

Development education is most effective in the formal education sector

Patsy Toland

Development education is served by a greater number and variety of agencies than ever before. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), community groups, One World Centres, missionary groups, immigrant support groups and many others are promoting the issues of awareness, action and change. However, the need is not for many organisations supporting many issues, but for a single, comprehensive approach to development education that will be accepted and adopted by all Irish people. The only forum for reaching all Irish people is through the formal education sector. This does not mean that we have to formalise development education but that we must use the formal education sector to deliver the message and approach of development.

There are many examples of the successful delivery of new initiatives and essential services through the formal sector. Only ten years ago, those with special educational needs were kept separate from society and we grew up without knowing people with learning difficulties in our everyday lives. They were educated mainly by religious orders, trained in special workshops and employed in sheltered units. What did this result in? It segregated the people and their issues from the majority and kept us from fully understanding these people and fully integrating them in our lives. Look at the provision for people with special learning needs today, a provision that has been achieved by full integration into the formal education sector. Young people today accept, with equality, that learning needs are only one of the many characteristics that determine what we can achieve in life. This is a product of provisions supplied by the Department of Education and Science through the primary and secondary schools and third level colleges.

This has been achieved not by shaping the needs of the people involved, but by changing the shape of education in our schools. This is what development education needs today to become an accepted instrument of change in Ireland. Those who fear formal education fail to recognise the changes that have occurred in the classroom in recent times. Students no longer sit in rows facing an all knowing teacher – they sit in clusters and support each other in the learning process. Students no longer look to their teacher for the rote answer to all their questions, but instead they learn to investigate, debate, question in an independent fashion and act to change. Look at the new primary education Science curriculum and methodology for an excellent example of this. In short, young people in schools practise the

process of development education.

Not all is without caution though. At second level many development education initiatives are focused on the Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) curriculum. In theory, this is the place for development education but in practice it is the place where many inexperienced teachers, sometimes untrained and unqualified are asked to deliver a curriculum of action and change in one forty minute period per week. This is a subject area with limited resources, an overstretched support service and a lack of commitment by management to assign teachers on a permanent basis to CSPE - instead, preferring to slot in those teachers who need one or two class periods to fulfil their teaching hours quota.

What we need in the formal education sector is an awareness and willingness from all teachers, management and parents to take the development education process on board and to see development education as a whole school issue – not an exam subject. It is already happening on the ground in most schools and colleges through the many supports on which we in the development education sector depend. Debates, fund-raising, social justice campaigns, linking initiatives, equality in gender issues, participation in community events, environmental supports – all point to a willingness and support for the issues and practice of development education. Our focus should be in supporting these initiatives and creating an awareness about the role of all teachers, all subjects and at all levels that development education is part of their educational process. The success of this initiative will depend on a whole school adoption of the methodology and issues that we promote. Every science teacher, economics teacher, language teacher, First class teacher and principal must be supported in bringing development education into every classroom.

They are an expert profession and their role is to educate – they have the skills, resources, the structures and the willingness to teach as development educators. Our role should be to support them and if we do not bring development education into the formal sector with all our resources, then we will continue to have too many voices, with too many issues, achieving too little.

Patsy Toland was a Geography, English and Special Needs teacher for 22 years in Colaiste Phadraig, Lucan, Co. Dublin. Following three years as a school principal he moved to work in the Self Help Development International development education programme ‘Africa Alive’ alongside Daithi O hAodha, a former teaching colleague. Patsy now coordinates the programme and has been recently elected as convenor for the Irish Development Education Association.