A Study of Student Teachers’ Perspectives on Social Justice and Development Education

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Introduction

While the meaning of social justice is contested, social justice education typically involves highlighting social injustices at a local and/or global level with a view to motivating individuals and groups to envision, and work towards, a different future, based on a more humane and just vision of society, on both a local and a global scale (North 2006). It is argued that if public understanding of injustices, crises and problems affecting people on a local and global scale is to be enhanced, there is a need for educators as well as young people to be critically engaged with such issues in school (ibid). Teachers, teacher educators and educationalists more broadly are in a unique position to draw attention to local and global crises and injustices that might otherwise be neglected or under-prioritised for a host of reasons.

There are a variety of forms of education (often referred to as ‘adjectival educations’) which can be classified as falling broadly within the remit of social justice education as they share many overlapping concerns. These include, but are not limited to:

- inclusive education
- citizenship education or education for democratic citizenship
- multicultural and intercultural education
- diversity education
- development education and education for sustainable development
- human rights education
- global education or the global dimension in education
- education for international understanding.

While the specific priorities of each of these versions of social justice education may differ somewhat, each shares a concern with cultivating awareness of the nature and causes of injustice and inequality in the world, and is oriented towards effecting positive social change. As an approach to learning, therefore, social justice education is about both understanding and transforming the world in which we live.
Despite greater political and media devotion to global crises and issues in recent years, as well as recent attempts to mainstream development and diversity education in the formal education sector, the existing research-based evidence on Development Education is limited (Smith 2004). This project sought to examine student teachers' understandings of development and related forms of education, as well as their attitudes towards the implementation of DE in formal education settings. It has implications for the conceptualisation and practice of education, particularly from the point of view of how best to prepare those in initial teacher education to engage in meaningful dialogue with their own students about how they can contribute to a more locally and globally just future.

**Research methodology**

A preliminary mapping exercise of provision and approaches to social justice, development and diversity was conducted among those teacher education institutions and programmes directly involved in the study, for the purposes of informing the attitudinal dimension of the project.

A literature review was conducted with a particular focus on identifying key issues and challenges pertaining to the implementation of social justice education in formal educational settings.

A survey instrument was designed for the purposes of gathering attitudinal data on social justice, development and diversity issues among students in initial teacher education programmes at University College Dublin. Similar questionnaires were distributed at institutions offering pre-service teacher education programmes in Northern Ireland to aid comparative analysis. Additional data was gathered therefore from student teachers attending Queens University Belfast, Stranmillis University College and St. Mary’s College who have been exposed to content knowledge and methodologies relevant to development, diversity and social justice issues. A combination of open-ended, Likert-scale and rank-order questions were devised with the purpose of informing the following questions:

- What meanings do student teachers ascribe to social justice and Development Education?
- To what extent do student teachers embrace the values and ideals of social justice education?
- How much scope do they see for the incorporation of Development Education content in their classrooms?
- To what extent do they feel competent incorporating social justice education into their teaching?
- To what extent do they embrace active learning methodologies within the context of their classroom teaching practice?
• To what extent do they feel confident in their ability to effect positive social change?

• To what extent have they been involved in local and global development/social justice-related activities?

Specific items were included in the questionnaire to examine student teachers’ perceptions and understandings of a range of issues including: the role and scope for development and diversity education in the curriculum; the perceived relevance of social justice education to ones’ own subject areas; attitudes towards migration, cultural diversity and racism; attitudes towards specific minority groups (e.g. Travellers); understandings of poverty; and attitudes towards social action, activism, and social change.

Relevant literature informing the work

Many strands of social justice education seek to provide deeper understandings of the intersectionality of local and global forces and to elucidate the relationship and relative impact of different aspects of globalisation. That dimension of social justice education concerned with Development Education or the ‘global dimension,’ is arguably more relevant than ever before, as the economic, social, environmental as well as epidemiological aspects of globalisation are increasingly enmeshed, resulting in a series of interrelated threats to humanity (Olssen 2004). The complexity of the task for educators who seek to cultivate awareness of the effects of globalisation and the need for a global consciousness and collective social action in the face of an escalating range of issues which transcend national borders, such as climate change, HIV/AIDS, the threat of global terrorism and so on, cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, existing research about the teaching and learning of development/global issues in an Irish/Northern Irish context highlights a number of deficiencies and challenges that need to be addressed if students are to emerge from their schooling more inclined to challenge major global issues and injustices of this nature.

Knowledge of, and engagement with, social justice issues among teachers

In the Northern Ireland context, recent research examining current provisions and opportunities for the delivery of the global dimension in formal educational settings suggests that while a majority of primary school pupils enjoy learning about global issues, there was a lack of knowledge among one in three primary school teachers/principals regarding their understanding of the global dimension, as well as a perception amongst teachers and principals that existing supports and resources to support the global dimension was limited (Reynolds, Knipe and Milner 2004). In the Republic of Ireland context, recent research on teachers’ interest, knowledge, and activism in relation to development and Development Education reveals that less than one fifth of teachers regarded themselves as being well
informed about ‘Third World issues’. Furthermore, besides financial contributions to Third World charities, teachers scored low on other forms of development activism (Gleeson, King, O’Driscoll and Tormey 2007). Findings of this nature suggest that while support for the social justice dimension amongst teachers and their students is generally high, barriers exist to ensuring effective teaching and learning in this regard.

Numerous related challenges to implementing Development Education in formal educational settings have been identified elsewhere in the literature. National curriculum and examination requirements, for example, as well as constraints on staff time within the context of an overcrowded curriculum limit the degree to which critical engagement with development issues is possible (Smith 2004). Relatively, much has been written about the dangers of ‘add-on’ or ‘add-and-stir’ approaches to teaching about development and related issues such as interculturalism (eg. Roman 2003).

Social justice methodologies and curriculum content

The reliance on textbooks as the Development Education methodology most commonly used by teachers is also problematic (72% of teachers use textbooks most often in teaching about development issues in the Republic of Ireland), not least of which because textbooks are also perceived to be the most effective method of teaching development/global issues by less than five percent of teachers (Gleeson, King, O’Driscoll and Tormey 2007). At least some of the development-related curricular content is also problematic, in the sense that it tends to privilege decontextualised and ‘do-able’ notions of development and individualised solutions to what are in effect highly complex structural problems (Bryan 2008). In at least some textbooks currently being used in an Irish context, contrary to Development Education’s stated goal of raising awareness of the underlying causes of poverty and ‘empower[ing] people to take action for a more equal world’ (Irish Aid/Trócaire 2006, 6), global awareness is often reduced to narratives which have the effect of positioning the Irish nation as a generous ‘First World’ donor to the ‘less developed’ ‘Third World’, while at the same time neglecting to provide understandings of the structural dimensions of poverty and the underlying reasons for underdevelopment in the first instance. Analyses of this nature run the risk of depoliticising, and therefore of trivialising poverty, in the absence of a concomitant critical consideration of the structures and systems which cause and sustain poverty in the first place (Smith 2004).

Relatively, development-as-charity narratives, which promote the view that poverty and underdevelopment can be remedied through individual charitable donations, are also common in school textbooks. While not seeking to deny that individual financial contributions can make a difference to the lives of those in poverty, representations of this nature have the effect of engaging students
in Ireland in a particular relationship to the poor, based on an image which identifies those in the developing world predominantly in terms of their dependency and need for financial assistance, thereby eclipsing the actual forces that produce and perpetuate poverty in the first instance (Leal 2007). It is notable that donating money is the most popular form of development activism in which young people in Ireland engage, reflecting the development-as-charity motif alluded to above (Gleeson, King, O’Driscoll and Tormey 2007).

The study also revealed that school is the second most important source of information that students have about the Third World (Gleeson, King, O’Driscoll and Tormey 2007). This further underscores the need to critically engage with the nature and implications of the messages that are conveyed in formal educational settings.

**Educational interventions with a social justice orientation**

These aforementioned challenges raise important implications for teacher educators who strive to equip student teachers with content knowledge and methodologies that will enable their own students to reflect on how they can contribute to a more locally and globally just future. Increased financial support for Development Education by government bodies in both jurisdictions in recent years have enhanced opportunities for integrating Development Education content and methodologies in initial teacher education programmes. These projects include a three-year DFID-funded ‘Global Dimension in Education’ project in the North and Irish Aid funded ‘Development and Intercultural Education’ (DICE) and ‘UBUNTU Teacher Education for Sustainable Development’ projects in the South, as well as a host of other departmental or institutional initiatives funded through Development Education grants schemes. For example, a multi-annual Development Education grant from Irish Aid in the Republic has enabled the School of Education at UCD to enhance its social justice offerings on the Postgraduate Diploma in Education programme through lectures and workshops which emphasise a range of active learning methodologies to facilitate student teachers’ own pupils’ understandings of development and global issues.

While a host of recent initiatives provide enhanced opportunities for teacher education programmes to offer a variety of courses and units with a strong social justice orientation, such as inter/multicultural education, diversity education or Development Education, it cannot be assumed that socially and culturally responsive teaching will necessarily follow from student teachers’ participation in such courses (Pohan and Aguilar 2001). Teacher educators need to understand students’ underlying values and ideas about diversity, their own experiences of development and social justice issues, and their understandings about local and global injustices and inequalities, in order to ensure meaningful classroom dialogue and to facilitate learning (eg. Clarke and Drudy 2006). It is with this in mind that a survey instrument was devised and distributed to those in initial teacher education programmes.
Levels of support for Development Education among student teachers

- Generally speaking, student teachers are very supportive of, and responsive to, the idea of incorporating Development Education themes, values and ideas in their teaching.

- 74% either agree or strongly agree that Development Education should have a high priority in initial teacher education.

- 71% either agree or strongly agree that Development Education is relevant to all subject areas.

- Almost 70% agree or strongly agree that Development Education should be afforded higher priority within the school curriculum than is currently the case.

Perceived competency in delivering Development Education content and methodologies

- A majority felt confident in their ability to deliver Development Education content and methodologies, with almost 62% agreeing that they felt confident in their ability to teach about development and social justice issues.

- Only 11% did not feel that active and participatory learning modalities were practical in a classroom context.

Attitudes towards social action

- Student teachers are favourably disposed to the social action dimension of Development Education and are positive that a more egalitarian world order is achievable.

- A substantial majority (over 80%) agreed that their role as an educator involved striving to help their students both understand social injustices as well as encouraging them to transform society.

- 72% agreed or strongly agreed that a more equal world is possible.

Confidence in one’s own ability to effect social change

- Student teachers’ own sense of agency to effect positive social change has significant implications in terms of the extent to which they will in turn try to encourage their own students to do so.

- Student teachers are generally committed to ideas of social transformation, although they do not necessarily feel confident in their own ability to enact change.

- Only one third of respondents felt confident in their ability to influence decisions affecting their local area and society more generally, whereas less than a quarter felt confident in their ability to influence decisions affecting other parts of the world.
Individual versus structural explanations of development and social justice issues

- Student teachers tend to privilege individualistic accounts of racism which fail to address the complex interrelationship that exists between the interpersonal level and broader structural and political processes through which racism is enacted.

- Over 80% believed that racism is mainly the result of people’s ignorance and lack of understanding of other cultures whereas less than 40% believed that government policies were largely to blame for the intensification of racism in society.

Understandings of poverty

Some of the survey’s findings suggest that student teachers’ understandings are consistent with ‘soft’ (as opposed to more critical) versions of development or global citizenship, whereby poverty is constructed as a lack of development, education, resources, skills, technology etc. (Andreotti 2006). Forty percent of respondents, for example, identified a lack of education and training as one of the most important reasons for poverty in developing world countries, whereas only 7% saw a relationship between poverty and these countries’ colonial pasts, and only 21% viewed the nature of international trade and economic policies as one of the most important reasons for poverty. Respondents were more likely to attribute poverty to factors like overpopulation (28%) and to natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes and droughts (30%).

Moreover, less than 4% viewed the lifestyles of those in the West as being one of the most important reasons for poverty in developing countries. Those perspectives which attribute poverty primarily to a lack of skills and resources, including education, rather than to a lack of control over the production of these resources, places the burden of responsibility for poverty on the poor themselves, thereby failing to consider the role of the West in extracting surplus value in the first instance (Biccum 2005, 1017).

Development activism

In terms of social action, student teachers were far more likely to have donated money to charities and non-governmental organisations (72%) than they were to have engaged in other forms of development activism, such as taking part in a public demonstration/protest or rally or actively campaigning about a social or environmental issue (17%).

Implications for Teacher Education

Collectively, these findings suggest that students in initial teacher education would benefit from exposure to more critical versions of development and global citizenship education, which seek to move people beyond the prevailing notions in the South based on compassion and charity, towards a deeper understanding of interdependence and a recognition of ‘causal’ responsibility - an obligation or answerability - towards the South (Spivak 2004,
cited in Andreotti 2006). In other words, these findings suggest that students would benefit from exposure to more critical forms of global citizenship which interrogate the legacies of colonialism and the West’s ongoing complicity in sustaining poverty, and to existing structures, systems, assumptions, and power relations that create and maintain exploitation and disempowerment in the first instance (ibid). Development Education content and methodologies should also focus on equipping student teachers with the skills and knowledge about how to effect social change, on an individual as well as collective level.

References


