Development education and educating for mutual understanding in Northern Ireland

In response to the local context, development education in Northern Ireland has taken on education for mutual understanding and reconciliation as a major focus. Here Gerard McCann assesses efforts to apply education for mutual understanding to the curriculum and challenges development educators in Northern Ireland to think strategically about their current and future projects in the context of current political developments.

Since the 1970s the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI) has been supporting a number of schemes which have the stated aim of promoting mutual understanding and reconciliation. Developed within a context of ongoing and highly polarising political instability and sectarian violence, the curriculum based schemes offered a means by which schools could actively participate in the reconciliation process. The various initiatives which have emerged have also had an impact on the way in which development education has evolved in the north of Ireland, and in particular have contributed to the methodologies used by educationalists. This article first looks at the ideology underpinning education for mutual understanding before going on to assess this aspect of development education as it is being applied to the curriculum in Northern Ireland, with particular attention to the work of the One World Centre (OWC).

Reconstructionist responsibility

Operating from the premise that pedagogy involves the construction of attitudes and that attitudes influence social change, the work of development education providers in Northern Ireland on mutual understanding has been recognisably proactive in pursuing a ‘reconstructionist’ approach. Cultural theorists such as Karl Manheim and Raymond Williams presented constructive knowledge as the ability to criticise a society while contributing to an agreed common good. What both proposed was a dialectic of alternatives, which could assist society in articulating tensions and oppositions as well as in establishing agreed democratic terms of reference in politics and social interaction. As with Fred Clarke’s concept of ‘the educative society’, the responsibility of educational organisations is not only to improve the quality of life for individuals, but to broaden our understanding of society by attending to the contentious issues of community, conflict, citizenship, social tension, and the means of effective reconciliation (Lawton 1983: 9-11). This ‘reconstructionism’ introduced a vision which accounted for change without compromising cultural diversity. Where development education as educational practice slots into this worldview is through its vision of a global village – where diversity becomes an enriching attribute for communities as opposed to a malignant source of social conflict.

Many NGOs in Northern Ireland have embraced the reconstructionist responsibility to promote reconciliation and social interaction and have sought to contribute to a benign and mutual understanding of communities locally, as well as globally. Recognising the importance of conflict resolution and community relations initiatives in Northern Ireland, development education providers worked throughout the 1990s to develop programmes which could incorporate the peculiar politico-cultural circumstances of the region into the objectives of development education. This meant broadening the reference points of the various projects which organisations such as Trócaire, Oxfam, Christian Aid, and the One World Centre (NI) were participating in to include a local dimension.

What has become increasingly apparent over these years has been the unique role which NGOs have played in improving the basis for building local community relations and encouraging the peace process. Educational organisations within the voluntary sector have established themselves as crucial links between the Controlled, Maintained, and Integrated schools (respectively Protestant, Catholic, and mixed). They have been acknowledged by the Northern Ireland Curriculum Council (NICC) as having contributed significantly to the cross-curricular themes of ‘Education for Mutual Understanding’ (EMU) and ‘Cultural Heritage’ (NICC 1989). Furthermore, DENI’s public endorsement of OWC’s 1996 project Northern Ireland and the Wider World, and its Primary Issues resource pack, highlighted a statutory desire for development education providers to contribute to EMU by exploring the concepts of interdependence, stereotyping, cultural traditions, and issues related to inequality in comparative form.

EMU in the policy field

The Ministerial Working Group on Education for Mutual Understanding stated in 1989 that an ‘EMU promoting institution’ should encourage pupils ‘as an integral part of their education’ to:

- Learn to respect and value themselves and others;
- Appreciate the interdependence of people within society;
- Know about and understand what is shared as well as what is different about their cultural traditions;
- Appreciate how conflict may be handled in non-violent ways. (NICC 1989)
OWC was well-positioned to accept this challenge and proceeded to design innovative projects which would not only fulfill its given remit on development education, but would also complement DENI policy on EMU. Taking such a step – committing to programmes with a conflict resolution message – had the potential to place the work of the Centre, and development education in general, closer to the coallace of educational provision in Northern Ireland.

Initiatives up until the late 1990s – ranging from in-service training for teachers on different cultures and traditions around the globe to supplying schools with work packs developed by the various sponsor agencies – had been to a large extent ad hoc. Future policy direction, reshaped to an extent by the establishment of the devolved Stormont government on 2 December 1999, suggested that greater political commitment to NICC’s cross-curricular themes could ensure a strategic contribution to community relations in concrete terms. OWC – as the only resource based development education unit in Northern Ireland – has been acknowledged by the Department of Education as being ideally placed to carry out certain aspects of NICC’s 1992 stipulations regarding EMU and Cultural Heritage. Indeed development education was an ideal means by which to carry these themes into receptive schools. In effect, this accreditation has reinforced the widely held belief that studying concerns such as international debt, human rights, or gender issues on a global scale can actively contributing to socialisation for mutual understanding. In the highly polarised society of Northern Ireland, with thirty years of intense intercommunity conflict, the rationale for and methodologies engaged in education for mutual understanding cannot be unvalued.

**In action, in schools**

Education policy is coordinated mainly by DENI, the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum Evaluation and Assessment (NICCEA), and the five Education and Library Boards. With the Common Curriculum undergoing a substantial review (begun in the mid-90s by then Minister Michael Ancram) and with an element of restructuring taking place, opportunities have opened up for the introduction of additional elements to teachers’ study programmes which go beyond the statutory curriculum requirements. It has been recommended that up to 15 percent of classroom time should be made flexible for the provision of ‘additional help in particular areas’ in order to ‘pursue subjects to a greater depth’. This has left room for the assimilation of a development education aspect into the study plans of teachers willing to participate. Subjects such as geography, religious education, citizenship education, and to a lesser extent English and history, are especially suited to this assimilation process.

To date the Centre has acted as a coordinating agency for development education within the formal and non-formal educational sectors. With the idea of contributing to school programmes, its various initiatives have utilised the extensive resources which are available to enhance existing and proposed EMU projects. The approach taken, emphasising learner-centred teaching, has been refined over years of monitoring to form a system which enables children to draw from family and community experiences to get a more involved understanding of the ‘global family’. The participative method of teaching development issues has proved to be a productive method through years of practice by organisations such as Oxfam and Trócaire, with the pupils taking a keen interest in the games and activities as well as learning key concepts.

In addition to providing resources and library material for school programmes, a series of related initiatives have facilitated the involvement of the Centre in curriculum activity:

(i) The Primary School Project and resource pack, *Primary Issues*, was applauded by Catherine Coxhead, Director of NICCEA, as a valuable asset to the overall development of EMU. The thorough nature of the Project and its contribution to cross-curriculum programmes ensured that the key concepts of empathy, toleration, and mutual understanding were carried into the participating schools in an innovative and professional way (OWC 1996: 46). As an initial project it was aimed at Key Stage 2 and depended largely on the employment of a Project Coordinator who had the task of linking the project to the participating schools’ EMU coordinator’s programmes of work.

(ii) Secondly, an all-island educational training initiative began in April 1997 which intended to co-join various development education programmes throughout Ireland. This included an EMU aspect in the North wherein schools were linked through a collaborative process and attended to the themes of interdependence, defining reasons for conflict, examples of reconciliation, cultural differences and similarities, and local and global problems. Sponsored by the Irish Foreign Office’s National Council for Development Education (NCDE), the OWC’s project offered a base for the pre-service and in-service training of teachers. By introducing a protean perception of mutual understanding, it was hoped that local differences would be compared with a global perspective. An NCDE Project Officer was appointed in April 1997 and, while being based in the Belfast [One World] Centre, worked throughout Ireland developing a role for development education with participating schools. By 1998 this initiative had tied in with the Amnesty International/Trócaire Human Rights primary project.

(iii) The next development, strongly recommended by evaluations in 1996 and 1997, came in the form of a Key Stage 3 project which aimed to employ similar development education methodologies with the crucial cross-border element. Grounded in the geography curriculum activities, it included in-service and in-service training for teachers, comparative case studies, linking participating schools, producing study materials which cover Maintained, Controlled, and Integrated sectors, and developing pupil group activities such as brainstorming, role plays, sequencing activities, ranking, and surveying histories. This is an ongoing activity for the Centre, supported by the UK’s Department for International Development and the Foreign Affairs Department in Dublin.

(iv) With the Centre going on-line in 2000, enhanced opportunities for presenting development education (as a constituent of conflict resolution) to a wider audience have opened up. Negotiations with UNESCO and the European...
Union’s Directorate General VIII educational programme have proved fruitful in establishing working relationships with the various educational agencies throughout Europe that are also trying to promote the central themes of development education. In terms of incorporating mutual understanding into this agenda, the criteria for the EU Peace and Reconciliation Fund (among other EU initiatives) offers opportunities to link up with schools and pupils throughout Europe on mutual concerns for both EMU and development education – self-respect, controversial issues, interdependence, conflict resolution, and cultural diversity.

Collectively, these initiatives have helped define an active role for development education inEMU and in the curriculum by exploring the extent to which a global interpretation of local community relations can change attitudes. Furthermore, they have enabled the participating schools to measure the success of having a medium or ‘neutral’ agency to work through in developing teaching programmes.

The need for strategic planning
Apart from the NGOs involved in promoting a better understanding of development issues within the education system in Northern Ireland, a cohesion of statutory and voluntary education structures would be highly influential in carrying the study of development issues into the curriculum in a more thorough manner in the future. Existing initiatives could be expanded as a vehicle to administer programmes in reconciliation and conflict resolution.

First, however, a number of questions need to be addressed by those already encouraging development education provision. What is the need and scope for a reconciliation aspect to development education within the education system? What is the scale of current provision? How efficient is this provision? Who are the natural participating bodies? What form would any new provision take? Where would the financial backing for this initiative come from? And finally, which organisations would take on the role of coordinating such a project? Ultimately, the outcome would move some way towards recommending a management system which could carry development education into the formal education system in an effective and innovative manner. More research is necessary.

There is also a need to assess the role and functions of similar initiatives in other contexts, and, where examples may exist, to suggest models for possible application in the local context. For example, in Portugal the North-South diversity.

Adapting to the local
The Management Board of OWC has been attempting to bring the Centre closer to the realities of curriculum development in Northern Ireland. To this end, they have adapted the conventional interpretation of development education to include a local dimension. The Centre realised that it could have a role in community relations, but that it was up to the Centre to rework its traditional remit in education in order to offer another dimension to the practice of educating for mutual understanding.

From these premises the Board has been working to link its own strategic plan to that of DENI, ensuring that if the Centre (and its sponsor agencies) do have an input to community relations, it should be to maximise the potential for reconciliation. Tying closer to education for mutual understanding in project development is recognised to be one way of doing this, while offering a ready made strategy for the coming years.

By surveying the interests of teachers, DENI’s intentions, the Education and Library Board’s strategies, and the development agencies’ commitment to provision, it is hoped that a broad picture of needs can be specified and opportunities targeted for future programmes of study. In summary, development education imaginatively practised can contribute to conflict resolution. This is the experience in Northern Ireland.

References

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