

ADVANCES IN GLOBAL EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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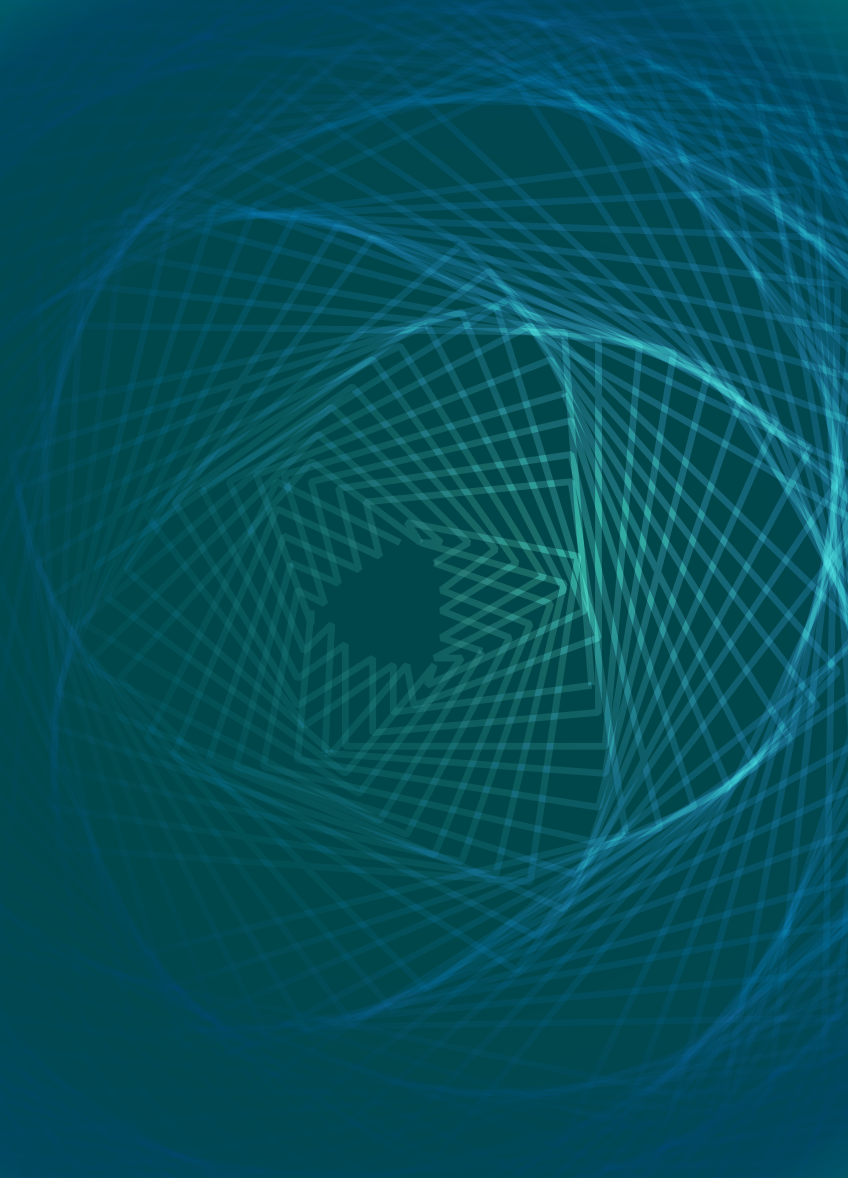
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# Teachers as Change-Makers: International Volunteering as Enabling or Hindering Their Capacity to Teach Global Development

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## Abstract

Teachers role in educating and preparing learners for global challenges assumes their competence and capacity to understand and engage with these challenges. This paper examines the potential of overseas volunteering to enhance teachers' understanding of global development and to motivate them as global citizenship educators. The findings illustrate a translation dynamic between their experience and professional practices. This analysis is informed by practice theory where changes in dispositions are mediated within constraining or enabling factors of habitus. Habitus is viewed as the site of negotiation of between individuals' agency and dispositions within social structures. This dynamic is demonstrated in two ways: how volunteer-teachers integrate relevant knowledge into their professional practices and teaching work, and how some volunteer-teachers struggle with their understanding of global development. There are clear professional gains in capacity for the volunteers from their work overseas, as it is clear and purposeful with applicability. However, they also witness global development challenges and their translation of learning is not as successful due to several hindering factors. This in turn affects their capacity and confidence in engaging with global education in their classrooms and affects their ability to become the necessary change-makers in moving towards sustainability and just behaviours.

**Keywords:** teachers, global citizenship education, international volunteering

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## Introduction

Teachers are viewed as important global citizenship educators and as a key actors in the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals. Their role in educating young people on global development issues and in preparing them for future citizenship has been clearly set out in international policies. In 1987, the Brundtland Report stated that 'The World's teachers will have a crucial role to play in bringing this report to them [the young]' (UN 1987). While the Incheon Declaration said it 'will ensure that teachers and educators are empowered, adequately recruited, well-trained, professionally qualified, motivated and supported' to fulfil this goal (UNHCR, 2016). But questions must be asked of teachers are adequately prepared for this role? Do they have the knowledge and capacity to teach these topics? And do they feel empowered and motivated to teach global citizenship?

## Literature Review

Some research suggests international volunteering can broaden and deepen understanding of aid and global development issues (Coghlan & Gooch 2011; McGehee 2014). Machin (2008) noted that it can contribute to greater understanding of development issues. On the other hand, there is some evidence that not all volunteers experience 'transformative' changes and overseas volunteering could 'easily fail to achieve its purported intentions of being 'pro-poor' or addressing social inequalities' (O'Neill 2012, p.1).

This paper asks how teachers become global educators and the change-makers that the international policies cited above expect them to be. It is based on PhD research carried out at University of Limerick, Ireland in conjunction with an Irish based volunteer sending agency. The research was a qualitative small-scale case study utilising interviews, school visits and reflection sheets completed on return to Ireland.

The analysis of the data is informed by practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; Lizardo 2012), where changes in dispositions are mediated through constraining or enabling factors in their teacher's habitus. Habitus is viewed as the site of negotiation of individual teacher agency and dispositions within broader school structures as well as dominant ideologies on global development.

The translation dynamic between experiences overseas and their dispositions is demonstrated in three primary ways outlined next. This data demonstrates this dynamic and many influential subjective and objective factors are revealed such as emotions, social and economic beliefs (ideologies), and school practices and management.

## Methods

The overall research project examined the learning of twenty-eight volunteers from Ireland, working as short-term overseas volunteers in India. The work was subject to full ethical review by the relevant university process. The data collection was in three parts; fieldnotes and observations while accompanying the teacher-volunteers in their work; interviews were conducted with teacher-volunteers on their return to Ireland; and thirdly reflection sheets were distributed to the interviewees one year after their return. All data was transcribed and analysed using inductive analysis and constant comparison to identify emerging themes (Boeije 2010). The volunteer-teachers were all given pseudonyms used here in this paper.

Analysis of these data components was conducted in both deductive and inductive approaches; the deductive approach followed key criteria for teacher learning set out by Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005), whilst inductive allowed for the participant voice to emerge by following commonalities across datasets. N-VIVO software was employed to manage the data using a segmenting and reassembly approach (Boeije 2010), where data is broken down into segments to examine meaning. These data blocs were then reassembled into a typology of common themes and further redeveloped into key concepts.

## **Findings**

Three primary thematic areas emerged from the analysis and are reported below.

### ***Intentional Professional Learning***

The findings in this section demonstrate how Irish teachers integrate relevant experience and knowledge into their conceptions of teachers' profession role and how practices are produced and reproduced (Bourdieu 1977; Wenger 1998; Lizardo 2012). Through their volunteering many realised the links between their everyday teaching practices and educational theory which engaged them in confronting their embedded professional dispositions (Liddy and Tormey 2020).

Vincent is a childhood literacy expert focusing on young children's acquisition of reading and writing skills; however he is not conscious how ingrained Piaget's theory of child development is in his work. During our conversation Vincent vividly described going into his attic to find the Piaget textbook illustrating his lack of reading (or more accurately his lack of need to read) any educational psychology during his teaching career. He did not realise the extent of the integration of theory into his professional practice until he is called upon to teach Piaget (Vincent, fieldnotes).

Grace describes how the international volunteering process made her re-engage with the foundations of teaching: 'it was a wonderful opportunity to revisit, renew and reflect' (Grace, reflection sheet). Whilst Isabel states how

the training we got before we went- it was like eureka, eureka, eureka. Every time I went it was like all the ingredients were in my head, I probably learnt it all in [name of college] but I felt things were kicking (Isabel, primary teacher. interview).

The data shows how the participating teachers reflect their re-engagement with educational theories, pedagogy and teaching and learning approaches. This reflects the process of making the habitus conscious and recognising the 'objective potentialities... things to do or not to do' that define practices and ways of doing (Bourdieu 1977, p.76). Uncovering these dispositions and naturalised practices involves working at the matrix of 'perceptions, appreciations and actions' (Bourdieu 1977, p.83) and this involves the discovery of doxa or self-evident givens that are beyond question (ibid.).

### ***Volunteers Integrate Their Experience Into Their Teaching***

While volunteering, the Irish teachers learn about development issues and life in a developing country which directly relates to their teaching. Donna explains how her experiences in India give her credibility in Religious Education class: 'they kinda give you some credit for it- you know what you are talking about, you are not just one page ahead of us in the textbook sort of thing' (Donna, interview). She described how her travels to Dharamsala and other religious sites in India enriched her subject knowledge: however, learning about Eastern religions was a secondary advantage. She feels more authoritative in addressing these topics when they arise from her first-hand knowledge and insight.

David echoed this credibility argument as he described his knowledge and understanding of colonialism derived from his stay in India has aided his teaching this aspect of the History syllabus. David described how being in India, visiting the museums and seeing the dominating colonial monuments such as the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata or the India Gate in New Delhi brought Indian history alive to him. He explained how this was important to him as a history teacher and being there helped with his teaching of colonialism and in the analysis of documents as part of the Senior Cycle History syllabus in Ireland. David also felt he gained greater understanding of the context for the original documents' element of the History syllabus in Ireland (David, fieldnotes).

Tammy works in a secondary school in Northern Ireland which has a four-year Global Partnership with a school in Ghana, funded by the British Council. Tammy has been working with a Ghanaian teacher in a literacy development project partnership between the two schools. Both she and her Ghanaian teacher-partner Sarah have visited each other's schools and Tammy is hoping to return to Ghana again. In her own school, Tammy is working on two global education projects; one on climate change and another on literacy. This work is strongly supported within her school with one of the Vice-Presidents playing a major role in promoting development awareness in schools across Northern Ireland. Arguably her school has an ethos and support for international work, but the limits of the prescribed syllabus confine her engagement with global development themes. While Tammy identifies the opportunity to bring global education topics into her classroom, links must be made with syllabus content and the prescribed list of books which may not include on current development topics. Thus, her professional habitus can be seen to be supportive to the inclusion of social justice and global development themes, but the confines of her subject may limit the potential to address critical global development issues such as workplace exploitation, consumption patterns and resource use, carbon emissions etc.

Further difficulties in engaging with development education are highlighted by Tracy, a post-primary Geography teacher. Tracy highlights the lack of time available for true engagement and unpacking of the global development content. The syllabus limits her engagement as it makes for an 'information' approach to the development content. Tracy explains:

...in the text book, Kolkata is an overpopulated city, it gives all the problems- the shantytowns, the lack of electricity. It's all there in bullet points and it is almost offensive because it is categorised to two and half paragraphs in a text book and I could talk about it for a month. But the time isn't really there for me to fully engage in the topic and I have 5 chapters to cover. (Tracy, post- primary teacher).

The textbook coverage of Kolkata minimises the human aspects to the global development story; furthermore, this recounting of issues lacks any impulse to develop empathy and understanding in the learner. Tracy gave a further example from the textbook where a short sidebar explained the extinction of a particular tribal community living Brazilian rain forest. She finds this emphasis on facts and information rather than the human element negates much of the potential for development education to challenge viewpoints and to engage in true learning:

And it reinforces about negative stereotypes that people have about these countries... When you go to India, there is poverty and there is open sewers, but that does not encompass the country. But that doesn't come across in terms of Geography in the textbook. (Tracy, post- primary teacher)



Whilst there are plentiful opportunities and supports for teachers to engage in development education, there are some remaining structural obstacles such as syllabus content, prescribed lists, and textbooks which can prevent deep learning and engagement.

### ***Volunteers Struggle to Integrate Their Learning on Global Development With Professional and Personal-Political Dispositions***

Samuel is a post-primary English teacher, who spent a number of years volunteering. During his interview, Samuel describes the process of learning about oneself and self-reflection that he went through:

I suppose learning- it's hard to put your finger on it- learning as in learning something, if you could say learning in terms of you know expanding your understanding of people and of education and of, even of humanity.... that kind of learning, would be much more kind of active type of learning than learning things which you're going to bring back home and learning facts... (Samuel, post-primary teacher)

It is clear that Samuel has some difficulty in expressing his learning, although he is certain he learned from his time spent in India. The lack of language or explanation enhances the ambiguity of the experience as transitional and liminal learning. His experiences and learning has unnerved him but he is unable to voice this clearly.

Nicole questions the dilemma of modernisation by considering the impact of better improved education on the people in the communities:

... you're kind of thinking 'the first generation of children that are educated, this is what they're going to be coming to'.... Because they will leave [name of village she worked in], I think they will leave all the good things of a close community behind (Nicole, post-primary teacher)

Nicole is questioning the impact of increased and improved education for the villagers she worked with as she believes this will challenge their community focus. She is questioning the overall purpose of the work, which despite her belief in education she also recognises the changes it will bring to the lives and to the welfare of people there. She sees this involving their migration to cities for employment opportunities as she sees urbanisation and education linked to wealth and economic progress. Nicole is asking questions about education, modern social patterns of urbanisation, migration and employment patterns: all of which relate to global development. She is negotiating the ambivalent nature of global development, where no easy solutions exist.

Later in the interview, Nicole describes her visit to Kolkata with other Irish volunteer-teachers and the uncomfortableness of the inequalities and extremes between wealth and poverty. She said:

you're driving through in the taxi, and you're looking- it's just so impoverished, and then we get to this really plush hotel! And we got a taxi to the restaurant and we ate in a plush restaurant. Again I found that, that just didn't fit... it didn't fit right with me. And I would never have thought that I would find that so objectionable... I did find that uncomfortable...

Arguably participants' lack of global development knowledge works to inhibit their agency in learning; as a group they are not development specialists, nor they have not studied development theory (Liddy and Tormey 2013). Additionally, within the habitus of Ireland, there is a lack of

questioning of dominant development discourses (Kirby 2012; O’Callaghan, Boyle and Kitchin 2014). Habitus can be seen as enabling learning within the familiar and facilitating ease of integration; however, it can be inhibitive when challenging dominant ideas and ways of being.

Global development challenges are a complex mix of economic, political and social factors and critiques of them could be read as radical, ideological and too political. This could undermine the volunteers’ learning because when new ideas are challenging to common sense beliefs and are unsupported within the media and wider culture, it can be easy to reject them. Asking questions and feeling unsettled can be viewed as an ongoing learning process where learners cope with uncertainties, ambiguities and questions.

## Conclusions

The physical move from Ireland to India means the Irish volunteer-teachers are confronted by the unfamiliar life-world of India and witness diverse social and cultural ways. This global setting raises the issue of wider socio-economic conditions and exposes the material and resource differentials. This data challenges the expectation of transformation arising from volunteering overseas, demonstrating how learning is a complex process and not a straightforward process of translation of experience into outlooks and views, practices and actions. While international volunteering may enhance teacher capacity, it may also reinforce pre-existing outlooks and ideologies.

These findings highlight a number of challenges in teacher learning. Illustrative case studies from my research demonstrated the durability and intensity of these challenges to integrating social justice work into the professional practice of teaching. My research data shows changes in teaching practices which are explained through the dynamic interaction between habitus and dispositions. This argument underscores the need for an enabling and supportive habitus to be open to possibilities and enabling dispositional change. For change in practices to occur, disruption to the habitus itself is not enough; change must be supported within the wider field of the educational system.

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