

A CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE: CONNECTING VALUE, VALUES AND EVALUATION

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Introduction

For the past several years I have worked as a drama and creative writer facilitator under the auspices of Poetry Ireland's 'Writers in Schools Development Education through Literature Project'. The project, which works in both primary and secondary schools, seeks to highlight global issues like child labour and Fairtrade. In this article, I will describe in detail how the project has been delivered at primary level. I will illustrate how a concept such as Fairtrade encompasses abstract ideas such as 'value', and how it can be handled in a classroom setting in a way that empowers children. I will touch briefly on the way in which the 'values' we hold as a society feed into our work and outline methods of evaluation that both reflect and complement the values extolled in development education work.

Finding an appropriate way to introduce the concept of Fairtrade

Introducing broad and complex concepts like 'fairness' and 'value' in the classroom is challenging, especially when working with young children, in this case age between 8-11 years. It is important not to overwhelm them at the initial stage with complex terminology, or to draw them passively into one side of the discussion despite the personal perspective of the educator. The intention from the outset must be for the young people to become critical explorers, to make their own judgements, but to still retain their 'child's' perspective. In addition, it is important to remember that the intention of this project in particular is not to offer pre-packed knowledge, but to elicit a creative response through poetry, song and drama, where the pupils and the educator are learning together.

To begin a discussion about Fairtrade, the young people are asked what they already know about the subject. There are usually a few in the class who are well informed, and their responses demonstrate that they have parents who are active supporters of Fairtrade. However, most know little or nothing about it which requires their involvement in a lesson to separate the

two words: 'fair' and 'trade'. We suggest other words for trade, such as 'swap' and 'exchange'. These are active verbs, which can be attached to concrete nouns like sweets or compact discs (CDs). We encounter more difficulty in suggesting synonyms for 'fair', which is a more abstract concept. Does this word mean something that is rational, reasonable, acceptable or justifiable? To elicit a reaction, I pick up a pencil and offer to exchange it for one of the children's possessions. They will immediately respond that they do not want to make the exchange, as they feel their item is worth more than the pencil. From here, I can introduce the concepts of 'worth' and 'value'. At this point the whole class is usually involved, each student contributing their own idea of what makes one thing more valuable than another.

Another approach to the issue of value is to ask them how much are *you* worth? When extended to the whole class, they laugh at the absurdity of the question; it's obvious they are priceless. But is everybody valued equally? We discuss, for example, the value of a child's life in developing countries. As the discussion continues, I realise that not only is 'value' being understood at a level beyond price and commodity, we are also revealing and consolidating values that are prevalent in our society.

Going Bananas!

At this stage, I turn to something more familiar in explaining the trading system, telling them about the journey a banana makes from plantation to shop. They are genuinely taken aback at both the extent of the journey and the disparity in the incomes of each contributor along the way, from worker, plantation owner, shipper, wholesaler through to retailer, especially considering the variety of labour involved for each. They are also shocked at the fact that some of the unpleasant and dangerous work is done by children, and allows us to introduce the topic of child labour and how much children's experiences vary in different cultures around the world.

To actively engage the students, I have them act out the bananas' journey by playing the parts of the different contributors. This offers them an opportunity to experience and articulate contrasting perspectives. Then they repeat the journey, this time with the bananas as actual characters. We approach it in a variety of ways, for example, bananas in conversation (one fairly traded/one not fairly traded), or using speech, song and dance. Such involved and creative methods helps keep up the levels of interest and

enthusiasm while exploring the wide variety of topics that are involved in the general issue of Fairtrade. Finally, they perform a series of improvisations with bananas singing protest songs, escaping from lorries, etc. We turn these improvisations into poems, stories and songs and publish them as a class 'book' for Concern's National Literacy Day. In terms of 'values', it's significant that the children introduce their own concepts of fairness without any prompting from me. Later, when we take part in Concern's 'Eat a Fairtrade banana day', they feel strongly that they have made an informed decision.

From values to evaluation – Teachers as witness

Working in the ways I have described here avoids the pitfall of favouring students who are more articulate or academic. It promotes a model of learning where each child and their contribution is 'valued' so that even those who find it hard to articulate their feelings about the issue in either a written or oral presentation can still participate. It allows everyone an opportunity to explore issues of value and fairness, firstly from their 'child's' perspective, then by taking a more reflective position, and finally by turning their experience into a creative piece, whether it be song, dance, drama, or a visual representation.

However teachers will require support in objectively evaluating this kind of developmental learning. What are the criteria? How can achievement and progress be assessed? How does a teacher assess or even recognise the learning potential in a group of children playing a bunch of bananas? Instead of 'grading' these activities, educators have to rely on something I call 'teacher as witness'. The teacher's sensitivity and awareness of what is happening is crucial. In evaluating development education, it's vital that schools and teachers apply the same 'values' that development education extols, such as co-operation over competitiveness.

Drama in the curriculum (and associated training) enhances opportunities for teachers to conduct the kind of open-ended, creative projects I have outlined, where both teacher and pupil learn together. While privileging the role of 'teacher as witness' and allowing for the subjective aspect of each individual teacher's approach to this type of learning and development, there are still numerous criteria which can be isolated for consideration in evaluating achievement and progress both for the individual

and the group. These include the participant's capacity to: be imaginative: to articulate their opinions through physical, oral, written and visual representation; to co-operate and work together; and to reflect on outcomes in a way which extends the learning process. While the teacher can isolate these factors in assessing achievement and progress, it is important to emphasise that these elements continually overlap and work off each other during the learning process.

Conclusion

Working on projects such as those I've described above, the need to identify and connect with specific values such as fairness, justice and equality becomes apparent. These 'values' fit in with the broad values promoted (at least in theory) in primary schools: values of kindness, politeness, mutual tolerance, unselfishness etc. Primary level children seem to value these concepts highly, but sometimes as the child gets older these basic human notions are devalued, replaced or compromised by conflicting values such as success versus failure and losers versus winners. In my own experience this is especially true at Senior Cycle, as pupils enter the exam system and values of competitiveness and success take over.

Knowledge is seen as something to be acquired in order to gain an advantage over competitors, and survival of the fittest is the environment in which many people operate, professionally and academically. A main concern is that many schools, due to multiple pressures, will shy away from a form of learning which is more complex, and therefore more difficult to monitor and evaluate, or which does not have prepared 'objective' criteria for assessment. The potential for development education to contribute to the overall development of a child is enormous. In terms of self-confidence and awareness, of instilling values of fairness and equality, and of exposing students to the world of global politics which demands joined-up thinking between history, geography and various other subjects, the lessons of development education are priceless.

References

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Pete Mullineaux lives and works in Galway, Ireland. He facilitates drama and creative writing in schools and other contexts, specialising in devising plays around development themes. In October 2009 he will provide an input into the Babaro International Festival for Children and present a paper at the Development Education Research Network (DERN) conference to be held at the National University of Ireland Galway. He has contributed previously to *Policy and Practice*, Issue 6, on Education for Sustainable Development. Pete has written plays for the stage and RTE radio and recently published a poetry collection, *A Father's Day* (Salmon Poetry, 2008). He is also the author of two learning resources for teachers linking drama with development education.