“What makes a global teacher?” Examining student responses to development and intercultural education

Barbara O’Toole

Introduction

The need to prepare teachers for working in multicultural contexts in an increasingly globalised world is one that all of us working in education would acknowledge as being of significance. It is something that particularly exercises us on the Development and InterCultural Education (DICE) Project, as we are concerned with both development and intercultural education.

DICE works with student teachers in the four Dublin colleges of education (primary) and has links with Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. The Project delivers courses in development and intercultural education, some of which are elective while other courses are a compulsory component of an Inclusive Education Module in Years 2 and 3 of the BEd in the Trinity-associated colleges (Coláiste Mhuire, Froebel College and The Church of Ireland College of Education). This paper will explore some of the challenges that we have encountered in our work in initial teacher education, focusing on our input with student teachers, and will also draw on some of our experiences of working with college lecturers and practising teachers. The paper will also describe some of the responses that we have developed to these challenges.

Challenges and responses in relation to content and focus

Within preparing teachers for working in an increasingly globalised world, there are two competing demands on course design and on the focus of delivery. Mainly that there is a danger that the urgency of ‘local’ needs can push an exploration of the ‘global’ off the agenda or down the list of priorities. The immediacy of these needs means that it is critical for DICE to have a response to these issues as they arise but also to consider the project’s primary task of promoting both development and intercultural education.

One of the on-going challenges therefore, is to ensure that preparation for the ‘multicultural context’ does not take precedence over a development education perspective. There can be a tension between the dual demands of
‘development education’ and ‘intercultural education’, and the perceived urgency of the intercultural agenda can heighten this tension.

In acknowledgement of that tension when DICE commissioned a Literature Review in 2005, it was entitled *Global and Justice Perspectives in Education*. Early on it emerged that little, if any, literature used the focus or concept of ‘global and justice perspectives’. Rather, literature focused more specifically on either development/global, intercultural or citizenship education. We identified ten core themes in the field of development/global; intercultural and citizenship education:

1. Development
2. Sustainable development
3. Interdependence
4. Cultural identity and diversity
5. Human rights and responsibilities
6. Discrimination, racism, prejudice
7. Equality and social justice
8. Peace, conflict and conflict resolution
9. ‘State of the world’ - geographic, economic, political, social, and environmental knowledge
10. Migration

By working with these ten core themes, practitioners are drawing the strands of development and intercultural education together under a common framework in which the local and the global become intertwined and interconnected.

Another response lies in course design. In recognition of the immediacy of students’ concerns with local issues we begin the course with a module exploring just that. Immediate concerns can be used as a ‘way in’ and also as a means of underlining the importance of this work with students. Courses or sessions then move beyond the local and extend into looking at development education themes such as exploring the concept of ‘development’; teaching about distant localities; teaching about ‘natural’ disasters; human rights education and so on. However, while this approach provides an entry point with students, it is also possible that the interest of many students will not extend past practical and immediate classroom concerns of incorporating global awareness into their teaching. This leads to the all-important question, “what makes a global teacher?”.

The examples that follow are drawn from evaluations on completion of an eight to ten-week module delivered to Year 2 BEd students. Often students drew from their Teaching Practice experiences. Student comments
on this first session in their end-of-term evaluations included:

“It is a good idea to have clear information on various cultural differences and I learned a lot about the various cultures in Ireland to aid me when teaching children of various cultures”.

“As Ireland is changing so rapidly, it is important that teachers promote equality to the next generation”.

“I wouldn’t have really thought there was a major need for intercultural education so this lecture opened my eyes to the need for this type of education”.

Classroom application: The development of skills

The following comments highlight a point often made by students on DICE courses. That is that the classroom application of ideas and concepts is of paramount importance to them and is often the deciding factor about whether they have found a session useful or not. For example:

Teaching about ‘natural’ disasters:

“....I thought it could be very useful topic to integrate into History, Geography, SPHE, English”.

Simulation activity on food/population distribution globally:

“...I will try this activity during my next TP [teaching practice] as I think it conveys the message of unequal distribution of food very clearly”.

“The game was great, very hands-on and useful to use in the classroom, really showed powerfully the reality of the division of food”.

While this is a very small sample of student evaluations, and certainly more structured investigation would be required over a period of time, it is consistent with feedback that DICE regularly receives from students on completion of courses. It is often apparent that what matters first and foremost to students is the potential applicability of the material to teaching; if they can use it in the classroom then it is valuable. Whether that relates to
development or intercultural education appears to be of secondary concern, for example:

“A lot of ideas given for an ‘ideal world’ but not many for teaching practice which is priority for all at the moment” (Overall course comment).

“(I would like) more designing and planning our own lessons and approaches” (Overall course comment).

A student may respond very positively to particular practical aspects of a course, but a longitudinal study would be required in order to see if this interest was maintained past the particular lesson activity or topic. Furthermore, DICE cannot shape a course purely around the practical application of ideas. Development and intercultural education is concerned with knowledge and attitudes as much as with skills, so it is imperative that we build students’ knowledge base in courses. This is despite feedback that shows that theoretical discussions are often less popular with students:

“Found it hard to relate the ideas to the classroom” (Feedback on ‘Exploring Culture’).

“Interesting, surprising facts; not classroom usable though!” (Feedback on ‘Development’ session).

“Found that it was too theoretical too soon.” (Feedback on ‘Exploring Culture’).

Attitudinal development: “What makes a ‘global teacher’?”

In addition to knowledge and skills, the third aspect which DICE courses aim to develop is attitudinal. This leads back to the earlier question: “What makes a global teacher?” In other words, why is it that some students will go on to incorporate a global and justice dimension as an integral part of their teaching, while another student who may have attended the same courses, will see this aspect as peripheral or irrelevant to their practice? The answer possibly lies in this third area of attitudes. The motivational factor is the key to whether a student will a) build on her /his knowledge base in relation to development and intercultural education and b) acquire the necessary skills to incorporate the perspective into teaching. Some of the students will have learnt interesting activities which they may use as one-off or sporadic
exercises. Others will go on to develop an approach to their entire teaching career.

Some of the material in the Literature Review Global and Justice Perspectives in Education (2005) is useful to consider in the context of motivation and attitude. The literature review presented and analysed Irish and international literature on the factors which influence teachers’ incorporation of global and justice perspectives in their teaching. As would be expected, whole-school issues such as ethos and leadership figure strongly as facilitating factors, as do aspects such as time, make-up of the student body, and the availability of resources.

The DICE literature review has found that certain life experiences can influence a teacher’s value system and how they incorporate this into their professional environment. This in turn can determine the extent to which their teaching methodologies reflect global and justice perspectives. The researcher cites her own research with practising teachers (Fitzgerald, 2003) to highlight this:

“For those teachers who did not have the same life experiences, they did not exhibit the same awareness of social injustice, or a desire to bring about change in society...The underlying cause of this differentiation between the two groups of teachers was found to lie in a differing value system between the teachers, arising from having different personal experiences in life” (Fitzgerald, 2003, quoted in Literature Review, DICE 2005).

Nevertheless, we cannot assume that the only students who will go on to incorporate a global dimension are those who already have a disposition towards these values as they commence their BEd. We must also hope that our input will have a positive impact on the attitudes of many students, including those not previously disposed. The attitudinal component of DICE courses therefore remains of central importance as well as being one of the most challenging aspects of the work. Part of that challenge is the need to engage students at an emotional as well as at a cognitive level, often within the constraints of relatively short courses.

Is emotional engagement possible over one term, with students meeting in large groups for one hour each week? Interestingly, some of the feedback would suggest that some attitudinal changes were occurring:

“I think that if anybody had any prejudices before going to these lectures, the lectures would probably open their minds more...” (Overall course comment).
“Really opened my eyes as to how unfair the world is…” (Session on Food).

“Seemed very obvious initially but made me think much more deeply over the following weeks of the issues raised” (Introductory session).

These comments suggest that including an experiential and discursive dimension in sessions is a critical response to the challenge of addressing attitudinal issues. Further work would be required to ascertain whether the students who responded in the way described above already have a predisposition towards social justice issues. A minority of student responses would indicate however that engaging with concepts such as social justice is a little more difficult:

“Introduction task (visualisation about moving to a new country) was very drawn out and required much too high a level of concentration than most of us had at that time of the day” (Session on migration).

“I find the content is strongly associated with Geography and therefore should not have so much time allocated to it” (Overall course comment).

Conclusion

Preparing teachers for working in multicultural contexts in an increasingly globalised world is one of the crucial challenges facing teacher educators today. Attitudinal factors are fundamental to this, and while life experiences may be central to attitudinal change, college courses can support this work in a very real way. Courses on development and intercultural education may challenge some students’ attitudes yet may also provide essential support for those students who already have a predisposition towards issues of social justice. For those students, DICE sessions may provide a dedicated space in which to explore matters of importance to them, about equality and justice, whether local or global, and gain tools for incorporating these issues into their future teaching.

This small scale evaluation of student responses to DICE courses reveals the need for a more structured longitudinal study which could explore the issues in greater depth. In 2005-2006 the DICE Project administered a baseline survey to students undertaking modules in development and intercultural education across some of the colleges of education, the results of which are being analysed at present. This will
provide some insight into students’ knowledge of and attitudes towards social justice perspectives in the second and third years of the BEd, opening the way for follow-up work to take place. It will also inform our thinking about further design and development of modules. It is crucial for teacher educators, especially in the area of social justice, to continue to develop our courses in order to best educate student teachers for working in increasingly diverse settings, in the wider context of a globalised world.

References and Bibliography


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The DICE project works to integrate development and intercultural education within initial primary teacher education, and operates across five colleges of education in the Republic of Ireland. It seeks to foster and develop programmes which equip educators within that sector with the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes to include global and intercultural perspectives within primary schools.
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