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It’s the Education, Stupid!

Teaching in the Knowledge Society from a Global and Social Justice Perspective

Introduction

It is, of course, not without reason that this article opens with a heading that is reminiscent of a phrase widely used during Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign against George H.W. Bush. Then the phrase “The economy, stupid” successfully reminded voters of the fact that republicans had forgotten to address the state of the American economy adequately in their election campaign. Correspondingly, I would like to remind politicians and policy makers with the following article that they have failed to adapt the general structure and frame of our education system to the transformations that have taken place in our increasingly globalised world over the last two decades. Furthermore, the reference to election campaigning highlights also the fact that I believe there is an immediate need for a meaningful debate on how people working in the education sector can work together in order to create an education system that is capable of dealing with the demands the future of our globalised world has already placed on education today. In the following article I argue that educators working in Development Education and/or Intercultural Education have a genuine contribution to make to the future of our education system.

The article begins with an investigation of the commonalities and differences of development education and intercultural education. It argues that a comparison of these educational approaches in terms of shared knowledge, skills and values emphasises the need to position the debate surrounding DE and ICE within a specific discourse: education. To initiate such a debate is the intention of the second part of this article. It discusses the role education has to play in the new context of the so called ‘knowledge society’, before concluding with some suggestions as to how DE and ICE could be seen

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as valuable contributions to an education system that is focused on and informed by the future.

**Coming to Terms with Terminology**

One of the challenges facing the field of development education and intercultural education is coming to terms with the terminology it relies upon. There is a wide range of definitions and, indeed, on-going discussions about the lack of clarity regarding the terms Development Education (DE) and Intercultural Education (ICE). In an international context, for instance, DE is increasingly being contested by phrases such as ‘the global dimension’, ‘global education’ or ‘global citizenship education’ (Bourn, 2006, p.1). These terms have emerged as alternatives to the concept of ‘development’ which was, and is, hotly debated, and emphasised instead the global dimension or the focus on active participation in global affairs. The question remains as to whether ‘development education’ and ‘global education’ can be used interchangeably, or whether the name denotes an alternative analytical framework.

A similar ambiguity can be found in relation to intercultural education. While some would argue that it could be subsumed under development education as a “sub-section” others see it as a separate area with a distinct theoretical framework. (Fitzgerald, 2005, pg.7; see also for this discussion: (Fitzgerald, forthcoming; Tormey, 2002, pg.2/3; and Gannon 2002). There is also no consensus across Europe regarding the distinction between intercultural and multicultural education. Recent publications in the Irish context such as the *NCCA Intercultural Guidelines* (NCCA, 2005) suggest a sort of linear progression from multiculturalism in which, different cultures are living side by side, to an intercultural merge of different cultures. This progression is challenged by others who argue that a clear distinction between the two terms in relation to their understanding of culture is simply not possible.

The lack of clarity with both terms is not helped by the fact that there is an abundance of other so-called ‘adjectival educations’ (Regan & Sinclair, 1999, pg.19) that claim to promote similar topics, themes, values and educational approaches. Many of these
‘adjectival educations’ have arisen over the past number of decades, each with its own particular focus: human rights education, environmental education, peace education, anti-racist education, gender education, futures education, and most recently education for sustainable development. While these educational frameworks or approaches each have their own starting point, the interdependence of concepts such as peace, environment, sustainability, human rights, gender or the future means that none of them can be studied in isolation. Thus, it could be argued that the difference between them is a difference in emphasis or perspective. While the various ‘educations’ share common teaching methodologies and often cover the same content, they differ in the way they emphasise a certain theme or approach topics from a specific perspective.

In any case the ambiguities and uncertainties in relation to terminology are pointing at the need for more research in both areas; a claim that is echoed in many statements by researchers and practitioners in the field of DE and ICE (Andreotti, 2006, pg.7; Bourn, 2006, pg.1). It was for these reasons that in 2006 the DICE project commissioned research on the relationship between DE and ICE. The overall aim of the research was to clarify where DE and ICE intersect and where they divert, because it was felt that in order to be well founded a debate on teaching DE and ICE necessitates a clarification of these issues. The specific objectives were; firstly, to undertake a detailed examination of the conceptual frameworks of DE and ICE. Secondly, to map how the two conceptual frameworks are applied in practice in initial teacher education. And finally, to draw conclusions on whether or not these conceptual frameworks should be taught in an integrated way. The research process entailed two key processes, namely a review of national and international literature and qualitative interviews with key educators/practitioners working in the area of DE and/or ICE in Ireland and in the UK.

One of the main outcomes of the research was that DE and ICE “share a largely common set of underlying values and skills” and that this overlap is “relatively uncontested” in the literature and by the interviewees (Fitzgerald, forthcoming). The findings also show, however, that there is less consensus “about the core themes or areas of knowledge that are shared by both.” (Ibid) Even though the interconnectedness between local and global
developments is identified as one of the key principles of DE in the literature there is evidence that many practitioners still believe that DE has “a primarily global focus” and deals with the developing, non-European world while ICE “is more concerned with the local context” (Ibid) here in Ireland. Again it could be argued that this is a difference in emphasis as one could approach the same topic from a global perspective first and then move to the local or vice versa.

Notwithstanding these differences the report shows clearly that there is an agreement amongst the interviewees that DE and ICE

share a common outlook or framework, which is to enable people to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values to participate in society, so that they can address issues of injustice and inequality in order to instigate positive action for change and create a more just, fair and sustainable society (Fitzgerald, forthcoming).

The interviews, however, also show that such an overarching framework does not exist to date. The foundation may be intact and the scaffolding in place but the building of an entire framework is a challenge yet to be accomplished. The research report points clearly to the benefits of such a framework:

[It] could allow the boundaries between development education and intercultural education to remain fluid rather than fixed, and could allow for any issue to be approached from either a development education perspective or from an intercultural education perspective or indeed from both, depending on the particular subject matter to hand and the context of the discussion (Fitzgerald, forthcoming).

Any investigation into a suggested conceptual framework of DE and ICE has to take into account whether or not DE and ICE should be taught using an integrated or segregated approach. There seems to be a broad consensus that both DE and ICE should be addressed in an integrated fashion in relation to the primary school curriculum. For initial teacher education, however, this approach remains contentious. The DICE project has combined DE and ICE by teaching and promoting an integrated approach. In stressing the interrelatedness of global and local issues this was very often an enlightening combination. At times, however, questions as to whether an integrated approach is the best way forward arose from discussions within the team, as well as from staff members in the teacher training colleges in Ireland. While some would argue strongly for retaining
an integrated approach others maintained that they should be kept and taught separately because an integrated approach in fact dilutes both educational concepts equally. In its conclusion, the forthcoming DICE research report on the commonalities and differences of DE and ICE points at some of the areas for consideration in this discussion. It states,

- There is considerable similarity between the two; therefore a combined approach would avoid the risk of duplication.
- In a combined approach however, there is a risk that certain features of each ‘education’ could get diluted.
- In a combined approach, there is a need to identify and ‘flag’ certain issues or perspectives as being of primary concern to development education, while others are the primary remit of intercultural education.
- Whichever approach is taken, the two ‘educations’ must work closely together.
- The learning needs of student teachers in relation to developing skills to teach in a culturally diverse classroom and to create an intercultural teaching environment cannot be ignored in this debate.
- An already overcrowded curriculum, at both primary school and initial teacher education levels, is also an influencing factor in this debate.
- Funding agencies ultimately play a key role in deciding whether development education and intercultural education should be addressed in an integrated or segregated fashion.
- The distinctive role of development education and intercultural education within the general discussion on education in general needs to be highlighted (Fitzgerald, forthcoming).

It is the last bullet point in the above list that sets the scene for this whole discussion as it refers to the need to situate the debate around DE and ICE within a specific discourse: education. Regan and Sinclair (1999) argue that too often debates on what they refer to as the ‘adjectival educations’ take place in isolation from each other, without proper engagement with the nature of education as a whole. An argument exists that all ‘educations’ (whether in the classroom or in initial teacher education) if done well should achieve the same results in terms of achieving and understanding issues of justice and equality, and therefore there should not be a need to establish boundaries between them. As one of the educators interviewed argued,

All of the different ‘educations’ are either good education or they’re not good education, and they’re either contributing to liberating people, helping them to develop their potential, helping them to understand, grasp and deal with the realities in which they find themselves. … You’re either giving people a social conscience, or preventing people from having a
social conscience with what you’re doing. And I think all of these ‘educations’, for me … are more about social conscience, social justice and those allied areas (Fitzgerald, forthcoming).

But then the question arises: what is ‘good’ education?

**Framing ‘good education’ in the knowledge society**

From the beginning the DICE project has framed both DE and ICE in the global context of rapid change and of unequal development. While many people worldwide experience the benefits of increasing prosperity, millions of others live in poverty and hunger, suffering from malnutrition and with little or no access to clean water, to health care or to education, deprived of basic human rights. Nor has Ireland been immune to global trends: the benefits of recent economic success here have not been equally distributed across society. Also, having become one of the world’s wealthiest countries, Ireland attracts immigrants from many parts of the world, bringing a rapid expansion of cultural diversity to Irish society. These developments place special demands on the education system. The need to equip children with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to live and act as global citizens in an increasingly interdependent world has never been greater. Thus, the need for the education system to develop new frameworks in order to adapt to these changes has increased accordingly. Even though more research initiatives are needed, practitioners and researchers in DE and ICE, in my view, have gone a long way in developing ideas and approaches as to how to address global and social justice issues. Negotiations, therefore, on how the education system should adapt to changing global and societal environments should be informed by these ideas and approaches.

It is a prominent feature of liberal literature on education in the 20th century to emphasise the role of education in socialising children into the values of a society, and the consequent power of education to bring about change in society (Bare & Slaughter, 1993). Schools of thought such as the critical literacy movement - which can be traced back to the works of Paulo Freire and which has influenced work in DE and ICE immensely - have qualified this emphasis by highlighting the connection between education and social justice (Gilbert, 2005, pg.185). For these thinkers literacy is seen as a cultural practise “involving the ongoing negotiation of meaning in continuously
contested sites of meaning construction” (De Souza, 2007, pg.4). Such approaches offer a framework for readjusting education to the rapidly changing context, both globally and in Irish society. However, before an investigation into the frameworks can begin, it is important to clarify what the changing context consists of.

In her book *Catching the Knowledge Wave* the educational researcher Jane Gilbert refers to this context as the “knowledge society”. In line with post-modern thinking she describes this society as one which forms “people’s social identities” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.29) through discourses and patterns of consumptions rather than through a fixed set of values and socio-economic status. In terms of culture she maintains,

> We live in a culture dominated by images, sound bites, and fragmentary ideas that, because of their rapid turnover, can never settle or be properly processed. Differences, novelty, change, and choice are valued over standardisation, stability, and external authority (Gilbert, 2005, pg.29).

This cultural change has repercussions on the way the modern workplace is organised in the knowledge society where the focus is no longer on ‘things’ and products but on “contexts, processes, and systems in which a thing functions or is used in order to find new functions or uses for it.” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.30)

This societal “paradigm shift”, Gilbert argues, has altered our understanding of two concepts of Western civilisation upon which our education system is founded: Knowledge and Individuality. Our present education system “is a product of the industrial age” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.47) where knowledge was seen as a “thing, a product” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.71) and perceived as a factual and true outcome of a thinking process that can be ‘stored’ in our minds and that builds the foundation of what we have learnt to know as academic disciplines. In this view knowledge is objective and it exists independently of people as a factual ‘thing’ that can be accumulated, i.e. learnt over time. This perception of knowledge results in what Gilbert calls the “production-line model of education” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.68) in which learning is perceived as a “process by which knowledge gets stored in minds, [and can be] broken down into parts and introduced as a series of steps” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.70). While this type of education system served its purpose during the industrial age by preparing students for industrial age society and workplaces,
this is no longer the case. Consequently, we have to adapt our education system to the changed realities and needs of our post-modern and post-industrialised society.

The other concept that has been affected by the knowledge society is our understanding of individuality. Again linking it to the very foundations of our present system of education and in line with post-modern political theory Gilbert argues that “we should move away from the one-size-fits-all model of individuality and equality […] and look for new and different ways of thinking about individuality, ways that allow difference to be expressed as difference rather than deficiency, lack, or exclusion” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.109). She argues that “because the system is to turn out standardised products, […] it has no way of dealing with individuals” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.58). Based on the concept of ability Gilbert describes the flaws of the present education system in most Western societies:

Success at school is defined via the education system’s quality control checks, known as assessment, the results of which are used to sort students by ability. A high-ability student, that is, a quality product, is sent on for further processing, designed to prepare them for professional and/or managerial jobs. Those students deemed to be of lower ability are rejected by the system and allowed to drop off the production line. However, by the time they have been rejected, they will have developed basic skills and habits need to work on one of the industrial age’s many low-skill jobs (Gilbert, 2005, pg.59).

This vivid description of how ‘product orientated’ our education system is reminds us also of the fact that education is always political and that any analysis of education has to take institutionalised power relations into account. Especially because the new talk about the knowledge society tells us clearly that power relations are shifting. But how has education to change in order to adapt to these new realities? In many ways schools of thought like the critical literacy movement or research and practice in DE and ICE have already paved the way for new approaches to education. It is now more a matter of convincing decision makers in the education sector to go down that avenue. First steps in the right direction would be to put an emphasis of further research on key principles of DE and ICE like multiplicity, diversity and interconnectedness as important cornerstones of any new educational framework. This would entail the conceptualisation of knowledge as a process or as an activity, rather then seeing it as a product that can be accumulated by
learning. An education system which takes this on board would be more about learning and less about teaching. Such a new framework would also allow us to do justice to more forms of intelligence which are summarised by the physiologist Howard Gardener in eight different categories:

- verbal-linguistic
- logical-mathematical
- physical-kinaesthetic
- visual-spatial
- musical
- natural-environmental
- interpersonal
- intrapersonal

It is easy to see that our present education system only caters for some of these categories. If its true that, as Jane Gilbert claims, “knowledge based societies emphasise creativity and innovation” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.68) we, therefore, have to accept that the existent education systems of most European countries do not prepare students for the reality of the workplace. Teamwork, problem solving, innovative ideas, change, life long learning, are the new words that are buzzing around in the market place. But they are much more than buzz words; they are messengers telling us of a paradigm shift that has already taken place and which most education systems have failed to acknowledge. In order to prepare children for a post-modern society in which fragmentation and diversity are common features and in order to prepare students for a post-industrialised market place in which homogeneity is replaced by plurality and interconnectedness we need to develop new ways of framing education. In other words, we need an education that emphasises “connectedness over autonomy, processes over products, and systems over details” (Gilbert, 2005, pg.118).

DE and ICE can both be seen as educational responses to this need to empower young people to think critically, independently and systemically. With their strong emphasis on values and perceptions they also prepare learners to participate effectively in society, both locally and globally, so as to bring about positive change for a more just and equal world. In relation to DE these challenges are echoed in the definition of this term given by the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA):

DE is an educational process aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live. It seeks to engage people in analysis, reflection and action for local and global citizenship and participation. It is about
supporting people in understanding, and in acting to transform the social, cultural, political and economic structures which affect their lives and others at personal, community, national and international levels (www.ideaonline.ie).

Process, analysis, reflection, action, understanding and transformation; all these key words emphasise the dynamic nature of this educational approach. As such DE contains a number of elements summarised by Roland Tormey in his introduction to *Teaching Social Justice*:

It [DE] is education *as* personal development, facilitating the development of critical thinking skills, analytical skills, emphatic capacity and the ability to be an effective person who can take action to achieve desired development outcomes. It is education *for* local, national and global development, encouraging learners in developing a sense that they can play a role in working for (or against) social justice and development issues. It is education *about* development, focused on social justice, human rights, poverty, and inequality and on development issues locally, nationally, and internationally (Tormey, 2003, pg.2).

If we look at various definitions of what intercultural education entails the similarities are striking. Echoing the dynamic understanding of development education A.M. Sedano, for instance, identifies a framework in which intercultural education should operate:

Understanding of the cultural diversity of contemporary society; increasing the possibility of communication between people of different cultures; creating positive attitudes towards cultural diversity; increasing social interaction between culturally different people and groups (Sedano, 2002, pg.268).

Both, Sedano and Tormey refer in their definitions to another skill that is key to DE and ICE; the ability to think systemically. In a diverse and multi-faceted world such as ours, where one needs to make meaningful connections between a multiplicity of things and systems, this seems to be one of the key ‘survival skills’. And it is, again, an argument for a more integrated way of teaching different subjects.

Indeed the fact that both DE and ICE transgress the traditional boundaries of the academic subjects makes them a prime example of how teaching in the knowledge society may be furthered in the future. Thus, both, DE and ICE, should be seen as much more than ‘just’ additions to the existing curriculum. With their existent repertoire of
teaching methodologies, research and thinking about education in general DE and ICE should play a pivotal role in crafting an education system that is capable of educating our children for a knowledge-based society. As many practitioners in DE and ICE have argued over the years this imperative also necessitates a further development of the research dimension in DE and ICE (Andreotti, 2006, pg.7).

And yet, there is another, probably even more important, reason why DE and ICE should be at the heart of any re-alignment of our education system: Most of the writing and thinking about the knowledge society has so far been driven by the economic interests of the business world, and hence a capitalist marketplace. The added value of including the expertise of practitioners and researchers in DE and ICE in this process is, therefore, almost self-explanatory: With its commitment to values such as sustainable development, human rights and global and social justice both DE and ICE are perfectly positioned to educate children as socially responsible global citizens. And an education that claims to be focussed on the future can not miss the opportunity to ensure that we educate our children to live a just and sustainable life as conscientious global citizens.

Thus, the required change is neither entirely about the economy nor about education alone, stupid! It is about a different kind of education that allows us to make connections and that links the way we learn and teach to the realities of our globalised world.
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