



Supporting Development Education in the
Adult and Community Education Sector: A
Case Study of a Strategic Partnership
Approach in Ireland.

Paper presented by Melíosa Bracken at Academic
Network of Global Education and Learning [ANGEL]
Online Conference 2020, Oulu University, Finland.

Supporting Development Education in the Adult and Community Education Sector:

A Case Study of a Strategic Partnership Approach in Ireland.

Paper presented by Melíosa Bracken at Academic Network on Global Education & Learning

2020 Online Conference, hosted by Oulu University, 11th June 2020.

Key words: Development Education, Adult Education, Community Education, Strategic Partnership.

Introduction:

Development Education (DE) is a transformative, participatory learning process aimed at empowering people to play a role in achieving global justice, equality and sustainability. As such, it embodies education that “creates spaces where unjust systems can be identified and interrogated” (Madison, 2010, p159).

In this paper, I use a case study methodology to examine the case of ‘Saolta’ – a new strategic partnership programme in Ireland. Saolta is tasked with increasing the accessibility, quality and effectiveness of DE within the Adult and Community Education sector.

My research draws on a documentary analysis of a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including institutional records, policy documents, reviews and annual reports. I also draw on my own experiences, as a member of a Working Group which helped inform the strategic approach taken towards the sector and as a Research Officer for Saolta, a position I have held since last September.

Context and background

Before beginning, I would like to say a few words about the terminology used in this paper. Ireland, unlike many other countries, has maintained its use of the term ‘Development Education’ and the sector, so far, has resisted attempts to replace ‘Development’ with ‘Global’. This definition from Dóchas broadly captures how DE is understood in Ireland and it is clear that it shares many similarities with Global Education and Learning.

Development Education is about increasing people’s awareness and understanding of global issues and of the interdependence of different countries

and parts of the world in relation to those issues.... It is an education based on reflection, analysis and action at local and global level. (Dóchas, nd)

In Ireland, DE emerged to describe the educational work carried out by charity organisations to raise awareness and build support for overseas aid and development work (Bullivant, 2011). In Ireland's case this was mostly driven by Catholic church-based organisations who carried out missionary work overseas in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Veterans speaking about this period acknowledge that much of this DE work encouraged a charity mindset towards poverty in the majority world. In other words, it encouraged the Irish public to think of the people from the Global South as passive victims in need of charity and salvation (Fiedler *et al*, 2011, p18).

However, some missionaries and overseas aid workers were inspired by a more radical agenda after hearing Paolo Freire's theories on oppression, critical pedagogy and conscientization. These ideas were brought back to Ireland, leading to initiatives from the early 70s that endorsed a radical approach to learning about global issues. Thus, DE became an educational process that challenged dominant views, encouraged alternative perspectives on, and solutions to, issues of inequality and encouraged people to take action for a more just world (Bourn, 2015, GENE, 2015).

DE in Ireland today

In terms of how we 'do' DE in Ireland today, Ireland has been praised by the OECD and the Global Education Network of Europe - GENE - for its DE policy and practice. A national review of Global Education in Ireland was carried out in 2015 by GENE, as part of the European Global Education Peer Review Process. The report noted that Ireland has a long, vibrant history of DE and is a leader in Europe with regard to strategic development and coordination' (GENE, 2015, p9).

The majority of DE work in Ireland is carried out with the support of Irish Aid, the Irish Government's programme for overseas development and the principal state actor in promoting DE. It is managed by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and it is responsible for developing national strategy and policy in this area and for directly funding and overseeing DE programmes and projects. Funding is through multi-annual, biennial and annual grants and in 2018, approximately 4 million euro was approved for 37 DE providers across Ireland (Irish Aid, nd). DE providers also fundraise for Dev Ed initiatives and are grant aided from other governmental departments and EU and international sources.

DE in the Adult and Community Education Sector.

Focusing now on the ACE sector, it is worth noting that Adult Education and Community Education are separate but overlapping aspects of post-compulsory education in Ireland. Adult Education

refers to vocational training and the upskilling of work-related competencies. Community Education refers to non-formal or informal learning and tends to have a more empowering and transformative agenda (Bailey, 2011; IDEA, 2014). There are clear synergies between Community Education work and the work of the DE sector. They share core principles, such as equality, justice, empowerment, and active citizenship and they are closely linked in ethos and pedagogy. The links between DE and Adult Education are less palpable but there is a growing awareness that providers must meet the needs of learners living and working in a globalised world and deepen their understanding of the global forces impacting their daily lives (IDEA, 2014). This is echoed in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, most notably in Sustainable Development Goal 4 which includes the following target (SDG4.7):

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development.

(United Nations, 2015)

Research has shown that Irish adults have high levels of support for overseas development programmes but low levels of understanding of the root causes (Dóchas, 2015). DE targeting adults is diverse in nature, incorporating the informal, non-formal and formal spheres, including community development projects, community education centres, further education centres, NGOs, women's groups, family resource centres and community gardens. It reaches many target groups, including second chance learners, unemployed people, minority groups, adult literacy learners, older people, migrants, travellers, trade unionists and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (IDEA, 2017). Practitioners work out of adult education principles and draw on creative and participative pedagogical practices. This has helped retain an authentic, radical dimension, an essential element of an education process aimed at societal transformation. Provision ranges from accredited courses to informal events and engages thousands of adults each year (IDEA, 2017).

However, several years of austerity budgets, introduced after the fiscal and banking crisis in 2008, disproportionately affected the Community Education sector with funding cut by thirty-five percent between 2008 and 2012 (Harvey, 2012). During the same period, state funding for DE declined annually from a high of 5.7 million euro in 2008 to less than 3 million euro in 2013 (GENE, 2015). The cumulative effects of these cuts, along with a prioritisation of labour market needs, created difficult conditions for education with a transformative, social justice agenda. Long-standing collaborations between DE providers and ACE providers broke down, smaller providers closed, and larger providers replaced DE initiatives with upskilling programmes aimed at newly unemployed adults (Bracken and Magrath, 2019). It is only in recent years that both sectors have begun to thrive again, but there is a need for strategic direction and a cohesive approach to rebuild cross-sectoral collaboration.

Building a Strategic Partnership Approach

One of the key recommendations of the GENE review in 2015 was that Irish Aid should 'encourage the adult and community sector to develop a strategic, sector-wide approach (GENE, 2015, p58). This echoed calls from practitioners in the sector who came together, under the auspices of the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA), to form the Community Education Sector Working Group (CSWG). A submission by the Working Group to the GENE review identified 'a genuinely, representative partnership approach' as a 'critical success factor' in advancing the quality and reach of DE in the ACE sector (IDEA Community Sector Working Group, 2015).

Irish Aid are strong supporters of strategic partnership approaches, dedicating roughly half its DE budget to multi-annual funding of its Strategic Partners and describing it as a 'core value' (Irish Aid, 2017). Irish Aid worked closely with the IDEA and the Working Group over a two-year period to examine the possibility of a strategic partnership approach and to identify strategic priorities for the sector.

During this consultation process, the Working Group agreed that there were multiple, reciprocal benefits associated with a partnership approach. For non-governmental organisations a strategic partnership would allow:

- A de-centralisation of power in favour of collaborative approaches with a wide range of stakeholders.
- Enhanced access to high-level statutory decision and policy making processes
- Enhanced access to Irish Aid's expertise in policy, strategy and monitoring and evaluation.

For state bodies, it would allow:

- Access to diverse sectoral experience and expertise.
- Access to the outreach capacity and networking bonds developed by NGOs.
- Increased capacity for flexible, innovative responses to emerging issues.
- Strengthened capacity with grassroots knowledge and pedagogical expertise amongst DE practitioners complemented by Irish Aid's institutional knowledge and technical expertise.

(IDEA, 2013).

However, concerns were also raised about a strategic partnership approach. Strategic partnerships have their origins in the corporate business sector and Bryan speaks of transformative potential being muted when powerful actors co-opt radical projects and discourses, describing it as a one of 'the hallmark strategies of neoliberalism' (2011, p2).

During consultations, DE practitioners raised concerns that smaller actors could be pushed out of partnership arrangements by larger stakeholders and that efforts to ‘mainstream’ DE could lead to a de-radicalised educational process. There were also concerns that Irish Aid’s endorsement of a results-based approach to programme activities could reduce innovation and creativity, both valued components of DE work (IDEA CSWG, 2013).

Nonetheless, there was a strong consensus that a more cohesive, coherent and long-term plan was needed to advance DE and the Working Group ultimately advocated for a Strategic Partnership approach (IDEA, 2015). The consultation process came to fruition when Irish Aid included a commitment to establishing a strategic partnership in the ACE sector in its 2017 – 2023 National Development Education Strategy (Irish Aid, 2017). In Mar 2019, a call for proposals for a DE Strategic Partner Programme was issued with the following requirements for a successful application:

- Capacity to achieve impact in relation to the programme outcome of **“increased accessibility, quality and effectiveness of DE within the ACE sector”**.
 - Knowledge, understanding and experience of the ACE sector in Ireland.
 - Knowledge, understanding and experience of DE in Ireland.
 - Experience with grant management.
 - Proven track record in results based management including monitoring & evaluation.
 - Evidence of robust financial systems.
- (Irish Aid, 2019, bold in original text).

About Saolta

In June 2019, Irish Aid awarded the Strategic Partnership Programme to a consortium called ‘Saolta’, an Irish word, meaning ‘worldly-wise’. Saolta was awarded multi-annual funding to deliver an ambitious programme over a two-and-a-half-year period. The aims and objectives of the Saolta programme include

- capacity building and professional development pathways for ACE practitioners,
 - the development of high-quality resources for those wanting to deliver DE in ACE settings,
 - a robust, evidence-based research base to inform policy and practice, and
 - direct delivery of DE initiatives, including a flagship SDG Advocate Programme.
- (Saolta, 2020)

These strategic priorities are made possible by the unique skillsets and expertise held by the Saolta partners. Five non-governmental organisations drawn from both DE and ACE sectors, make up the Saolta Consortium:

Concern Worldwide is Ireland's largest aid and humanitarian agency. It has extensive experience of Development Work, Development Education and Public Engagement and sits on several other strategic partnerships with Irish Aid and other stakeholders.

AONTAS is Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation. It has a membership of 400 organisations and individuals and hosts a Community Education Network to support practitioners in the field. It has a long history advocating for and supporting lifelong learning for adults in Ireland.

Department of Adult and Community Education in Maynooth University has a long, rich history of research and practice in adult and community education and delivers a highly regarded Teacher Qualification Programme for adult educators.

Irish Rural Link represents the interests of rural groups in disadvantaged and marginalised rural areas. It has an extensive membership and a strong track record in advocacy and influencing policy at local, national and EU level so that the needs of rural communities are met in an inclusive and sustainable manner.

Development Perspectives is a small, grassroots NGO with a twenty-year history of innovative and creative approaches to DE with adults. It is known for its participatory and interactive learning methods.

Development Perspectives is the lead organisation in the Saolta partnership and is responsible for coordinating programme activities and meeting the Saolta strategic goal of increased accessibility, quality and effectiveness of DE within the ACE sector. Development Perspectives is guided in this work by the Saolta Steering Group which consists of a representative from each of the partner organisations.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that when we talk about Development Education or Global Education and Learning, there is a tendency to think only of young people – we speak of ‘preparing students for the 21st century’ or ‘building future global citizens’. There is a sense that this kind of educational work is for ‘not yet citizens’ – young people who, in many ways, are the furthest removed from positions of influence, power and decision-making. Adults, as a target audience for DE are somewhat overlooked, even though they are the ones who have considerably more power over how sustainable or ethical their household, business or consumption patterns are. Out of curiosity, I checked the Abstract Booklet for this conference and found only seven references to adults – six of those were in the abstract for this paper.

That is not to say that young people don't need or benefit from DE, but it does suggest that the DE stool is missing a leg. Greta Thunberg and her fellow school strikers are inspirational examples of youth activism and agency but the fact that they had to take to the streets to force adults to act suggests an urgent need for DE opportunities for the adults of this world.

Of course, the economic and social aftershocks of Covid19 are likely to be wide-ranging and severely damaging. DE is, perhaps, needed more than ever as people contend with the most extraordinary of events - global anti-racism protests, climate breakdown, forced migration on an unprecedented scale, historic levels of wealth inequality, all against the backdrop of a global pandemic. Achieving Agenda 2030 will be a considerable challenge in light of current events. In addition, the role of Adult and Community Education is likely to change under the pressures of large-scale unemployment, unprecedented economic contractions across the world and radical changes to the working environment.

The case of Saolta, as outlined in this paper, could, perhaps, be seen as an innovative and effective model for a strategic and co-ordinated programme of DE in a sector noted for its diffuse and diverse nature. A model that respects and honours the grassroots and learner-centred practice of adult and community education. A model that can span both accredited, skills-based provision and informal community education initiatives to support adults in critically engaging with pressing global development issues and in taking action for a more just and sustainable world.

Bibliography

Bailey, N. (2009) *Integrating Development Education into Adult Education using Active Citizenship as a Focus*. Dublin: Aontas.

Bourn, D. (2015) *The theory and practice of development education: a pedagogy for global social justice*. London: Routledge.

Bracken, M. & Magrath, C. (2019) *Mapping Community Education Closures in Ireland: 2008 – 2018*. Unpublished.

Bryan, Audrey (2011) 'Another cog in the anti-politics machine? The 'de-clawing' of development education'. *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, 12 (Spring). pp. 1-14. Available at: <http://doras.dcu.ie/21470/> (Accessed 2nd June 2020).

Bullivant, A. (2011) 'Global Learning: A Historical Overview' in Gadsby, H. & Bullivant, A. (eds) *Global Learning and Sustainable Development*. London: Routledge.

Dóchas (nd) *Development Education*. [Online] Available at: <https://dochas.ie/development-education> (Accessed 29th May 2020).

Dóchas (2015) *Attitudes towards Development Cooperation in Ireland*. Available at: https://dochas.ie/sites/default/files/131002-Amarach_survey-Key_Finding.pdf (Accessed 21st May 2020).

Fiedler, M., Bryan, A. & Bracken, M. (2011) *Mapping the Past, Charting the Future: A Review of the Irish Government's Engagement with Development Education and a Meta-analysis of Development Education Research in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Aid. Available at https://www.ideaonline.ie/uploads/files/Mapping_the_Past_Fiedler_Bryan_Bracken_2011.pdf (Accessed 11th May 2020).

Global Education Network Europe (2015) *Global Education in Ireland: The European Global Education Review Process – National Report on Ireland*. Available at https://gene.eu/wp-content/uploads/Gene_NationalReport-Ireland.pdf (Accessed 23rd May 2020).

Harvey, B. (2012) *Downsizing the Community Sector*. Dublin: Iris Congress of Trade Unions.

IDEA Community Sector Working Group (2013) *Towards a strategy for the ACE sector: Draft Document*. (Unpublished document circulated for discussion).

IDEA Community Sector Working Group (2014) *Development Education in Adult and Community Education Settings: Guidelines for Good Practice*. Dublin: IDEA. Available at: https://www.ideaonline.ie/uploads/files/Good_Practice_Guidelines_for_Development_Education_in_Adult_and_Community_Settings.pdf (Accessed 11th May 2020).

IDEA Community Sector Working Group (2015) *Submission by the Adult and Community Education Task Group to GENE, June 2015*. Available as Appendix at: <https://www.irishaid.ie/news-publications/publications/publicationsarchive/2015/november/2015genereport/> (Accessed 2nd March 2020).

IDEA (2017) *Development Education in Ireland Report*. Available at: https://www.ideaonline.ie/uploads/files/Development_Education_in_Ireland_Report_Final.pdf (Accessed 2nd March 2020).

Irish Aid (nd) *Development Education Funding*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/who-we-work-with/civil-society/development-education-funding/> (Accessed 18th May 2020).

Irish Aid (2019) *Adult and Community Education Strategic Partnership Programme: Information Session*. [Powerpoint Presentation] 25th March 2019. Irish Aid Offices, Hatch Street, Dublin 2.

Irish Aid (2017) *Irish Aid Development Education Strategy 2017 – 2023*. Available at: <https://www.irishaid.ie/media/irishaid/allwebsitemedia/20newsandpublications/publicationpdfsenglish/Development-Education-Strategy-2017-2023.pdf> (Accessed 20th April 2020).

Madison, D. (2010). *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance (Theatre and Performance Theory)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

OECD (2014), *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Ireland 2014*. OECD Development Cooperation Peer Reviews, OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/peer-reviews/Ireland%202014%20full%20report.pdf> (Accessed 13th May 2020).

Saolta (2020) *Elements of the Programme*. Available at: <https://www.developmentperspectives.ie/saolta> (Accessed 18th May 2020).

United Nations (2015) *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication> (Accessed 27th April 2020).