

Curriculum Development and the World Food Issue: A Case Study¹

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For the last two years, Trocaire has been involved with a group of twelve teachers in a development education project dealing with hunger in the world. In this article, Tony Dunne, one of the teachers participating in the "Food Project", discusses the mainstream curriculum in Irish second-level schools, some alternatives to it, and the need for development education projects such as the Food Project.

Introduction:

Curriculum Development is the process of continuously adapting the curriculum to the changing needs of students, teachers and society. This article examines one aspect of current curriculum development – the global dimension and more specifically, the approach of one project – Trocaire's food project.

The context of curriculum change

In examining curriculum development in general and development education's contribution to it in particular it is useful to consider the broader educational context in which it operates at the outset. The early 1980's witnessed a nearly universal demand for fundamental change in both the curriculum itself and the state examination system. The setting up of the interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) in 1984 was an official recognition that changes were necessary and also, implicitly, a declaration of intent to initiate major change.

To a significant extent this demand for change has arisen from the considerable demographic, economic and social changes which have occurred in Ireland over the past three decades. Considerable pressure was placed upon a school system (in structural, curricular and resource terms) which had not adapted adequately to the broader social changes. This was (and, to a significant degree, still is) particularly the case as regards the curriculum itself. Many changes have been introduced via the Vocational Education Committee (VEC) structure, new subject areas, changes in the overall school structure but, by and large, the traditional subject based focus remains. Many experienced observers would argue that the curriculum remains too

academic and exam-oriented, that it is overly geared towards students aspiring to third level education and that it is too inflexible in adapting to social change. They would further argue that there is a widening gap in far too many schools between the educational needs of students, the teaching needs of teachers and the needs of the curriculum in a rapidly changing world.

Despite this a number of important curriculum initiatives have been undertaken. In many locations around the country, local VEC's with the support of the Department of Education have undertaken various pilot schemes. Of particular interest here are those introduced in Dublin (for example the Humanities Programme) in Shannon (Social and Environmental Studies Project) but others in Galway and Tipperary should also be noted. They have provided an alternative context to that of the mainstream curriculum in which small groups of teachers and curriculum specialists have come together and developed more locally relevant curricula. A brief examination of one of these, the Humanities Curriculum, will give an idea of how such programmes differ from the mainstream.

The Humanities is a three year Junior Cycle Programme (for 12-16 year olds). It integrates the subject areas English, History, Geography and Civics. Specific subject skills and concepts are emphasized rather than memory work. With a view to making the transition from Primary to Secondary level easier, the content develops from the local environment in first year, to contrasting environments in both space (geography) and time (history) in second year, to contemporary issues in third year. The methodology is geared towards developing basic, analytical and evaluative skills and the content is seen as a means to this end. In the mainstream curriculum content is usually the end in itself.

Since 1976 the Humanities Curriculum has been recognised by the Department of Education on a pilot basis as an alternative within the state examination system, corresponding to English, History and Geography at Intermediate and Group Certificate levels. The assessment procedures include: continuous assessment for 30% of final marks; portfolio of work (Projects and Essays etc.) for 30% of final marks; written examination for 40% of final marks. Thus, the percentage of marks (60%) allocated by the teacher is high. Obviously the gathering and moderation of these marks requires a very substantial amount of administrative work. The City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee's Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) performs this administrative task along with a number of other very important ones. The CDU supports the teachers involved by having frequent representative meetings where teachers meet and discuss their work. Inservice sessions are organized as are working parties which are often responsible for

further developments within the programme. Schools are visited regularly and this allows school-specific problems to be discussed. A resource centre is also provided.

The materials used in the Humanities programme have all been developed by the teachers involved, tested in the classroom, then subsequently edited and published by the CDU.

Successful features of alternative curricula

The Humanities Curriculum and similar type projects are important because they are generally accepted as having succeeded to a significant degree in catering for the changing needs of students and society.

These and other alternative programmes together with the mainstream system, are likely to be the ingredients in the melting pot from which our recast curricula and examinations will be developed. So if we can identify the reasons for the alternative programmes' success, then we can use these as a yardstick by which to judge other programmes including development education programmes. The successful aspects are also those which are most likely to be integrated into new curricula and assessment procedures. The reasons, I suggest, for the success of such programmes are as follows:

- (1) Teachers were involved in the initiation, planning and development of programmes and materials. Teachers were no longer merely the media through which the curriculum was passed on to students from the Department of Education and the Syllabus Committee. They were initiators and facilitators.
- (2) Teachers were supported by the CDU in a number of ways and on a regular basis. This helped to allay the doubts and fears that necessarily accompany any change.
- (3) Teachers developed new skills in the areas of methodology and assessment.
- (4) Teachers were afforded many outlets for their creativity in a supportive environment.
- (5) Students developed skills and understanding of concepts rather than being burdened with masses of unrelated and often irrelevant facts.
- (6) The assessment procedures gave the students a real chance of success if they produced their work during the school year.
- (7) The assessment was broadly based. It encompassed written work, oral work and attitudinal response. This procedure gave weight to areas which are as important as academic ability but which are not often measured in the state examinations.

The case of development education

Development education is both a body of content in itself and a perspective on traditional educational content and methodology. At one level development education seeks to deal with the body of knowledge associated with Development Studies. At another level it tries to bring the perspective of the wider world (that beyond our experience and immediate context) to bear on traditional subject areas and approaches. In this sense development education is seen to be a perspective on the curriculum. The case for including this perspective in the curriculum has been cogently argued elsewhere².

The concentration of resources on developing a junior cycle programme makes sense because this is the age at which attitudes are being formed. Development Education examines attitudes and helps students to be critically aware of these and the influences on them. Few other subjects on the present curriculum lay such stress on attitudinal formation at this critical age.

The greatest difficulty in introducing Development Education is generating an awareness of what it is and what it is trying to do. It is not a subject in the conventional sense; it is more a way of looking at the world. Unfortunately, in a subject centred system like our own mainstream one, anything which is not a subject is likely to be neglected, or compartmentalised – in the case of development education usually to the Religious Education syllabus. Subject centredness, which is the hallmark of our Second Level Curriculum, creates competition between subjects. Specialists often do not want their subjects watered down by having to take on board new perspectives such as Development Education.

There are a large number of groups with the power to influence directly or indirectly the content of subject syllabi. These include Teachers, the Department of Education, CEB Course Committees, Curriculum Developers, School Managers and Parents. Some of these such as parents can only be reached through long term and expensive media initiatives. So the best strategy is to aim at the direct influences on the subject syllabi. These, undoubtedly, are course committees, the Department of Education, Curriculum experts and, most importantly, teachers.

The Food Project

Having set the educational context in which we are operating we can now look at one project – Trocaire's Food Project which is fundamentally a strategy for introducing Development Education into the second level junior cycle curriculum. The Food Project was aimed directly at key people in the groups listed above. It was felt that if such a group of key people could go through the process of examining their own attitudes this learning experience would transfer

into their work and would have the desired “knock-on” effects. In other words the skills and knowledge plus attitudinal assessment necessary for such an examination would become part of their professional expertise. The new perspective acquired through this process by key people would then be disseminated by them through their individual groups.

Traditionally curriculum development has often begun with a body of content – described in the official *Rialacha agus Clar do Mean Scoileanna*. That body of content often took on the form of gospel. In traditional development education the starting point again often lay in a body of content – an issue, a region, a set of perspectives which the experts, in this case, development workers, decided should be in the school syllabus. But what of the teachers’ and students’ experiences and perspectives? How could these be included more adequately? In the Food Project the starting point for curriculum work rested in all three but with a bias towards the perceptions and experiences of the teachers.

Another major factor which affected the choice of theme was the Ethiopian famine of 1984/85. Not since Kampuchea or Biafra had there been such an interest in the plight of the hungry. The numerous “Aid” phenomena, beginning with Band Aid and culminating in Sport Aid, generated a hitherto unseen involvement by the ordinary people of the First World in the plight of the poor in the Third World. This involvement was reflected in the fact that agencies such as Trocaire were inundated with requests for information on the African Crisis. Trocaire found it difficult to cope because it hadn’t a readily available pack of resources that could satisfy this demand. Obviously a package which dealt with the food crisis in Africa in 1984/85 would be welcomed. It was in this context that a “Food Project” was conceived.

The Food Project’s approach

It was decided that the project would emphasise a number of key elements:

1. It would be aimed at a specific target group – the 12-15 year old age group.
2. Teachers would be involved from the initial stages in its planning and development and they would be backed up by support services.
3. Links would be established with strategic curriculum bodies such as the Department of Education and the Curriculum Development Units in Shannon and Trinity College, by inviting their representatives to participate.

4. A study visit to East Africa would be organised as a central element.
5. The teachers would eventually be inservice facilitators with the skills to organise and carry out inservice work themselves.
6. The materials produced would be tested in schools before being published.

The personnel involved included the following: 9 teachers, one of whom had been seconded from her job to act as co-ordinator of the project, 3 curriculum experts with extensive experience in curriculum development, 1 Department of Education inspector and Trocaire's head of education.

The teachers involved had a wide subject spread between them so that in discussions the relevance of development education to practically all areas of the curriculum could be covered. Teachers were also chosen to represent all the provinces as this would facilitate the provision of countrywide inservice work in the future. A number of the teachers were officers in their subject associations and others were members of CEB Course Committees. Most had also curriculum development experience of one sort or another, either at local or individual school level.

The curriculum experts had extensive experience of "organising" curriculum development. They were the theorists who could put a structure on the practical ideas of the teachers. They were also dispassionate observers who had no subject axe to grind and so could give a more integrated view.

The inspector was the link with the Department of Education without which the project could not have come about. Through official Department of Education involvement the extensive experience, as well as the guiding and supportive role of the Inspectorate, underpinned the project. Overall, the role of the Department has been crucial to the development of the project.

The involvement of Trocaire staff ensured that the development perspective itself remained centre stage and provided much of the key supportive work, as well as finance. The project began when the group met for the first time in September, 1985. The project had three phases, i.e. (I) Preparation; (II) Study Visit; (III) Production.

(I) Preparation

The aims of this phase were to familiarise the project personnel with the issues involved in development education and to prepare for the Study Visit.

This initial phase of conscientising or becoming aware was the

most important part of the project for two reasons.

First the often intense discussions focussed the minds of the group on the issues involved, provided information and helped to formulate a development perspective. This perspective is the key to development education because if a teacher has it, whether the syllabus specifies it or not, that teacher will bring it to bear on what and how she/he teaches. The popular phrase "Curriculum Development is teacher development" sums the process up. Second, the methodologies used by the course co-ordinators to heighten consciousness put the onus on the group to think through positions. In all the weekends spent together the group was lectured to on only two occasions when detailed specialist information was required which was unavailable within the group. The activity based type of learning process was in my view much more effective and pleasant than lecturing and note taking. It was learning by osmosis rather than by infusion. By being involved the group developed new skills and re-discovered others which had been unused and possibly forgotten.

During the preparation phase the group also spent a lot of time examining where development education could fit into individual subject areas. Close examination of the syllabi within which we work was necessary. This process was very enlightening because it made us examine our own doorsteps when our eyes were on the far off hills. Suddenly the syllabi we thought we knew so well began to sparkle afresh with new possibilities.

(II) Study Visit

The preparation for the study visit ensured that we were not only practically well prepared with the right clothes, film etc. but that we were also emotionally well prepared. Emotionalism during the visit would have prevented us from absorbing as much as possible of life in the Third World by draining us physically and mentally. Having explored our emotions before we went we had come to terms with them. The following diary extract was written by one of our group after our first contact with horrific poverty in a shanty town in Nairobi.

"I was apprehensive about what my reaction would be. I feared that I would have an overwhelming sense of guilt and possibly revulsion. Arriving there I found that my fears were unfounded. My reaction was one of acceptance of squalor as a reality that I alone would not change."

The study visit in January, 1986 was an extension and deepening of our awareness — a mirror for testing our reflections of the

previous months. The whole group spent a few days in Nairobi in early January to acclimatise itself. Then six of the group went on to Ethiopia, the rest remained in Kenya but split up into three groups and headed for varying study locations where they spent two weeks. On arrival in Addis Ababa, the six divided into three groups and went to different locations. At the end of the two weeks all the groups returned to Nairobi for a week-long debriefing.

The visit had a number of functions. The most obvious one was the experience it provided of the Third World. For a number of us it was our first visit and we were very excited at the prospect of seeing what until then we had only heard of or read about. For everybody the reality of the Third World was different to what we had expected. It was a succession of surprises piled one on top of the other. Everyday we encountered situations that challenged our previsit impressions of that world and our own. By the end of the three weeks we realised that we had only scratched the surface of the many layers of our prejudice and misconceptions. It was a great stimulus to further study and it bred the desire to return some day. The following quote from one of the participant's diaries sums up the study visit quite well:

"We have experienced Development at first hand. This type of experience can not be got from texts. At least now we have a basis from which to work, i.e. a common experience shared by the group."

The study visit provided a context for our studies. Before the visit it was difficult for those of us who had not been to a developing country before to imagine the reality, so all the information we were accumulating related only to an imagined place. The visit gave all the information a real context which facilitated its absorption and retention. Like any piece of field work it provided an immediacy that is not present in classwork. This immediacy hopefully can be passed on to students and other teachers through our enthusiasm and the educational resources we brought back.

The resources from the visit include first hand information, slides and photographs and realia such as implements, newspapers etc. The photographic resources are especially useful. When using one's own slides or photographs one can provide excellent background information and interesting anecdotes which make the pictures come to life for others. The realia and people profiles also facilitate this.

The resources gathered on the trip have been used extensively since then, both in the production of the book "Food Matters", in the classroom, and at inservice sessions.

If there is one lasting impression of East Africa which is common to all the members of the group, it must surely be the vital role

played by women in that society. The following extract from the diary of one of the participants echoes very well what the group felt:

“I always enjoyed our visits to the well – here was a hive of great activity particularly for women. Even to this day, it never ceases to amaze me the long distances women walk – just to have enough water to survive with for one day – for their families. Not only were they responsible for fetching water, firewood and looking after their families, they did most of the work on the shamba. They appear to be very strong women whose life is not an easy one and it makes one realise how much we take for granted here. You couldn’t help but notice, everywhere you went, the very close bonding between mother and child – the child is carried constantly on mother’s back for anything up to 2/3 years and it is lovely to see.”

(III) The Production Phase

The main tangible products of the project so far are student materials in the form of the book “Food Matters” and inservice courses for other teachers.

From March 1986 until April 1987, the group worked on the production of the book “Food Matters” which was published in Autumn 1987, after much discussion, drafting and redrafting.

People agreed to attempt writing sections in which they were interested. These were collated, discussed and modified, if necessary. Finally, in January 1987, a pilot version of “Food Matters” was ready for testing in fifteen schools throughout the country. The response, a reporting back session in April 1987, was very positive. The materials had been well received by students and teachers. After the feedback session the materials were adapted in the light of the comments made by the participants. “Food Matters” was then ready for the printers.

The second product in the production phase is the provision of in-service courses for teachers by the “Food Matters” group. Most of the members of the group, with the exception of the curriculum experts, had little experience of guiding inservice courses so we had to be prepared for this task which is the most important one in the dissemination of the project. Our work since September 1985 has familiarised us with the issues involved. The numerous discussions over the last two years ensured that issues were explored in depth in a situation similar to what one would expect at an inservice session. This intensity ensured that we could deal confidently with the issues raised at future inservice sessions. The methodologies that had been used with us in the “Food Project” could be

transferred easily to other inservice situations. So, by now the group has the essential ingredients to be efficient inservice facilitators: confidence, knowledge and methodology.

Evaluation

It can be argued that for the participants in it the "Food Project" was a success. The project showed that people's attitudes can be changed and that they can be spurred into action. The evidence for this lies in the diaries of the participants and in the myriad of development education activities in which the members of the group are currently involved. So what can be learned from the project?

First, intensive, and if at all possible long term, inservice courses are vital when one is trying to explore and change attitudes. Attitudinal modification is a slow process and cannot be hurried. People need time to reflect on their attitudes before there is any possibility of change.

Secondly, if teachers are to develop new teaching or resource production skills they should not be expected to do it all at their own expense and in their own time. If this is the case, the innovative teacher will be penalized financially and physically. Professional development should not be solely the individuals' responsibility.

Thirdly, the "Food Project" group was well balanced in terms of the varying interests represented in it. There is no doubt but that the varying perspectives and talents of curriculum developers, teachers, Department of Education inspectors and Trocaire representatives led to a much more balanced output than would have been obtained from a group which was comprised of only one of the above.

Fourthly, although the project has been successful in terms of modifying its participants' attitudes, the same level of certainty does not exist about the effects of "Food Matters" on students' attitudes. Too often educational research is confined to libraries when the real need is for "action research" in the classroom. The forthcoming introduction of "Food Matters" into schools is an ideal opportunity to research the efficiency of development education materials in the formation or modification of students' attitudes.

Fifthly, the funding of the project was adequate to allow it to be a long term project involving a study visit and the release of teachers from some classwork which were all crucial to its success. Future curriculum developments, whether they be in the development education field or not, will have to be funded adequately if they are to have a chance of success. But, in the field of Development Education, where one is primarily dealing with attitudes, the cost is likely to be higher because the time taken to modify attitudes is

greater than that taken to provide information and develop skills.

Finally, the "Food Project" is evidence that if encouraged and supported teachers respond positively. This is the key to successful curriculum development and to the future integration of development education into the curriculum.

Conclusion

"Food Matters" is a good example of the thematic approach to education. Themes can be looked at from many angles and so illustrate the interdependence of people and knowledge. Students' minds are not compartmentalised into history, politics, woodwork, economics etc., but we insist on compartmentalizing knowledge. By so doing we are robbing them of the contexts which aid real understanding. Compartmentalising knowledge also simplifies phenomena by examining them from only one perspective. For example, geographers tend to emphasise natural processes such as drought when attempting to explain famine. "Food Matters" illustrates the unity of knowledge showing the links between geography, history, politics, economics, civics, home economics and science. As with all themes English and Maths are integral parts of "Food Matters". Food and the issues surrounding it are complex. "Food Matters" illustrates this complexity in a way which is readily accessible to 12-15 year olds.

This article has attempted to outline some of the issues of curriculum development in one context — that of development education and Trocaire's food project. The broader issues of curriculum reform and the contribution of development education require the results of a larger range of projects and an appraisal of the scope for innovation in the curriculum in the current economic and political climate.

FOOTNOTES

1. The author wishes to thank Elaine Kelly Conroy and Colm Regan for comments on an earlier draft.
2. See for example, Hicks, D. and C. Townley (eds) 1982, *Teaching World Studies: An introduction to Global perspectives in the Curriculum*, Essex, Longman, and Regan, C. 1985, *Dialogue for Development Teachers Handbook*, Dublin Trocaire.