) requires a long-term commitment and sustained support over time.

Teachers need time to try out new ideas and methodologies, reflect on what they are doing, talk to their peers, and then go back to the classroom and try it out again (NCCA, Key skills reports 2009; 2010). Through a process of reflective practice they can become more skilled and confident in development education and recognise the benefits for themselves and their students. In addition, I propose that the focus of professional development needs to shift from providing resources or information to teachers to building up their repertoire of teaching methodologies and skills. Finally, I suggest that DE practitioners need to take every opportunity to influence the changes in curriculum and in education more broadly that are coming down the line. There is a genuine desire to engage the partners in education in decisions relating to future developments. The development education sector needs to be involved in these consultations to point out the moral purpose of education as one of social transformation and counter the positions which promote an instrumentalist view of education.

On a positive note, I think the time is ripe for change as many recent consultations point to the need for a fundamental renewal of teaching and

learning. Teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders in education all agree that change is needed. I believe that development education practitioners are well placed to support schools and the wider system in working towards a different vision of education.

Conclusion

While this research study has provided useful ‘food for thought’ it also points to gaps and opportunities in relation to future research. One obvious gap is in the area of adult and community development education, as very little DE research has focused on this sector to date. Research tools need to be developed which can be used by all groups engaged in development education to gather baseline information on participants’ attitudes, practices and understanding. These baselines could then be followed up to assess the short or medium term impact of the different educational interventions. In the context of groups increasingly needing to demonstrate impact and justify funding for their work it seems to me that such research tools could have a broad use. On a broader level, I would suggest that the ways in which evidence is gathered needs to be broadened. Surveys provide one useful tool but perhaps there has been an over-reliance on questionnaires and interviews in development education research. It would be useful to gather evidence of what *is* working through videos and case-studies.

The overall conclusion that I would draw from surveying the research is that if we want different results then we cannot keep doing things the same way. If we are brave enough to take up this challenge of working differently then when a review of progress in development education is undertaken in 2020 we can all look forward to a more positive picture emerging.

References

Aistear is the ‘Early Childhood Curriculum Framework’ for children aged for birth to six years in Ireland. Further details are available from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) web site at the following link: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education, Bracken, Meliosa, Bryan, Audrey, Fiedler, Matthias (2011) *Mapping the Past, Charting the Future – A Review of the Irish Government’s Engagement with Development Education and a Meta-Analysis of Development Education Research in Ireland*, Irish Aid, Limerick.

Cosgrove, J, Gilleece, L & Shiel, G (2011), *International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS): Report for Ireland*, Dublin, Educational Research Centre. Gilleece, L, Shiel, G, Perkins, R, & Proctor, M (2009), *Teaching and Learning International Survey (2008): National Report for Ireland*, Dublin, Educational Research Centre. Both of these reports suggest that teachers in Ireland made much less use of what they called ‘student-oriented

practices' and active learning than teachers in other countries. These activities related to group work, students planning their own learning, and conducting extended projects.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2010) 'Leading and Supporting Change in Schools - A discussion paper' available at http://www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Consultative_Documents/Leading_and_Supporting_Change_in_Schools_A_Discussion_Paper.pdf

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009: 2010). To access documents on how successfully employed methodologies have helped to embed key skills in the teaching community visit: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/PostPrimary_Education/Senior_Cycle/Key_Skills/

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009: 2010). An example of a recent consultation pointing to the need for a fundamental renewal of teaching and learning is the recently published 'Summary of Junior Cycle Consultation Findings' available at [http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Junior_cycle_developments/Report_on_JC_consultation .pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Junior_cycle_developments/Report_on_JC_consultation.pdf)

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