# Policy & Practice
## A Development Education Review

## Issue 37:
## Frontlines of Activism

*"The views expressed herein are those of individual authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of Irish Aid."*

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# Editorial

## FRONTLINES OF ACTIVISM

## STEPHEN MCCLOSKEY

> "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action, they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (Freire, 1996: 29).

This quotation from Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a key influence on development education practice, confirmed the centrality of action to his concept of transformative education. The methodology underpinning this transformation is praxis, the combination of reflection and action which supports the demystification of the world and a 'critical intervention in reality' (Ibid.: 62) to achieve 'mutual humanization' (Ibid.: 56). One of the revelatory components of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is its capacity to speak to successive generations subjected to the same dialectical forces at work. 'I consider the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of *domination*', wrote Freire in 1970, 'which implies its opposite, the theme of *liberation*, as the objective to be achieved' (Ibid.: 84). Freire railed against the oppressor's 'materialistic concept of existence' because 'money is the measure of all things and their primary goal... even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing' (Ibid.: 40). Fifty years on and we find that this domination continues with a small elite, motivated by the same materialistic impulse, driving inequality. In 2021, the global top ten percent owned 76 percent of total wealth and 52 percent of total income. By contrast, the global bottom 50 percent captured just 8.5 percent of total income and 2 percent of wealth (Chancel et al., 2022: 3).

But domination is not maintained solely by elite wealth and capital accumulation. It is supported by what Freire called a 'praxis of domination' that

includes 'manipulation, sloganizing, "depositing", regimentation and prescription' (Ibid.: 107). They are needed to ensure our passivity, objectivity and silence. Freire warned of the 'depositing of "communiqués"' by elites which are intended 'to exercise a domesticating influence' (Ibid.: 112). When we think of sloganising today what comes to mind are false communiqués like 'stop the boats' (Sunak, 2023), a 'hurricane' of mass migration (Syal, 2023), and 'build that wall', Trump's anti-immigration mantra from 2020 (Hesson and Kahn, 2020). These culture wars are designed to distract us from the root causes of our oppression but can be unveiled and challenged using problem-posing education which 'stimulates true reflection and action upon reality' (Freire, 1996: 65). The theory of transformative action advocated by Freire had to combine reflection and action. Reflection without action is mere 'verbalism' and action without reflection is 'action for action's sake' (Ibid.: 68-69).

The theme of Issue 37 of *Policy and Practice*, 'frontlines of activism', is, therefore, central to Freire's pedagogy. Actions should not be prescribed or pre-ordained in Freire's pedagogical methodology but an organic outworking of the learning process. They should be agreed in acts of cognition based upon dialogue and critical thinking involving both teacher and learner in a process of experiential learning. The 'frontlines of activism' may have shifted to new terrains, most notably the digital platforms that seek to mould attitudes and behaviours, and the existential climate crisis enveloping our world, but Freire's pedagogical tools remain as relevant as ever. For example, in this issue, Maayke De Vries draws upon Freire's pedagogy of hope to deliver an action-oriented unit on climate justice designed to support civic action by her students. And, Chriszine Backhouse, Sarah Robinson and Claudia Barton apply Freire's praxis to the performative arts by using socially-engaged forum theatre to explore the complexity of algorithmic injustice. I introduce here the contributions to Issue 37 of *Policy and Practice* and what they are telling us about the frontlines of activism.

## Active citizenship
What does it mean to be an active citizen and what are the implications of the turn toward global citizenship education (GCE) in the Irish development education (DE) sector? These are questions central to Niamh Gaynor's Focus article in this issue. She argues that 'For all the talk of citizenship, it remains

unclear what exactly it means to be an "active citizen", much less a globally active one'. Similar questions and concerns emerged in research commissioned by Dublin City University and Comhlámh on global citizenship in Ireland, which argued that active global citizenship 'should be transgressive, questioning and/or disruptive of existing laws and responsibilities' (Cannon, 2022: 3). The research concludes, however, that 'Discourse on global citizenship as practiced by international development agencies... is **aspirational rather than practical** (emphasis in original), due to the continued dominance of nation states in the provision or not of citizenship rights' (Ibid.: 13). Gaynor raises similar concerns about the framing of citizenship in the context of the nation state. The right to activism and to claim rights from the state and its institutions is a 'powerful political tool', argues Gaynor, but:

> "failures to acknowledge and address the multiple, overlapping inequalities and exclusions of citizenship practice, coupled with selective and increasingly narrow framings, notably the influence of neoliberalism and related conflictual relations with marketised nation states, very much mitigate against these rights".

In Issue 36 of *Policy and Practice*, Audrey Bryan and Yoko Mochizuki warned of an enlarged private sector role in education provision premised upon a skillification agenda that 'accelerated depoliticised notions of the "global"' (Bryan and Mochizuki, 2023: 51). The main outcome of this privatisation agenda is an individualised and politically detached sense of citizenship bereft of the critical thinking skills and praxis needed to effect meaningful change. As DE/GCE practitioners, we need to resist the depoliticisation of our work and continue to draw upon the deep well of Freire's pedagogy. As Gaynor argues, this 'means facilitating the active engagement of those most marginalised and excluded from political participation'.

Freire also looms large in Maayke De Vries' article about action research conducted over three years with school students in the Netherlands on the climate emergency. She draws upon Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* (2014) as an 'antidote to despair' in the context of the anxiety and distress experienced by many young people in regard to the climate crisis. Freire argues that 'without a minimum of

hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness' (Freire, 2014: 3). Thus, 'hope alone will not transform the world' but 'to attempt to do without hope, which is based on the need for truth as an ethical quality of the struggle, is tantamount to denying that struggle is one of its mainstays' (Ibid.: 2). De Vries delivered a twelve-week unit on the climate crisis as part of an action research study with her students framed by the pedagogy of hope. The unit aimed to enable students to move from individual actions toward a more systemic analysis of global injustices. Each cycle of teaching was followed-up with student interviews, data collection, reviews of teaching materials and conversations with a 'critical friend'.

The research findings revealed that most students engaged in activism online and persisted in the need to change the mindset of individuals rather than reveal or challenge unjust structures. Social media was positively framed by students (14–15-year-olds) as a means of awareness raising through sharing content although part of the feedback from students referred to transactional forms of 'activism' based on donating to charity. However, when students did take action online it became a source of hope that they could make a difference even if the most common form of action was awareness raising. De Vries found that a 'lack of knowledge and understanding of participatory politics might have contributed to students mainly expressing strategies for actions that align with personally responsible citizenship rather than justice-oriented citizenship'. However, her overriding conclusion was that 'engaging students in developing, planning, and executing their own action provides them with hope to solve global issues'.

## Digital activism

Digital activism is also central to Gabriela Martínez Sainz's Focus article on youth mobilisations in Brazil in response to a failing education system characterised by budget cuts, school closures, increasing class sizes and curriculum reforms. Between 2015 and 2016, over 1,100 secondary schools and 200 Universities were occupied in different states across Brazil as a youth activist response to the threats posed to their education. The actions were co-ordinated under the auspices of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education which has specific targets

that include ensuring free, equitable and quality education at primary and secondary level.  Martínez Sainz argues that new digital technologies and spaces 'have been particularly relevant for children and how they exercise their fundamental human rights, including their right to participate, being heard and engage in public deliberation and influence decision-making'.  The more horizontal and accessible nature of digital technologies 'offer novel and inclusive ways to advocate for social change favouring actions in particular among individuals and groups often marginalised'.

Martínez Sainz draws upon Hannah Arendt's theory of action to contend that 'action is a way in which individuals can disclose themselves to others and form human relationships'.  The digital content of the students involved in the protests was monitored and showed that social media was 'used as a learning space for children to learn about their rights, in particular, their right to protest and freedom of assembly'.  The article concludes that even if the young people's campaigning objectives are not achieved, the 'extrinsic value of digital activism is evident in the social, cultural and political transformations that occur as a result of their political actions'.

Student activism is also a key component of the fourth Focus article in Issue 37 by Gertrude Cotter which sets out the theoretical framing and practical outcomes of a research study into the integration of community linked-learning (CLL) into university education using development education methodologies.  This initiative was part of a four-year research study in University College Cork that sought to nurture 'socially responsible and globally aware' students through community links that sought to address 'real-world challenges'.  Like the De Vries and Martínez Sainz articles, the aim here is to foster 'socially conscious citizens' by equipping them with the critical skills, awareness, partnerships and a heightened sense of their own agency to 'challenge systemic injustices'.  The research was conducted with a critical ethnographic methodology and monitored by the researcher through the use of interviews, focus groups, participant observations and data collection.  Storytelling was used to evidence the transition from the personal to the political with students using digital stories, art installations, radio and websites to share their narratives.  The positive research findings from the study emphasised 'the importance of challenging power

structures and advocating for justice'. Gertrude Cotter concludes that: 'development education's radical tradition can and must thrive, ensuring that independent voices within academia and society have the safe spaces they need to challenge injustice'.

## Forum theatre

While Cotter, De Vries and Martínez Sainz share evidence-based research on how digital learning can support activism and awareness-raising among young people, the Perspectives article by Chriszine Backhouse, Sarah Robinson and Claudia Barton considers the more sinister side of online platforms that can be used as a source of misinformation and manipulation. They discuss how our social media imprints, algorithms, are being used by global media corporations to shape our political behavior and social and cultural attitudes. One of the most damaging examples of this media manipulation was the harvesting of fifty million Facebook profiles by the data analytics firm, Cambridge Analytica, which worked on behalf of the Trump election team and Brexit campaign to influence voter behaviour (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). The authors introduce the concept of algorithmic justice and then describe the process of writing and performing a play on this important issue using the Freirean-informed forum theatre. The interactive methodology used by forum theatre combines praxis with audience participation which can influence the outcome of scenes as they are being performed. This innovative performative medium, argue the authors, 'could be used by global citizenship educators to move from reflection and theory to action'. The GCE/DE sector is constantly seeking 'creative ways to develop critical awareness of social inequalities and power dynamics'. Forum theatre offers rich possibilities for practitioners to make the learning process interactive, innovative and action-oriented.

In a second Perspectives article on activism, Sally Daly and Aidan Farrelly reflect on a bootcamp organized by the National Youth Council of Ireland for youth participants in a Global Youth Work and Development Education Certificate course delivered using an anti-oppressive framework. The authors describe the bootcamp as 'a non-formal educational context to support understanding about the nature of oppression and power, and an opportunity to develop or enhance the ability to reflect, critically analyse and inform practice'.

Central to the bootcamp was a 'disruptive pedagogy' to enable youth workers 'to take a step back and think about ways to disrupt systems and structures, to challenge inequality'. A process of self-reflection on their positionality as youth workers that combined centring, de-centring and re-centring enabled participants to step into areas of discomfort that ultimately supported the discovery of themselves and the world around them. The successful outcomes of the bootcamp speak to the need to support reflective learning as part of our professional development as practitioners.

The third Perspectives article in Issue 37 by Barry Cannon explores the impact of emergent far-right activity on overseas development aid (ODA) through a literature review of academic and policy articles on far-right anti-ODA narratives. This timely article coincides with growing concerns about the rise of the far-right in Ireland following increasing attacks on migrants and asylum-seeker accommodation (Magee, 2023). There were also ugly scenes witnessed at a far-right protest outside the Dáil (Ireland's parliament) in Dublin on 20 September 2023 (Graham-Harrison, 2023). Cannon sets out the discourse of the far-right in regard to ODA which is often centred around a narrative that is anti-elite, anti-globalisation and anti-immigration / migrant. It also proposes counterstrategies that could be employed by the ODA sector to combat these narratives such as highlighting the inter-connectedness of the issues addressed by ODA at local and global levels, and sharing the positive outcomes of aid provision. Cannon, warns, however, that these counterstrategies 'may entail explicit politicisation of ODA supporting NGOs which may leave them vulnerable to far right attacks and state disapproval'. He adds that this is 'a risky occurrence if such NGOs are dependent on state funding and/or cooperation'.

## Corporate greenwashing

The threat posed by the far-right in the United States (US) is the subject of the Viewpoint article by Henry A. Giroux in this issue titled 'Critical Pedagogy in the Age of Fascist Politics'. Giroux describes a 'predatory capitalism' in the US which has elevated 'privatisation to the governing principles of society' and where 'education has increasingly become a tool of domination' through reactionary policies that include:

"disallowing teachers to mention critical race theory and issues dealing with sexual orientation to forcing educators to sign loyalty oaths, post their syllabuses online, give up tenure, and allow students to film their classes".

These policies extend to banning books with 1,500 individual instances of banned books recorded by PEN America between July and December 2022 (Yang, 2023). These bans are not the work of extreme outliers but State legislatures and courthouses in Republican-controlled states (Petri, 2023). 'It is hard to imagine a more urgent moment for taking seriously Paulo Freire's ongoing attempts to make education central to politics', argues Giroux, because 'his view of education encouraged human agency, one that was not content to enable people to only be critical thinkers, but also engaged individuals and social agents'.

The role of corporate power in education, the media and public life is taken up in the second Viewpoint article by Peadar King, Colm Regan and Tom Roche titled 'Awash in Greenwash'. It concerns sponsorship of sporting and arts events by corporations to 'greenwash' their brands and convince the public (and consumers) that they have the best interests of the planet at heart. Friends of the Earth (2022) describes greenwashing as 'a marketing ploy used by companies to make themselves seem environmentally friendly, even when they're not'. Greenwashing arguably reached the height of absurdity, evading the sharpest of satirists, when *Coca-Cola*, the world's biggest plastic polluter, was a sponsor of the United Nations Climate Conference (COP27), held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt in November 2022. King, Regan and Roche discuss their education and campaigning activities in Ireland designed to end the 'Texaco oil company's efforts to greenwash its image by inserting itself into the social and cultural life of the country', particularly through its sponsorship of a children's art competition and a 'Sport for All' programme. They met a 'deafening Irish silence' from civil society organisations and the media when approaching them for support to raise the greenwashing issue. 'Remaining silent on this issue', they argue, 'is tantamount to colluding in Texaco's sportswashing agenda'. It also ignores the fact that greenwashing is more 'than a single stand-alone cause'. '[I]t is a critical cross-cutting issue that goes to the heart of the global power imbalance and the deepening inequality that has become such a hallmark of contemporary society'.

The frontlines of activism have been well delineated in this collection of articles: education as a site of domination and control or as an agent of diversity, inclusion and social change; digital media platforms as drivers of awareness raising and horizontal activism or manipulation through algorithmic injustice; global citizenship that promotes politically detached, individualised behaviours or supports critical consciousness, praxis and transformative action. If we inform our policy and practice with the Freirean pedagogies of the oppressed and of hope, then we can deliver 'education as a political concept', argues Henry Giroux, 'rooted in the goal of empowerment and emancipation for all people, especially if we do not want to default on education's role as a democratic public sphere'.

## Escalation in the Middle East

At I write this editorial, there has been a major escalation of violence in the Middle East triggered on 7 October by Hamas attacks on southern Israel that killed 1,405 Israelis and saw 210 captives being taken (AJ Labs, 2023). The Israeli response has seen 4,137 victims in Gaza, mostly from aerial bombardment, including 1,661 children, and 82 Palestinian fatalities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Reliefweb, 2023: 2-3). Israel has imposed a complete siege on Gaza which has tightened its sixteen-year blockade of the strip to include food, water, medicines and electricity (Kusovac, 2023). Gaza is in a humanitarian crisis with 384,200 internally displaced persons sheltering in 90 United Nations' (UN) schools living in dire conditions with up to 70 people per classroom. The UN reports that 'Anxiety, fear and grief are rising due to relentless Israeli Forces airstrikes, bombardments and the loss of family members, loved ones and people's homes' (Reliefweb, 2023: 1). In writing about the origins of the current escalation, Palestinian civil society activist, Omar Barghouti (2023) quoted Paulo Freire:

> "With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already begun. Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed...Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons – not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognized".

One of the victims of the surge of violence in Israel and Palestine has been the democratic right of activists to protest and have their voices heard on the conflict. British Foreign Secretary, James Cleverley, for example, urged pro-Palestinian protesters 'to stay at home' and Home Secretary Suella Braverman described waving the Palestinian flag as illegitimate 'when intended to glorify acts of terrorism' (Hunter, 2023). The purpose of these statements, argues Hunter (2023), is 'to intimidate would-be protestors and de-legitimise criticism of Israel by aligning it with criminality'. The French government has gone further by banning Palestinian protests altogether with those who break the ban 'susceptible to disrupt public order' (Vock and Peter, 2023). Germany and Switzerland have also imposed bans on Palestinian protests which prompted Amnesty International (2023) to write that:

> 'States have a legal obligation to ensure that people are able to peacefully express their grief, concerns and solidarity... we call on authorities across Europe to protect and facilitate everyone's right to express themselves and peacefully assemble'.

Pro-Palestinian activists have been dismayed at the stance taken by most western governments (The White House, 2023) to 'express steadfast and united support of the State of Israel' despite the asymmetrical nature of the conflict reflected in the number of fatalities in Gaza and the deteriorating humanitarian crisis there. Public protests in solidarity with Palestine, by contrast, have called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza to allow humanitarian access to the territory (Aljazeera, 2023). This underscores the vital role of public activism in democracy, particularly at a time of conflict, raised international tensions and acute humanitarian crisis. 'Protest is the ultimate in equal opportunity political action', argues human rights lawyer Kieran Pender (2022). 'When enough of us come together to express our views, to show solidarity and demand change, decision-makers must listen' (Ibid.).

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# Focus

## What Does it Mean to be an 'Active Citizen'? The Limitations and Opportunities Posed by Different Understandings and Deployments of 'Citizenship'

## Niamh Gaynor

**Abstract:** Over the last fifteen years, policy and debate on development education have become increasingly framed in terms of citizenship. Yet, despite its ubiquity, citizenship is rarely defined. It remains unclear what exactly it means to be an 'active citizen', much less a globally engaged one. Drawing from the rich body of theory and debate within the social sciences in this field, in this article I highlight both the limitations and the opportunities posed by different understandings and deployments of 'citizenship' by a range of actors and interests. Exploring the multiple exclusions and inequalities experienced by particular groups which limit and/or inhibit their agency as active citizens, I argue that citizenship, within development education and more broadly, is not something which just exists; it must be claimed. Such claims involve struggles and tensions. In short, they involve activism.

**Key words**: Citizenship; Activism; Global Citizenship Education; Neoliberalism; Exclusion; Erasures, Denial.

## Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, reflecting global trends and institutions such as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), policy and debate on development education (DE) have become increasingly framed in terms of citizenship. Be it 'active', 'engaged', 'responsible', 'global' or different combinations thereof, concepts of citizenship are now to the fore in policy and practice across the sector, both in Ireland and more broadly. For example, the Irish secondary senior cycle subject 'Politics and Society' includes 'Active Citizenship' as one of its four strands and a citizenship project as one of its two

forms of assessment. International non-governmental organisation (INGO) Concern Worldwide's 'Online Classroom' resources use the terms 'Global Citizenship Education' (GCE) and 'Development Education' interchangeably. Trócaire's online resources now appear under the banner of 'Citizenship Education', and the most recent Irish Aid development education strategy is entitled a 'Global Citizenship Education Strategy' (Irish Aid, 2021), in contrast to the previous three iterations. Yet, despite its ubiquity across the sector, citizenship is rarely defined. For all the talk of citizenship, it remains unclear what exactly it means to be an 'active citizen', much less a globally active one.

This is the focus of this article. Drawing from the rich body of theory and debate within the social sciences on ever-evolving concepts and understandings, I highlight both the limitations and the opportunities posed by different understandings and different deployments of 'citizenship' by different actors and interests. I note that while, in theory, citizenship implies universal rights and equality, in practice this is not universally or globally manifest. In this context, I explore the multiple exclusions and inequalities experienced by particular groups which limit and/or inhibit their agency as active citizens, and I demonstrate how these exclusions are compounded by the rise of neoliberal influences on the institutions, discourses and practices of citizenship which severely limit its promise and ambition. I conclude by arguing that citizenship, within development education and more broadly, is not something which just exists; it must be claimed. Confronting multiple inequalities and exclusions embedded in deep-seated structures and relations of power and privilege, such claims necessarily involve struggles and tensions. In short, they involve activism.

## Classic traditions of citizenship

Academic literature on citizenship often distinguishes between liberal, communitarian, and civic republican traditions (see, for example, Isin and Turner, 2002: 3-4). Classical liberal theories promote the idea of universal rights, viewing the role of the state as being the protection of individual citizens in the exercise of their rights. Communitarians, however, take issue with the concept of the 'independent' or 'self-interested' citizen and argue that an individual's sense of identity is produced through relations with others. Community belonging and social-embeddedness are, therefore, at the heart of communitarian theory. Civic

republicanism emphasises citizens' obligations to participate in public affairs and points to a more active notion of citizenship – one that recognises the political agency of people and groups. While there are differences in emphases across these three traditions, two factors are common to all. The first, conforming to the principle of equality, is the universality of rights. Equality and justice are based on rights and not on needs. The second is the political agency of individuals (following liberal traditions) and groups (following communitarian and civic republican traditions) – the right to have rights, and the right to seek those rights from the state and associated institutions, individually and collectively. Taking these different theories together and applying them to development education, therefore, citizenship is about political activism and voice aimed at securing equality and justice for all. However, as the inequalities and exclusions discussed below illustrate, achieving this is no easy task.

## The inequalities and exclusions of citizenship

While, in theory, citizenship appears to offer a universal rights-based approach, in practice this is not necessarily always the case. This is because the universalism inherent in theories of citizenship can serve to hide the practical realities of inequalities and exclusions under a veil of formal equality. A wide body of literature highlights the many limitations of universalised, unproblematised concepts of citizenship in this context. Four issues are particularly pertinent to our thinking and action in relation to development education policy and practice. These may be characterised as the 'who', the 'how', and the 'what' of citizenship, together with the rise of neoliberal influences on its institutions, discourses and practices more broadly.

### The 'who'

A key concern for many citizenship scholars and analysts is the diversity of inclusions and exclusions of citizenship for particular groups and individuals. Not only do people have vastly different abilities and opportunities to engage as citizens, but the policies and structures of globalised states and institutions often exclude their perspectives, analyses and experiences, thereby impeding their participation. Feminist, race, migrant and disability writers and movements are at the forefront of debates in this area (see, for example, Mamdani, 1996; Lister 1997; Young, 1997; Benhabib, 2004). Highlighting the ongoing privileging of

'male-white-cis-able-bodied' citizens in contemporary globalised societies, their aim is to ensure that minority groups can equally participate in social, political and civic life. Intersectional feminist approaches to citizenship, for example, consider how gender, sexuality, race, class, caste, religion, migrant status, and disability shape the degree to which an individual can be an 'active citizen' and participate in political and civic life (Sweetman et al., 2011).

Such concerns are highly pertinent to development education in a context where, despite a stated commitment to GCE as a lifelong process (see Irish Aid, 2021: 4), policy and practice often focuses on primary and/or second level students / 'young learners'. The specific barriers to citizenship participation (global or local) experienced by other groups and individuals are rarely acknowledged or highlighted, with much policy and practice saying or doing little to facilitate the participation of such groups. For example, in Ireland, Irish Aid's GCE strategy, while aiming to 'broaden and deepen the conversation' to include more marginalised groups (Irish Aid, 2021: 3), says nothing about the specific barriers faced by these different groups or how these might be tackled. The lack of a gendered perspective in development education policy and practice in Ireland has similarly been noted (Madden, 2019). It is no small irony that those with some of the most egregious experiences of globalised inequalities and marginalisation are effectively excluded from acts of global citizenship engagement.

## The 'how'

A related consideration concerns the 'how' of citizenship actions. For scholars concerned with the diversity of social and economic conditions within which people survive and/or thrive, as well as the diversity of identities and groups, active citizenship is at its most effective when organised collectively. As Held (2006: 162) notes: 'The existence of active groups of various types and sizes is crucial if the democratic process is to be sustained and if citizens are to advance their goals'. Yet, as discussed in further detail below, citizenship within development education in an Irish context is often framed purely in individualist terms, while approaches to human rights education often focus on civil and political rights and, to a lesser extent, economic and social rights, rather than on collective rights and the right to collective modes of action (see, for example,

research by Bryan and Bracken, 2011; Waldron and Oberman, 2016; and Cannon, 2022 discussed later).

## The 'what'

A third related issue concerns the question of what exactly it means to 'take action' and to what end. While a redistribution of resources and wealth is, of course, imperative for development education advocates, inequality is relational as well as material. Challenging and tackling it therefore involves confronting and addressing the unequal and often exploitative relations that exist between people and institutions, and indeed with our environment more broadly. Iris Marion Young (2011) has argued that social justice should be understood in terms of discrimination and oppression (institutional constraints on self-development) and domination (institutional constraints on self-determination) since this enables a conceptualisation of justice which refers not only to redistribution but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and group rights. For development this means challenging the structural and institutional roots of marginalisation, oppression and domination, together with discourses and framings which support these.

Two points are important here. The first concerns the substance or target of development education. Addressing the structural and institutional roots of inequality and oppression means moving beyond a 'business as usual' approach to development education which, ignoring the failures of modernity, persists in advocating increased aid flows and the (sometimes conflicting) SDGs as a solution to global inequality. And the second concerns one of the fundamental principles of citizenship – relations with the nation state. Classically, citizenship has been conceived as membership of the nation state. Yet, in our contemporary globalised world, the notion of the nation-state can appear exclusionary and out-moded. Despite the persistence of the nation state as one of the key drivers of global capitalism (Harris and Hrubec, 2020), citizenship itself has become both globalised and exclusionary. People now hold multiple citizenships and belong to multiple polities – local, regional and global, while, as noted previously, others exist in limbo, excluded from citizenship by particular states. In this context, the Eurocentricity of the concept of citizenship as employed and deployed within global citizenship education (Parmenter, 2011), together with

the erasures and foreclosures which underpin the exclusionary politics of knowledge (Stein et al., 2022) which underpin it need to be confronted and challenged.

Within this globalised context, a number of scholars (for example, Cerny, 1997; Harvey, 2005; Robison, 2006) argue that traditional welfare states, as conceived by classicists and civic republicans alike, have given way to 'market' or 'competition states' which, embedded in local and global institutions, prioritise market priorities and imperatives over those of their citizens. This problematises the role of states vis-à-vis citizens, notably given state claims to (and practices of) a monopoly of authority and force which can, at times, actually prevent citizens from exercising their rights and duties as citizens' time, attention and energy is sapped through welfare cuts and retrenchments. For development education scholars and practitioners, this means critically engaging with state discourses and framings of global citizenship and of global citizenship education within the context of states' broader marketised imperatives.

## Neoliberal influences

A final issue raised by scholars and theorists of citizenship concerns the influence of the New Right or the neoliberal project on framings and practices of citizenship from the 1980s forward. Although seeming to signal a return to classic liberalism with their focus on individualism, such influences actually represent an even narrower conception of citizenship than this. In the neoliberal tradition, as Hoffman and Graham (2009: 125) note, 'although neo-liberals appear to return to the classical liberal position, gone is the [implicit] assumption that humans are free and equal individuals. Free yes, but equal no!' This is because neoliberals argue that any attempt to implement distributive or social justice will undermine the unfettered operation of the free market. As David Held (2006: 171) contends:

> "Democracy is embedded in a socioeconomic system that systematically grants a 'privileged position' to business interests... this ought to be a concern to all those interested in the relation between liberties that exist in principle for all citizens in a democracy and those that exist in practice".

Indeed, many scholars demonstrate deep and ongoing contradictions between citizenship and capitalism (see, for example, Turner, 1986; Dean, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Kuttner, 2018). For development education, this means that global citizenship activism needs to be critical, radical and disruptive of global capitalism where it impinges on citizenship rights. Another important consideration concerns the associated neoliberal view that people 'fail' in society because of their own individual shortcomings and 'irresponsible' behaviours. Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's distinction between 'active' and 'passive' citizens in this regard, as recalled by Faulks (1998: 86), is noteworthy given the trend in current global citizenship education discourse and framing. As I have noted above, in the neoliberal tradition, active citizenship is increasingly framed in individualist, behavioural, attitudinal terms, stripping it of its structuralist, relational and political facets.

It is clear, therefore, that theories and practices of citizenship are highly complex and contested. While, in theory, citizenship implies universal rights and equality, this is not universally manifest in practice. The multiple exclusions and inequalities experienced by particular groups have material, structural and institutional roots. These are compounded by the rise of neoliberal influences on both state and state-associated institutions and on their related framings, discourses and practices. As a result, now, more than ever, citizenship, as both a status and a practice, is not something that exists on its own; it must be claimed. As Isin and Nyers (2014: 8) assert:

> "...the rights of citizenship have always involved social struggle. This includes the struggle for a right to be recognized as a right in the first place, and then the struggle for the breadth and depth of these rights".

Such claims and struggles and the inevitable tensions, dislocations and ruptures they give rise to lie at the heart of acts of 'active citizenship' within development education. They lie at the heart of citizenship activism.

## The implications of theories and critiques of citizenship for policy and practice

So what does all this mean for development education policy and practice? While, on the one hand, citizenship theories and concepts offer considerable potential and scope for political activism, on the other, their exclusions and selective framings mitigate against this. The right to have rights, and the right to be in a position to seek and claim those rights from state and state-associated institutions – the right to activism – is a powerful political tool. However, failures to acknowledge and address the multiple, overlapping inequalities and exclusions of citizenship practice, coupled with selective and increasingly narrow framings, notably the influence of neoliberalism and related conflictual relations with marketised nation states, very much mitigate against these rights. The degree to which these exclusions and selective framings are acknowledged and challenged ultimately determines the scope and potential for global citizenship activism within development education.

Research across the sector in Ireland provides some sobering food for thought in this regard. Overall, it points to an inattention to inequalities and exclusions and a dominance of selective, neoliberal framings. Collectively, these mitigate against and severely limit the scope and potential for global citizenship activism. More specifically, in relation to the 'who' of citizenship, much research and policy remains focused on students (for example Bryan and Bracken's (2011) extensive research in the field of formal education). While the important role development education can play in challenging damaging anti-immigrant discourses and narratives and fostering global solidarity has been highlighted (see for example Devereux, 2017), the complex question of how migrants and asylum seekers can be actively involved in development education activism themselves, notably in the context of the significant personal and socio-psychological impacts they face (Tarusarira, 2017), has received far less attention. In relation to 'how' citizenship is promoted and enacted, research by both Bryan and Bracken (2011 – in schools) and Cannon (2022 – with development NGOs) highlight a dominance of individualised approaches with the 'what' of citizenship actions limited to light-touch and feel-good actions. Bryan and Bracken (2011) refer to these as the 'three F's' approach – fundraising, fasting, and having fun, while Cannon (2022: 13) characterises these as 'performance rather than status... taken

to simply mean doing "good things" to improve your community'. Within the related field of Human Rights Education, Waldron and Oberman's (2016) research among primary education level teachers reveals an emphasis on individual conformity and responsibility, rather than on rights. Within the field of higher education, elsewhere I have highlighted the limitations of an individualised, vocational, skills-based approach to global education (Gaynor, 2016). Across the education field more broadly, Bryan and Mochuziki have also highlighted this dominance of a 'skillification agenda' which, they argue, 'seeks to yield a productive (i.e., mentally healthy, resilient and skilled) workforce and a pliable, politically docile citizenry' (2023: 48).

Reinforcing this analysis and highlighting the dominance of neoliberal approaches across the sector is McCloskey's work (2019) where he has berated NGOs for failing to move beyond the SDGs and engage with the deeper structural roots of global inequality. In a similar vein, Fricke's (2022) analysis of development NGO websites has found a lack of structural analysis of neoliberalism as the root cause of global poverty and inequality. My own content and discourse analyses of Irish Aid strategies and Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) submissions reveals an increase in neoliberal framings over time (Gaynor, forthcoming). With respect to the relational dimensions of development education activism, Dillon's (2017) research among development education facilitators across the sector has revealed evidence of relational tensions with the state with Irish Aid, as principal funder of development education in Ireland, negatively impacting on the criticality of development education actors' public engagement. Indeed, as Fiedler et al (2011: 18, 36) have noted, such relational tensions have existed since the advent of development education in Ireland in the 1960s. Taken together, this body of research and analysis highlights the dangers of uncritically adopting dominant framings of development / global citizenship education while ignoring their multiple and overlapping exclusions, inequalities and limitations.

## Conclusion

In an increasingly divided, unequal world where, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than six in seven people felt insecure (UNDP, 2022), the failures of mainstream development and the 'modern-colonial global imaginary' on which

it rests (Stein et al, 2019) can no longer be denied. The range, depth and scope of the multiple overlapping challenges we collectively face – be they ecological, social, political or economic – can sometimes seem overwhelming. And it can be difficult to know how to respond.

The citizenship turn within development education, when considered and mobilised within the context of broader citizenship theories and critiques, offers one important avenue for a response. Yet, to be effective, this means moving beyond politically neutral, inoffensive awareness raising activities to challenge and confront the multiple and overlapping inequalities and exclusions which characterise dominant neoliberal framings and practices of global citizenship education. It means facilitating the active engagement of those most marginalised and excluded from political participation. And it means confronting the multiple erasures and denials which characterise much of the substance of contemporary development education where, evidence and testimony to the contrary, modernist conceptions continue to dominate. The SDGs retain a central place in framing development education policy and practice even though, for many, sustainable development is not a possibility within this modernist-colonial complex. Indeed, it is oxymoronic. As Stein et al (2022: 275) note:

> "...[Our ongoing] predicament is not primarily rooted in ignorance or immorality, and thus it cannot be addressed with more knowledge or more normative values... this predicament is instead rooted in foreclosures... or socially sanctioned disavowals".

Now, more than ever, we need to consider how we can reorient and reclaim global citizenship education in a way which acknowledges and addresses these disavowals and denials. Confronting historical and systemic erasures and exclusions as well as deep-seated relations of power and privilege – with the state, with our environment, and with each other -is uncomfortable and difficult. It involves struggles and tensions. It involves activism. This lies at the heart of what it means to be an 'active citizen'.

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# Civic Action within Global Citizenship Education as an Antidote to Despair

## Maayke de Vries

**Abstract:** Global citizenship education (GCE) as developed by UNESCO in 2015 is a pedagogy that aims to foster learners who contribute to a more just and peaceful world. UNESCO's framework for GCE is based on three dimensions: cognition, socio-emotions, and behaviour. Freire (2017) stated that learning about oppressive structures in the world cannot only be an intellectual endeavour but must include action to accomplish a more just and peaceful world. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (2014: 80) wrote about the importance of hope as a catalyst for change: 'there is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope'. For young people, however, the ability to dream becomes harder when they feel a collective sense of anxiety and distress around global problems, such as the climate crisis (Hickman et al., 2021). Actions towards solving complex global problems should address the intertwinement between individual acts and state-corporate behaviours (Bryan, 2022). This article reflects on a study that implemented such a justice-oriented GCE during three consecutive academic years in one Grade Nine class, as students participated in a ten-week action-oriented unit on the climate emergency. The outcome of the Action Research shows the importance of taking collective action as a part of GCE, since students derived hope from experiencing a sense of success when engaging in civic action. Social media, furthermore, was highlighted by students as their main form of civic engagement and could therefore be utilised as means for civic action within formal education. Lastly, the article suggests that insights from citizenship education into strategising and organising collective actions might help to address the complexity of global issues.

**Key words**: Civic Action; Social Media; Action Research; Global Citizenship Education; Paulo Freire.

## Introduction

Active citizenry is necessary for a democracy to function: citizens need to be engaged to influence decisions and take well-informed actions. Civic action, in

the form of collective initiatives addressing issues of public concern, is the cornerstone of active citizenship. The opportunity to develop skills and competences necessary to be an active citizen should be a part of any education for active citizenship (Ross, 2008). The study of citizenship education is relatively young and, therefore, somewhat unsettled (Arthur, Davies and Hahn, 2008). There is no clear conceptual structure that forms the foundation of knowledge and understanding within citizenship education (Jerome, 2018: 496). Besides deliberations on citizenship education for any national curriculum, there is also the increasingly popular concept of global citizenship education (GCE). GCE originates from a variety of different educational initiatives that belong to a distinctive pedagogical approach: global education (GE). The different educational approaches that form GE are development education, human rights education, education for sustainability, and GCE (Tarozzi and Torres, 2016: 6). UNESCO published an extensive guide on the educational framework for GCE in 2015. According to this document, GCE aims to 'build the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that learners need to be able to contribute to a more inclusive, just and peaceful world' (UNESCO, 2015: 15). The references at the end of the guide show the influence of critical pedagogues, such as Vanessa Andreotti, James Banks, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Geneva Gay, and bell hooks. The UNESCO guide from 2015 promotes a justice-oriented citizen: one that investigates structures and patterns underlying injustices to take action that addresses the root causes of the problem (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Recent discourses within the United Nations (UN) indicate a less critical approach to global issues, by highlighting a solution that calls for individuals to develop resilience or kindness (Bryan and Mochizuki, 2023). This tendency reflects the dominance of neoliberalism in all facets of society, asserting the belief that 'all problems are personal and individual, making it almost impossible to translate private troubles into wider systemic considerations' (Giroux, 2022: 112). Competences of self-development, however, are not skills related to citizenship, as the former does not require a relationship between the individual and wider society. Civic engagement is about being concerned with public issues and finding solutions through collective initiatives.

This article examines the role of civic action within GCE that aims to develop a justice-oriented citizenry. I investigated my own teaching practice by

paying specific attention to the role of civic action within the implementation of GCE. By following the UNESCO guide from 2015, the aim was for students to go beyond individual acts of kindness and responsibility and think about transforming broader unjust structures and systems in society. After three cycles of Action Research, the findings suggest that students engage with civic action in the form of awareness raising but remain focused on influencing individual mindsets and attitudes. Students engaged mostly with politics through social media, and this deserves more attention within the formal curriculum. Lastly, students expressed feelings of hopefulness after organising their own action which emphasises the importance of civic action within GCE.

## Global citizenship education

Since the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in 2015, GCE has gained increasing prominence. SDG 4.7 explicitly aims to educate for sustainable development and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2017). The UNESCO guidelines from 2015 divided GCE in three different domains: cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioural. I briefly summarised the three different domains in figure 1, as all three included long and detailed overviews of learning progressions and topic lists.

Figure 1: Summary of GCE based on UNESCO's 2015 framework.

| The cognitive domain | Focuses on acquiring knowledge and understanding about historical influence on and current-day influences of global power structures on local realities. |
| --- | --- |
| The social-emotional domain | Elaborates on identity forming and cultivating collective well-being through respecting diversity. |
| The behavioural domain | Deals with effective civic engagement through taking action in order to achieve social justice and becoming an agent of positive change. |

On the one hand, the guide contained a detailed explanation on how to implement GCE in schools, but was vague and ambiguous about concrete

examples or topics. For example, even though the legacy of colonialism or slavery is mentioned, no clear connection is made between this legacy and present-day economic inequalities between the global North and South. The behavioural domain mentioned developing the skills of strategising, organising, and mobilising, while it also highlighted entrepreneurship, financial skills, and innovation as relevant skills for taking action (UNESCO, 2015: 43). The ambiguities of GCE are the result of the variety of educational programmes within GE.

GCE can be divided into three major orientations: neoliberal, liberal, and critical (Pashby et al., 2020). Neoliberal understandings of GCE focused on an economic narrative, whereby there is an entrepreneurial position noticeable and competitiveness for employability encouraged (Ibid.). Liberal typologies of GCE highlighted the role of democracy based on universal values including openness, love, and respect, along with cultural equality and a strong focus on civic engagement through dialogue (Ibid.). Critical approaches to GCE addressed and acknowledged social injustices, thereby critiquing current power structures and ideas of modernity and recognising complicity (Ibid.). Additionally, Pashby et al. (2020) looked for crossovers between the different typologies to show that liberal and neoliberal - and some critical - orientations shared a Western perspective on the world which perpetuates existing colonial and capitalist social relations (Ibid.: 3). This strong influence of liberal and neoliberal discourses within GCE can be considered as a battle between idealism and the increasing influence of corporations on the UN Education programmes.

Neoliberalism's influence on UN policymaking is clearly noticeable since economic growth is at the centre of the SDGs and thus GCE. There is a silence regarding consumerism and neoliberal economic agendas as a cause of today's global inequality within UN initiatives to better the world (Selby and Kagawa, 2011). Bryan and Mochizuki (2023) indicated how recent discourses within the UN deviated from a politically engaging orientation of citizenship towards a more de-politicised and individualised approach. The UNESCO framework (2015) was influenced by Freirean interpretations of transformative education as an enabler of social and ecological justice. However, a UN Summit in 2022 identified transformative education 'as a *lynchpin* for (green) economic

growth in a digitised economy' (Bryan and Mochizuki, 2023: 55). These two understandings of education foster different kinds of citizenship education. Whereas the latter emphasised competences and skills to become employable in a flexible workforce (Ibid: 63), the former encouraged inquiry into global relationships and structures behind the economic exploitation of people and the planet in the global South and North (Shultz, 2007). Within GCE there is little discussion about the characteristics of citizenship education as an academic field, although a better understanding of citizenship education could ensure that empowerment of citizens is at the core of GCE.

## Active citizens are empowered citizens

Citizenship as status can be considered a political and legal relationship between a state and its inhabitants. In recent decades the concept of citizenship expanded to include a relationship with the wider planet rather than only with a state, along with encompassing ideas about living together as fellow citizens (Veugelers, 2021). This enhancement of 'citizenship' happened paradoxically while neoliberal philosophies guided government policies, withdrawing the government from public life and replacing it with market structures (Ibid.). As a consequence, citizenship is mainly perceived as an individual identity that grants rights to *individuals,* along with capabilities and choices that *individuals* can exert through participation in society (Soysal, 2022). Such a participatory perception of citizenship is based on an individualistic approach to citizenship and represents just one interpretation of the concept.

Citizenship education teaches students knowledge and understandings about governmental systems and should provide them with opportunities to practice the necessary skills for taking civic action. Any effective citizenship education contains three elements: values and dispositions, skills and competences, and knowledge and understanding (Ross, 2008). The latter is sufficient for a passive citizenship, whereas the first two are essential to educate active citizens who feel empowered to engage with and seek to change a given situation (Ibid.). These three elements correspond with UNESCO's three domains for GCE and all three should have a place in schools' curricula. Ross (2008: 496) highlighted the importance of skills and competence within citizenship education for students to be active citizens:

"sophisticated skills of communication, which include being able to consider and respond to the views of others, being able to persuade, and being capable of being persuaded; skills of participation, which include an understanding of group dynamics and of how to contribute to the social development of civic action and skills of social action".

Civic action is about interacting with others to inform, deliberate, persuade or motivate in order to challenge or transform an injustice concerning the community.

Westheimer and Kahne, in their influential publication from 2004, conceptualised three main types of citizenship that education might promote (see Figure 2).

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Figure 2: Overview of three kinds of citizens (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004: 239)

| | Personally Responsible Citizen | Participatory Citizen | Justice-Oriented Citizen |
|---|---|---|---|
| Description | · Acts responsible in his/her community<br>· Works and pays taxes<br>· Obeys laws<br>· Recycles, gives blood<br>· Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis | · Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts<br>· Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment.<br>· Knows how government agencies work<br>· Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks | · Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes<br>· Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice<br>· Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change |
| Sample Action | Contributes food to a food drive | Helps to organize a food drive | Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes |
| Core Assumptions | To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good characters; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community. | To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures. | To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time. |

A parallel can be drawn between the UNESCO publication from 2015 and Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) conceptualisation of justice-oriented citizens. Both frameworks highlighted assessment of root causes of local, national, and global injustices, along with an emphasis on analysing structures and unequal power dynamics in perpetuating existing global inequalities. Both frameworks also promote civic action that challenges issues of social justice through individual and collective action directed at transforming oneself and society as a whole. However, the most common interpretation of GCE is arguably more related to personally responsible citizens through its focus on donations and volunteering, rather than on actions that would question and challenge root causes of structural injustices (McCloskey, 2016). Neoliberal philosophies that guide institutional policies nowadays address citizens as personally responsible and participatory individuals.

## Global citizenship education from a justice-oriented perspective

The kind of learning aligned with a justice-oriented GCE is scarce within GCE, as the focus seems to be on personal acts rather than collective initiatives (Tarc, 2015: 53). GCE is, therefore, teaching citizenship instead of what Biesta (2011) described as learning democracy. According to Biesta (Ibid.), learning to be a citizen is not only about knowledge, skills, or values but about opportunities for students to enact upon their citizenship through exposure and engagement with democracy. A report by the Development Education Research Centre evaluated the impact of a three-year project that aimed to develop active global citizens in different countries (Hunt, 2017). The report highlighted that GCE encouraged students to reflect on their own behaviour and they became more interested in global issues and action, but there was no significant impact on the willingness and participation in civic action to make the world fairer. This seems like a missed opportunity since citizenship education aims to develop citizens who are able to engage, organise, strategise and mobilise with others in order to address a public concern.

A justice-oriented citizenship education considers *acting* as a part of *knowing* so that a critical understanding of the world can emerge. The work of the Brazilian pedagogue, Paulo Freire, formed the basis on which the conceptualisation of a justice-oriented citizen is developed by Westheimer and

Kahne (2004). Freire (2017) suggested problem-posing education to educate citizens according to democratic principles. This method of teaching aimed to bring down the barrier between the teacher and the student by creating a dialogue between the two, without one being in control of the conversation. Students are in charge of their own inquiries about the world in which they live, thereby investigating the root causes of the problems their communities face. The inquiries would expose the exploitative structures and systems that create a given situation, which would consequently instil a sense of obligation to address the exposed realities. This is what Freire referred to as the emergence of consciousness or *conscientização*. For Freire (Ibid.: 131), *conscientização* was not only a cognitive development, but involved taking action to transform oppressive structures as an inherent part of this process:

> "People will be truly critical if they live the plenitude of the praxis, that is, if their action encompasses a critical reflection which increasingly organises their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naive knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality".

Thus, reflection and action aimed to transform structures are at the core of Freire's educational philosophy and the educational philosophy upon which justice-oriented citizenship is based.

Freire's educational ideas were rooted in his work with those who were oppressed by the structures that needed to be transformed, hence the implementation of his pedagogy in the global North might be considered somewhat incongruous. Freire used problem-posing education to empower illiterate poor farmers in Brazil, whereas the implementation of this educational approach in the global North involves those who bear responsibility for the existence of the structures they aim to transform. Within formal education, students often participate in actions that are superficial and focussed on quick fixes aimed at self-fulfilment rather than reflecting on their own complicity and responsibility (Karsgaard, 2019: 70). However, the realisation of complicity can be a disempowering experience, as students do not actively choose to be complicit or have the power to change the situation (Zembylas, 2020: 10). The goal of

justice-oriented citizenship education would be to translate the realisation of complicity into specific individual and collective acts resisting the perpetuation of the injustice (Ibid). For complex global problems, civic action would require an understanding that 'ordinary harms' committed by individuals are embedded in the structural behaviours of states and corporations that facilitate these acts (Bryan, 2022: 335). This calls for a pedagogy that addresses the responsibility of individuals as well as institutions, by identifying the complex connections between the acts of individuals and structures that perpetuate and incentivise these activities (Ibid). Thus, civic action within a justice-oriented GCE should focus on specific acts that translate complicity into individual and collective action aiming to address the complexity of global problems.
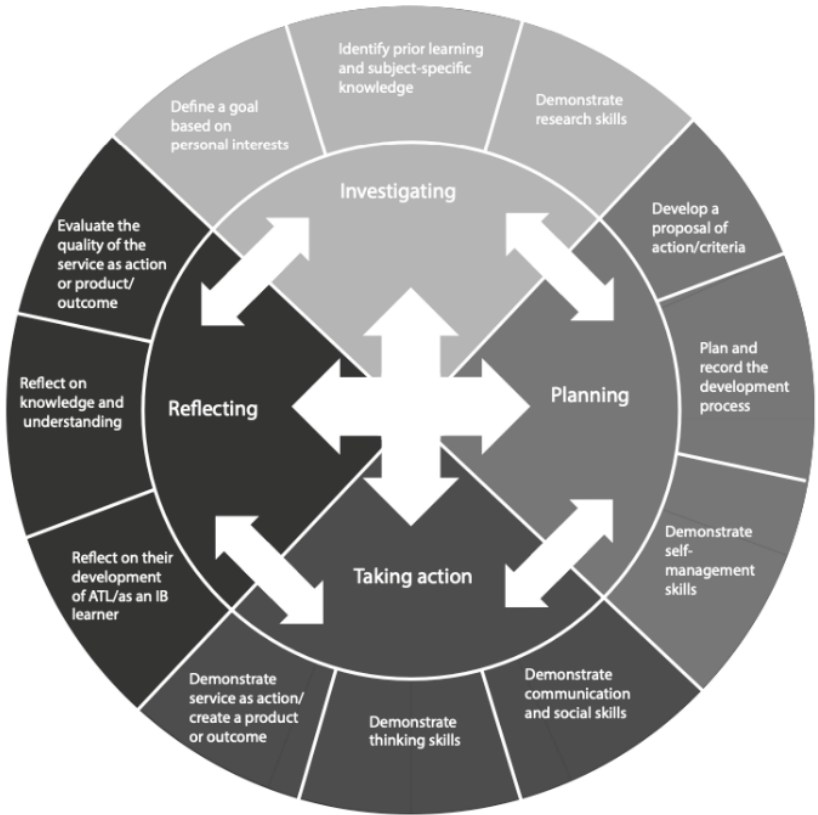
## The study

The UNESCO framework of GCE aspired to develop citizens who feel empowered to make the world more inclusive, just, and peaceful through knowledge, values, and skills. As I outlined in the previous sections, citizenship education is about engaging in civic action as much as it is about knowing political processes and procedures or embracing values such as diversity and respect. However, there is a lack of initiatives within GCE that develop active citizens through engagement with civic action, as the focus is more on nurturing citizens that prioritise individual acts without challenging the status quo. The research question that guides this article is the following: How can engagement with civic action help to develop justice-oriented citizens within GCE?

The study presented in this article draws upon my doctoral research that investigated the implementation of GCE as a pedagogy through Action Research (AR). My aim was to investigate how engagement with civic action, as an integral part of GCE, could enable students to see beyond simplistic individual acts and encourage them to take action that would target global structures of injustices. The study took place in the Netherlands at an international school that followed the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme. One of the required components of this programme is Service as Action. Students need to design, organise, and participate in actions that make a positive difference in their community throughout the Middle Years Programme (MYP). This stems from the IB's mission to create a better world through education by enabling students

'to make sense of the complexities of the world around them, as well as equipping them with the skills and dispositions needed for taking responsible action for the future' (International Baccalaureate Organisation, 2019: 1). The IB Director General Olli-Pekka Heinonen made this further explicit by referring to the IB's mandate to provide an education that is relevant during the current climate emergency, so that students can be active participants in saving the world from this global crisis caused by selfishness, greed, and apathy (Heinonen, 2022). The IB curriculum, therefore, promotes the idea of inspiring students to become 'agents of change', who are equipped to explore local and global issues and able to take principled action to realise change in the world (Heinonen, 2021). Justice-oriented citizens who first investigate complex issues before taking action fits with the IB philosophy to educate agents of change.

The data for this study was collected while students participated in a ten-week action project about the climate emergency, which followed a twelve-week unit on human rights that used systems thinking. Teaching climate change allows educators to highlight the interconnectedness of the planet by examining how consumer practices and government policies in the global North impact other parts of the world, thereby promoting individual as well as collective actions (Mallon, 2015). The IB model for action-oriented projects contains a four steps sequence so that students' actions are appropriate, ethical, and necessary (Figure 3). The data was collected throughout the 2020-23 academic years and the study took place in Grade Nine; students were fourteen and fifteen years old. Consent was asked from students, parents, and the educational institute, leading to a total of 39 participants. The school was a semi-private institute, which means that parents pay a school fee in contrast to free public education in the Netherlands. Thus students attending the school came from economically privileged backgrounds. The nationality of the students was diverse since international schools serve an international community who are highly mobile.

During their action-project, the students worked in groups to prepare and execute an action that would either mitigate the causes of the climate emergency or adapt to the inevitable consequences of an increase in temperature. Between 2020 and 2023, students were offered different topics from which they could choose. In 2020-21 and 2021-22 the focus was on prominent sectors that emit the most carbon dioxide, such as industries and agriculture·, whereas in 2022-23, the students focused on the causes and consequences of the climate

emergency in the Netherlands to emphasise the connection between the local and the global. Students first investigated their topic, which included issues such as fast fashion, factory farming or rising tides. Hereby students used systems thinking tools, like cause-and-effect diagrams and connection circles, to reveal the impact of societal structures on individual behaviours. Thereafter, the students planned their action, executed it and reflected on the impact of the action on themselves and the community at large. Examples of actions that students took during this project were petitions, lobbying political leaders, or conducting workshops at school. Their progress and effort were captured in a graded report that included evidence of all four components equally.
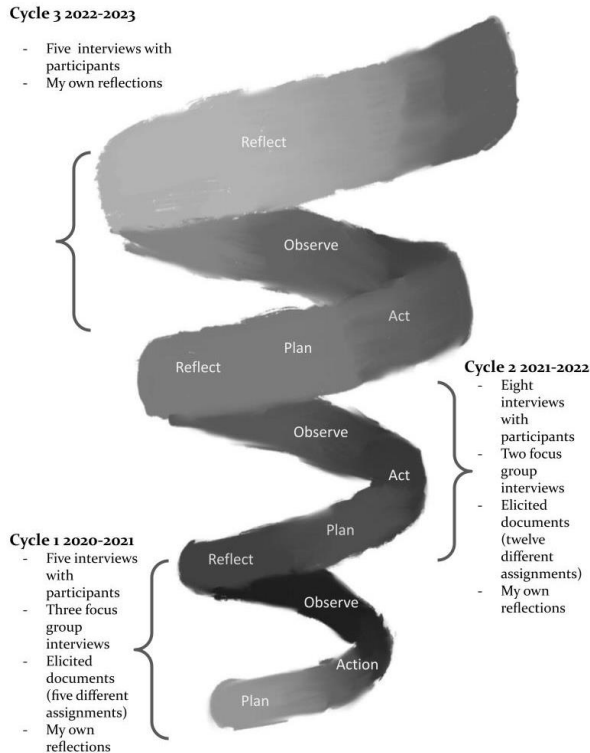
## Methodology

This AR took place in three consecutive academic years, during which I revised my teaching to improve the implementation of GCE. The aim of an AR is to improve a given social situation through research by the practitioner, who engages in systematic and critical inquiry in order to better understand their own practice and share this publicly (Altrichter et al., 2008: 6). As the aim of AR is for practitioners to solve their own challenges, self-reflective cycles of action and reflection form the core of knowledge creation (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014: 26). Therefore, I reflected during and after each cycle on my practice by interviewing students, collecting elicited documents, and conducting conversations with a critical friend who taught the parallel class so as to better understand the effect of action-oriented teaching (Figure 4).

During the interviews, I asked students about their experiences of the teaching and learning. The interviews were based on assignments that students did as a part of the unit, such as a mind map on the climate emergency or a graphic organiser about a class reading. The language of instruction is English at the school, therefore, the interviews were conducted in English. I would ask students to explain their work and to indicate if something from the assignment was considered significant to them personally or if they had any outstanding questions about the assignments. By interviewing students on the basis of elicited documents, I aimed to mitigate the power imbalance between them as the students and myself as their teacher. The students were in control of the information they

wanted to share and their ideas guided the conversation, as the questions were about assignments they had undertaken beforehand (Barton, 2015).

On the basis of the data collected and analysed, I planned the next cycle of teaching, leading to changes that provided more examples of young people engaging with civic action, making use of system thinking tools to focus on structural causes, and connecting the climate emergency to urgent local issues. Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) was used to guide the collecting and processing of data.

Figure 4: Overview of the data collection



Cycle 3 2022-2023
- Five interviews with participants
- My own reflections

Reflect
Observe
Act
Plan
Reflect
Observe
Act
Plan
Reflect
Observe
Action
Plan

Cycle 2 2021-2022
- Eight interviews with participants
- Two focus group interviews
- Elicited documents (twelve different assignments)
- My own reflections

Cycle 1 2020-2021
- Five interviews with participants
- Three focus group interviews
- Elicited documents (five different assignments)
- My own reflections

The aim of CGT is to formulate a theoretical understanding of an experience that is well-grounded in the data. Just as AR relies on the reflexivity of the researcher, CGT highlights the need for the researcher to be self-conscious about their relationship to the data and the emerging themes (Charmaz, 2020). One key feature of a grounded theory is the simultaneous collecting and analysing of the data (Charmaz, 2014); the interviewing of participants and the coding of those interviews happened within the same cycle. In line with CGT procedures, I initially coded data through 'in vivo' coding, so that words from the participants guided the codes that emerged (Tarozzi, 2020). Throughout the data collection, the coding of the interviews became more focused as particular themes started to emerge. I applied theoretical sampling by purposefully interviewing participants that could either confirm the emerging theory or contradict it. During this process, I made continuous memos to justify choices made in the coding and to reflect on the emerging theory by connecting different codes. Based on those memos, theoretical coding took place which is captured in the four themes that eventually explained the role of civic action within GCE.

The study had several limitations: it was conducted in one educational institution, which serves a particular student body and offers a specific curriculum, with only one instructor. To verify my findings with others, I coded one interview together with my critical friend, who taught the parallel class, to confirm my interpretation of the participant's experiences. After each cycle, I also presented the initial findings to the participants by asking them for feedback. Participants might have given socially desirable answers during interviews while holding contrasting views privately. I sought to mitigate these challenges by triangulating the data from the individual interviews with insights from focus group discussions and elicited documents, and by working with a critical friend.

## Findings

The findings of the study directly relate to the role of civic action in developing justice-oriented global citizens. The goal of AR is to support practitioners with a particular challenge that they are facing in their practice, however 'such "situational understandings" can also be of universal significance by throwing light on possibilities for action in other situations' (Elliott, 2009: 35). By sharing these findings, I hope to contribute to conversations among GE educators about

possible practices that advance justice-oriented GCE in developing active citizens. From the data, four themes emerged that gave me insights into the role of action within GCE. These themes were derived from a combination of interviews with students as well as group discussions and elicited documents. Students mostly mentioned awareness raising as a method to take action: to mobilise more people to create a change. Students raised awareness most often on social media, which was an important way for them to take action. However, students remained focused on individuals who need to change their mindset, rather than mentioning the changing of unjust structures. Most importantly, students indicated that learning how to take action gave them hope that change is possible.

## *Recognising awareness raising as a catalyst for change*
The act of awareness raising was by far the most often-mentioned example of civic action that could create change. Students explicitly mentioned raising awareness as a useful way to ignite a significant impact on an issue. An example is this observation from one student:

> "So I think it could also be our responsibility to raise a bit of awareness about it [an injustice] because we know about it and some people don't know about it. So raising awareness about it could make people who don't know about or realise what's happening and they could help more people raise awareness about it. So it's more like a chain".

Students recognised the need to inform others about a certain issue in order to create a change, thereby acknowledging that a necessary transformation required a joint effort. For such a collaborative approach the students identified several requirements: clear goal setting, campaigning, and advocating on behalf of others. One student expressed the importance of goal setting for collective action: 'because [...] without clear goals, we just become a nuisance to the public view'. Campaigning could be done in several forms according to the students: addressing politicians through petitions, informing the public, or participating in protests. One student summarised it as follows: 'personally I would, I would do like activism. I would do like multiple stuff because I don't think one is enough, like protesting, making a petition...gathering people for that'. Lastly, the importance of awareness raising was connected to the act of advocating for those

who are in need, or as the students worded it 'standing up for others'. This was mentioned mostly in relation to the Black Lives Matter protests that took place in the summer of 2020. Students referred to standing against racism by participating in campaigns such as protests or informing others about the existence of racism. The act of raising awareness about a certain issue was considered by students as a way to eventually create a more consequential impact by using the power of the masses rather than working as an individual. Social media was the main method that students themselves used to spread awareness about certain causes.

### Using social media to be informed and to give voice

Social media plays an important role in young people's lives, by providing information about issues around the world and by giving them an opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions. Especially after the several lockdowns during COVID-19, young people spent more time on social media than ever (Groenestein and Portegies, 2020). Students talked about social media in a positive manner, as it allowed them to build connections and develop a sense of belonging. One student described it as a 'giant supportive system that I didn't have before'. At the same time, they acknowledged that social media has become hard to ignore: 'I mean like, it's kind of hard [...], you just see it, you know. Like no matter if you try or not, it's like everywhere basically, everybody is sharing different things'. In doing so students used social media to connect with others and to gain information about the world through those connections. Students also saw commenting on posts or reposting other people's videos or messages as a way to spread awareness. One student explained it as follows:

> "when I see it online, like on Instagram for example something, fire somewhere due to like climate hazards and then I also try to spread awareness about it, like posting the post on my story and stuff".

This quote shows how students use social media as a medium to gain information and as a means to spread awareness about a certain issue.

Social media was perceived by many students as a helpful tool to organise collective action which could eventually lead to change. The spreading of information through social media about injustices such as climate change, racial

discrimination or homophobia was seen as a way of educating those who might be unaware. Social media was seen as a driver of change, rather than a hindrance:

> "The young generation, we also have a huge role because we have social media and other platforms where we can spread awareness, because in the olden days there was like newspapers and all. But these days more people are using social media".

Social media was thus perceived by students as making it easier to participate in action, which the following quote illustrates:

> "I feel like it has never been easier for us to campaign because there are so many different ways. We can do it on social media, we can participate in real life [...]. So I feel like social media is looked at very negatively. I feel like if we use social media in the proper way, it can prove really useful in many areas".

Social media was for students a natural way to participate in civic action as they already utilise this tool in their daily lives, outside of any formal educational setting.

### Focusing on changing individuals rather than structures

Even though students referred to the importance of awareness raising in order to organise with others, the suggested solution was often focused on changing individual attitudes rather than systems or structures that facilitate certain behaviours. Under this theme were coded any answers from students that referred to the need for individual people to adjust their mindset for a fairer world to be achieved. Students often saw open-mindedness as a solution to the injustices they investigated as a part of their project. The following quote illustrates this idea:

> "There should be ways that people can have an opportunity to change their mindsets and grow from that [discriminatory attitudes]. I would say mostly in the education systems [is the responsibility for changing people's mindset] and how much priority they give towards discrimination and stuff. In some schools, I don't know specifically

what school, but maybe in some schools bullying or what people say to each other, they don't really care much about what happens. So, that's where a lot of these problems still continue".

The student refers to a system, namely education, that might not prioritise teaching fairness and equity, as such discrimination still happens. However, the student does not question the system that allows and normalises discriminatory behaviours of individuals by disregarding it.

This focus on educating yourself and others was considered by many students as the solution to global injustices. The idea ties in with the act of awareness raising; educating others was deemed to have a potential domino effect. An example of such reasoning is the following quote:

"Whenever I see something that I wasn't aware of, I just repost it so that other people are also aware. For example, if it's like a charity then I repost it, so other people can also donate to it".

Although students considered raising awareness as a way to gain support for a cause, there was no mentioning of a potential successive collective action. The raising of awareness was supposed to prompt individuals to act in the form of making a donation. This relates to a personally responsible citizenship, instead of a justice-oriented one.

Very few students articulated the idea that change might only be possible if many people are working together in an organised movement. The following quote was an exception, with regard to those who considered joining an already existing social movement:

"You could first start by taking into like consideration big movements, such as the Zero Hour or the Black Lives Matter. You could take into consideration what they're doing and you could either try to involve more people in it or get involved yourself and try to make change".

*Taking action gives hope*

Regardless of students' ideas about the kind of action that is most useful, the fact that they participated in an action brought them hope. Learning about global issues, such as the climate emergency, might create anxiety amongst students about the society in which they live. Hickman et al. (2021) showed that young people globally experience distress about inadequate governmental responses to the climate emergency because it compromises their futures. Some students gained new ideas about the kind of actions they could participate in through the organisation of their own action. This one student gained knowledge about a specific form of action: 'the petition, I didn't think of that before, I really thought about that and I did some research and I found that petitions make an impact'. So the experience of organising their own action gave students the insight that there are several ways in which they can make a difference. It is important that students feel that they can make change, as otherwise they might end up feeling rather hopeless in the midst of complex problems. The following quotation from a student shows how they experienced this:

> "I felt that just one person doing things won't be impactful, doing this more efficiently may help, but we have to raise awareness to gain more results. [...] After getting 100 signatures, like getting support from others. I felt happy that I raised awareness about whatever is happening, I thought I could do more [...], after that I got a little hope.

Another student also expressed confidence in their ability to organise another action after doing research into a topic: 'I was disappointed with so much emission from cows, which I didn't think of before. [...] So I thought we could spread awareness, for people to be more mindful about what they eat'. Both responses of students show that they felt disappointment about the current situation, but experienced a sense of hope when participating in taking action. This hopefulness might inspire future actions to feel less disappointed or overwhelmed by the problems that our planet is facing. Not all students were so explicit in referring to their own action as giving inspiration; others relied on examples that were given of young people who took climate action in their own communities.

## Discussion

This article reflected on a study that investigated the role of civic action in developing justice-oriented citizens in line with the IB programme and critical GCE. My aim was to understand how engagement with civic action could stimulate students to aim for necessary systemic transformations, rather than focusing solely on shallow quick fixes by individuals which have a limited impact.

Awareness raising emerged from the data as the most common way of taking action for students, aiming to ignite more impact by informing more people. The act of contributing to a public conversation about political issues can be considered a civic act: pursuing voice. Your voice is one of the voices in the mix of what is considered the public opinion about a certain issue (Allen, 2018). Awareness raising alone, however, does not lead to a justice-oriented citizenry, but rather to what Andreotti (2006) notably called 'soft GCE'. The impact of civic action might be more meaningful when awareness raising goes beyond informing and aims to influence a decision-making process. The findings suggest that students informed others about a certain issue without contemplating a subsequent response to that knowledge. I therefore consider it to be useful for subsequent action-oriented projects to make a distinction between pursuing voice, having an influence or perhaps both (Democratic Knowledge Project, 2023). For students to be able to drive more strategic impact, imparting traditional civic knowledge about advocacy, and dealing with elected representatives, or the power distribution between the local and central government, are necessary (Allen, 2018). This recalls the following recommendation from Jerome and Lalor (2020: 115):

> "We want to suggest that knowledge of how and why one would use a petition reveals students' level of citizenship understanding, whereas the mere knowledge that petitions exist is of limited use. The point for teachers is to consider scaffolding classwork so that students move beyond suggesting simplistic and superficial prescriptions for citizens' action and explain precisely how a proposed action might lead to a desired outcome".

Thus, awareness raising activities among students could potentially lead to more active citizenship by combining it with knowledge about leverage points within a democratic state.

A lack of knowledge and understanding of participatory politics might have contributed to students mainly expressing strategies for actions that align with personally responsible citizenship rather than justice-oriented citizenship. The findings showed that though students realised the importance of working together in order to solve complex global problems, their often-mentioned solution was for individual people to essentially 'know and do better'. Pashby and Sund (2020) explained that existing political actions do not align well with embracing the complexity of global problems, as most of our solutions are embedded within a neoliberal framework and tied to a personally responsible or participatory citizen. Especially in the context of the global North, civic action should involve reflections on complicity and shared responsibility in order to challenge dominant social, economic and political structures (Gyberg, Anshelm, Hallström, 2020). However, a GCE that furthers a justice-oriented approach to global issues, by highlighting the entanglement between individual acts and structural forces, requires more than this one-off project. The findings presented in this article suggest that a better integration of social media as participatory politics within GCE can provide a solution.

Social media was found to be an important tool for civic action as students used this frequently in their daily life. The findings show that students used social media to inform others about causes they cared about. The act of exerting both voice and influence on issues of public concern on social media are considered digital political engagement (Kahne, Hodgin and Eidman-Aadahl, 2016). Typical civic actions are now taking place online, by effectuating change through digital presence. During this action-oriented project, there was no mention of social media specifically, nor was it used as an example for successful campaigning. The importance of social media emerged through the interviews with the students, in which they expressed their usage of the platforms. For Biesta (2011: 6) 'learning democracy' is about young people's 'participation in the contexts and practices that make up their everyday lives, in school, college and university, and in society at large'. It is clear that social media has an important

role in students' everyday lives and therefore should arguably be more embedded as a site for learning citizenship. Besides social media's obvious flaws, there is potential for meaningful civic engagement such as micro-mobilisation, flash-activism, or hybrid-forms of actions (Earl, 2018). For students to utilise social media as civic action, the integration of digital citizenship within citizenship education is recommended. This in combination with critical literacy, to question and highlight power relationships online and offline, could make a justice-oriented GCE attainable (Pathak-Shelat, 2018).

Above all, the findings showed that engaging students in developing, planning, and executing their own action provides them with hope to solve global issues. Justice-oriented citizens look for complexity when trying to understand injustice, which can also lead to desperation and pessimism (Bryan, 2020). The findings, however, indicate that engaging with civic action that contributes to a solution gives young people hope. The experience of organising a collective action made students realise that they are not alone in their concerns but can count on support from others. This encounter provided a remedy for hopelessness and also gave young people the motivation to organise future actions. It underlines the importance of teaching active citizenship, allowing students to practice planning, organising, and executing collective actions.

## Conclusion

The implementation of active GCE to develop justice-oriented citizens is a complicated task since neoliberal discourses around citizenship are dominant in most parts of the world. Thus, most political actions that we are familiar with focus on individual acts and attributes, which disregard the responsibility of behaviours by states and corporates. Nevertheless, this research showed the importance for educators of providing students with an opportunity to engage with political actions as a way to work together towards solving complex issues of social justice. As bell hooks (2003: xiv) said: 'when we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope'. By informing GCE with insights from citizenship education, the kinds of civic actions that students can engage with might become more relevant in addressing the complexity of global issues for which there are no straightforward solutions.

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# CHILDREN'S ACTIVISM AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: EXPLORING DIGITAL POLITICAL ACTION AS PEDAGOGY IN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

## GABRIELA MARTÍNEZ SAINZ

**Abstract:** In the last decade, emerging digital technologies have created spaces for youth-led activism to flourish across the world. These spaces have facilitated civic engagement and bottom-up political participation from children and young people that are grounded in their specific interests and needs. Since the participatory practices granted by digital activism have been at the core of how younger generations are fighting for and advancing social change, it is essential for development education (DE) to explore the pedagogical possibilities of this particular type of participation. This article analyses youth-led mobilisations in Brazil connected to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their corresponding social media activity as a way to explore digital activism experiences and practices. The mobilisation is the Brazilian school occupations under the hashtag #OccupaTudo and #EscolasEmLuta that address SDG 4 Quality Education. Through a digital ethnography that explores the social media discussions associated with this movement and what can be perceived as the lack of long term impact, the article demonstrates the relevance of political action as a pedagogy and a tool for teaching children and young people about their rights, how to uphold them and how to overcome existing barriers for their civic engagement and participation. Building upon Hannah Arendt's theory of action, the article proposes an approach to digital political action as pedagogy and not only as an expected outcome for development education.

**Key words:** Children Human Rights Defenders; Children's Activism; Climate Action; Digital Activism; Social Movements; Sustainable Development Goals.

## Introduction

Development education (DE) seeks to promote social change towards a more just, fair and sustainable world through the empowerment, engagement and participation of individuals and communities. The four principles of DE as proposed by Bourn (2015) are: a global outlook; the recognition of power and inequality in the world; the belief in social justice and equity; and the commitment

to reflection, dialogue and transformation. DE fosters transformation of both the individual and the world 'with which and in which they find themselves' (Freire, 2005: 83). Action is an essential element for DE and is the core expected outcome of teaching and learning processes. As such, it unifies the diversity of approaches and stakeholders in this field (McCloskey, 2016).

Action for global social change has been significantly impacted by the emergence of a participatory culture challenging traditional forms of civic engagement and political participation (Jenkins et al., 2016). Digital technologies have created new spaces for activism that offer novel and inclusive ways to advocate for social change favouring actions in particular among individuals and groups often marginalised (Allen and Light, 2015; Kahne, Middaugh and Allen, 2014; Martínez Sainz and Hanna, 2023). These new spaces have been particularly relevant for children and how they exercise their fundamental human rights, including their right to participate, be heard and engage in public deliberation and influence decision-making. Digital spaces have facilitated unprecedented civic engagement and bottom-up political participation from children and young people leading to an activism that is deeply grounded in their specific interests and needs (Martínez Sainz et al., 2020). These spaces have not only afforded new opportunities for children and young people, they also pose risks and challenge to their rights, safety and wellbeing (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021). Since the participatory practices granted by digital activism have been at the core of how younger generations are fighting for and advancing social change, it becomes essential for DE to explore the pedagogical possibilities of digital spaces and the opportunities they create to advance transformative political participation. Deepening our understanding of digital activism among children and young people can help researchers and practitioners in the field of DE to create a responsive and child-centred blueprint for the field to move forward.

## Children's participatory rights and digital activism

Children, understood as those under 18 years old as stated in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), have been involved historically in protests and social movements around the world. Their involvement in social movements challenges key assumptions about power, children's capacity and their perceived political passivity (Taft, 2019). Children's rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly are key for their political participation and civic

engagement because it provides them with effective channels for political participation in response to their exclusion from traditional mechanisms such as voting or forming political organisations. Children's rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly are recognised in Article 15 of the UNCRC (Ibid.) which states that:

> "States Parties recognise the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.
>
> No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of these rights other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interest of national security or public safety, public order (*ordre public*), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others".

The effective exercise of these rights depends on the realisation of other children's rights including the foundational right to non-discrimination (article 2), the right to express views and have them taken seriously (article 12), the right to be free from harm (article 19) and the right to recognise their best interests and evolving capacities (articles 3 and 5) (Hanna and Martínez Sainz, forthcoming). The full realisation of these rights requires not only the facilitation but also the implementation of measures that ensure children have the means and space to exercise their rights safely (Lundy, 2020). Their right to assembly allows them to effectively express their opinions, raise their voice on matters that affect them, successfully influence policy-makers and impact the political, economic and cultural landscape. In this sense, peaceful assembly not only empowers children at an individual level but also strengthens their collective capacity for social change despite the vulnerable status they have due to the lack of full legal capacity or political and economic power.

Children and young people have been traditionally marginalised and excluded from public debates and in many cases their participation has been limited to consultations or confined to narrowed definitions of what counts as active civic and political engagement (Collin, 2015). Through digital technologies, they have crafted non-conventional and new forms of civic engagement in order

to amplify their voices in public debates, influence policy and demand social change through active political participation in digital environments (Collin, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2016; Martínez Sainz et al., 2020). Digital technologies have redefined children's political participation by enabling them to exercise rights and expanding their repertoire of citizenship practices, as a wide array of civic and political actions become available to them. Through digital technologies children can access and share information and engage in political discussions as well as taking part in campaigns and protests (Livingstone et al., 2019). Xenos et al. (2014) argue that social media offers children and young people a channel for political participation, and the expressive capacities to turn non-political methods into effective tools for engaging in political life (Theocharis, 2015; Cho et al., 2020). These digital spaces work as an educational environment for experiential learning of rights (Martínez Sainz and Hanna, 2023), a laboratory where they can create new forms of political action and try and test their own civic competencies (Jenkins et al., 2016). Digital technologies counteract the marginalisation of children and young people from public decision-making in a threefold way: providing them with the information needed, developing their civic skills and making accessible the tools to demand actions and disrupt political landscapes.

However, children face significant barriers to their right to peaceful assembly not only as a result of discrimination due to their age, but also from challenges that digital technologies have created for the enjoyment and protection of this right (Child Rights Connect, 2018; Hanna and Martínez Sainz, Forthcoming. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has noted, digital technologies have opened new spaces and opportunities for peaceful assembly and association but these have also created new risks and threats to this right. As stated in the report:

> "By serving both as tools through which these rights can be exercised 'offline' and as spaces where individuals can actively form online assemblies and associations, digital technologies have vastly expanded the capacities of individuals and civil society groups to organize and mobilize, to advance human rights and to innovate for social change" (UN Human Rights Council, 2019).

Even though children have access to these tools and digital spaces to participate civically and politically either online or offline, the extent to which they can fully exercise their rights thanks to these technologies depends on multiple factors, from material conditions and access to the technologies (Joyce, 2010), to their digital literacy and networks of support that allow them to effectively use the technologies to exercise their participatory rights (Allen and Light, 2015; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Martínez Sainz and Hanna, 2023). So exploring digital activism becomes key to understand how children exercise their rights, how they participate in public debates, influence agendas and demand action from government and organisations. These demands are associated with political, economic and social change towards a more just and sustainable world that they want to grow up in.

## Sustainable development and political action

Child-led activism, from concrete actions to protests or larger mobilisations, demonstrates that despite not being the generation with more responsibility to bear for the social, political and environmental problems of our times, children are not powerless witnesses (Kavanagh, Waldron and Mallon, 2021). On the contrary, they act as active agents of change and as dynamic catalysts for social transformation (Taft, 2019; Trott, 2021). Their involvement in activism, including digital activism, is rooted in their interests, needs and concerns on relevant matters both today and in the future, and these matters are strongly connected to the idea of a sustainable development. The idea of sustainable development was first presented in international policy documents in 1987 as part of the *Brundtland Report*, titled 'Our Common Future', which acknowledged the interconnection of ecological, economic and social systems (Sinakou, Boeve-de Pauw and Van Petegem, 2019). A comprehensive conceptualisation of sustainable development includes three pillars of sustainable development: environment, society and economy. Such a conceptualisation is guided by the aim to create policies and practices that allow us to meet the needs of present and future generations. The most widely accepted conceptualisation of and implementation plan for sustainable development is in the document *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015). Agenda 2030 comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to combat poverty and inequality, protecting the environment, and facilitating sustainable economies and peaceful societies. Each of the SDGs has targets that delimit the means of its implementation, and the emphasis is on the integration

and indivisibility of goals and targets based on the pillars of sustainable development pillars (Sinakou et al., 2019).

Even though Agenda 2030 has been key in advancing sustainable development, the SDGs represent a top-down implementation plan to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation through the development of policies. As de Man (2019) argues, the widespread scope of the SDGs results in severe difficulties to being effectively monitored and measured. Another criticism of the SDGs is their top-down approach that prioritises the decision-making of governments and policy-makers rather than focusing on the concerns of people that the policies directly impact and ignoring or dismissing political aspects and local conditions for implementation (Reuter, 2023). Because of all the interactions and interconnections between social, natural and economic systems, the SDGs as an international agenda cannot and should not replace direct political action at the grassroots level.

## Hannah Arendt's theory of action

Hannah Arendt's theory of action (1958) is helpful to understand the value and significance of political action and its inherent transformative power. Arendt's proposal of political action is developed as part of her larger project on analysing human activities, including contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) and active life (*vita activa)* and how these have changed through time. She develops a framework distinguishing two broad categories: *thinking* from *doing.* Within *doing* she furthers differentiates labour (cyclical activities directed to meet biological human needs) from work (time-bounded activity that produces long-lasting artefacts) and action (means to disclose our individuality and uniqueness). For Arendt, action, unlike labour and work, constitutes an essential part of the human condition, that is of living a fully human life (Parekh, 2008). Because action is a way in which individuals can disclose themselves to others and form human relationships, action serves to affirm our human nature but it also emphasises our human capacity to be free, spontaneous, be creative, start something new or unexpected (Kateb, 2000).

Building from Arendt's conceptualisation of action, it is possible to understand political action in the public domain as a process that informs and shapes the construction of one's identity and individuality. Political action is necessary to develop all aspects of individual identity that are only possible in a

social context, but becomes a unique individual contribution towards society. Due to its inherent value to the individual and the role it plays in constructing individuality and identity, political action is irreplaceable as a process of growth as individuals and as a process of civic engagement to transform societies. Since the action is both constructed by and imprinted with one's identity, the absence of a single individual in the public domain represents a loss for society as a whole since no one else can replace the political actions of someone else. By looking at digital activism using this approach to political action, it is possible to articulate the value of active citizenship and civic engagement stressing the inherent transformative power of action for the individual and not only for the world where it happens.

## Research design/materials and methods

This article explores children's digital activism in relation to the SDGs through analysis of child-led mobilisations and their corresponding social media discussions. The mobilisation is linked to SDG 4 quality education. A content analysis of social media data was conducted using the corresponding hashtags of the mobilisation to identify and collect relevant data. This approach to data collection and analysis has gained significant acceptance in the recent years and is now commonly used in qualitative research involving social media (Snelson, 2016). The data collected was publicly available and encompassed relevant text, images, photographs and videos, from the In-Real-Life (IRL) mobilisation such as speeches given during the mobilisations and recorded for social media or records of the placards shared in social media, to the online activity associated with the mobilisation such as media posts, documentaries and infographics. Data was collected from three main social media applications: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Even though other platforms are considered also relevant to explore digital activism, for example WhatsApp (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015), data from this social media application was not considered due to its private nature. Similarly, data from other social media platforms with a significant number of users aged under 18, such as Snapchat, was not collected due to its ephemeral nature and its lack of permanent record. Due to ethical concerns particularly regarding anonymity and data privacy (Williams and Burnap, 2017), this article paraphrased social media posts to avoid identification of individuals and reports mostly on identified patterns rather than individual accounts.

# The fight for quality education - #OccupaTudo

The case study addresses the school occupations in Brazil and mobilisations organised to support them under the hashtag *#OccupaTudo* and *#EscolasEmLuta* that address SDG4 Quality Education. Between 2015 and 2016, over 1,100 secondary schools and 200 Universities were occupied across different states in Brazil as a way to denounce cuts in education and school spending as well as modifications to curriculum without student consultation and overcrowded classrooms. Agenda 2030 establishes quality education as one of the SDGs with the aim to ensure inclusive and equitable quality of education for all by 2030. 'Quality education' as an SDG must ensure, among other things: free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education (target 4.1), equal access to all levels of education (targets 4.2 and 4.5), an education that promotes sustainable development, gender equality and human rights (target 4.7) and educational environments that are safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective (target 4.a).

However, in Brazil, the reality of the educational system falls well short of the targets of Agenda 2030, with low performance, low completion and high out-of-school rates, and accumulated inequalities and barriers to access education (OECD, 2015). Furthermore, the violence experienced outside schools has a significant impact on students' educational attainment (Koppensteiner and Menezes, 2019). It is in this context of inequality and lack of educational opportunities that the schools' occupation in 2015 - 2016 took place. In late 2015, as a result of austerity measures and budget cuts, the government of the State of Sao Paulo announced that almost one hundred schools would close, sending students to schools far away from their homes and the ratio of students per classroom would increase in already overcrowded classrooms. These measures were part of the State's law to streamline and maximise the use of resources in education; however, the measures were decided without consultation with teachers, parents or students and would affect more than 300,000 students. After several protests by teachers' unions and students, a group of students decided to occupy the first school on 9 November 2015, with nearly one hundred school occupations a week later. The *#OccupaTudo* and *#EscolasEmLuta* movements were a direct response to these government measures, seeking not only to stop the school closures, but also challenge violent teaching approaches, demanding the improvement of school infrastructure and learning conditions, and protesting against new proposed curricular structures that would cause arts, humanities and social sciences subjects to disappear. In the occupations, students

used social media not only as communication tools but as collaborative spaces to organise activities within and beyond the schools they were occupying from assemblies to protests and related events (Klein, Macedo and Andrade, 2016; Lemos and Cunha, 2018; Cunha Jr and Ferreira Lemos, 2016).

The digital content of these two movements, the *#OccupaTudo* and *#EscolasEmLuta,* showed that social media was also used as a learning space for children to learn about their rights, in particular, their right to protest and freedom of assembly. Through their digital activism they were able to develop a children's rights education (CRE) that was self-directed, that responded to their specific needs and driven towards action. As explained by children taking part in the occupations, the knowledge and skills needed to carry out a school occupation cannot be found in the official curriculum; they had to look for the information themselves, they had to identify relevant sources and analyse the content so they could adapt the information to their own context.

> "A student found a news story about the Penguins' Revolution in Chile. Nobody knew what an occupation was. So we learned what occupying meant and we decided to go ahead and do it" (Student in Diadema, Sao Paulo, interviewed by Alegria and Moresco, 2017).

> "When we decided to take to the streets, I said: Let's go [...]. What shall we take there? Whistles, horns, balloons... We didn't know what to take. How to march in the streets? It was like... google it: How to plan a street protest?" (Student in Sao Paulo interviewed by Alonso and Colombini, 2016).

Children's digital activism in this movement helped them to learn their rights and how to take political action, accessing knowledge about civic disobedience and disruption that is not part of the formal curriculum. As a result of the mobilisation and including its digital component, they created a new youth-led curriculum with peer-learning workshops and lectures on the topics they decided mattered (racism, gender equality, music and arts).

> "You learn more about politics in a week of occupying a school than in years of regular classes [...] Now young people know they can force

change" (Student in Rio de Janeiro interviewed by Prengaman and Dilorenzo, 2016).

Five years after the school occupations, it has been announced that the local government in Sao Paulo will start the restructuring of schools and classes that will see the closure of three hundred classes across state schools. Over two-thirds of the State will be affected with classes being resized and students being transferred, following the 2016 resolution (Quaresma, 2023). This political decision raises important questions about the long-term impact of the occupations and the movement itself, since one of the main goals of *#EscolasEmLuta* was to fight against lack of consultation in education and overcrowded classrooms. Many of the advances the movement achieved in terms of quality of education as framed in the SDGs have been halted while others have been reversed by the current administrations. Thus, even though the role of digital spaces as tools for political action before, during and after the occupations has been demonstrated (Romancini and Castilho, 2017; Cunha Jr and Ferreira Lemos, 2016), the lack of social change calls into question the significance of such political action and digital activism in general. It becomes necessary to re-think what counts as transformative when discussing political action, and its implications for development education.

## Concluding discussion

Digital spaces allowed participants of the *#EscolasEmLuta* movement to gain the knowledge and develop the skills they needed to occupy their schools, corroborating evidence from previous research on other grassroots social movements about the role these spaces play as educational environments for children's participatory rights (Martínez Sainz and Hanna, 2023). The findings show that the participatory practices afforded in these digital spaces not only promote children's voices in public debates but foster their capacity for political action through collective mobilisations as much as individual activities. The digital spaces generate spaces and channels for horizontal political actions - without specific hierarchies - that shift power dynamics, which is key for children's civic engagement as it gives them the possibility of influencing public debate and direct political decision-making that affects them (Jenkins et al., 2009). As such, digital activism becomes key to challenge political exclusion based on adult-centric views of children and young people's development, which are associated with negative assumptions about their lack of knowledge and capacity to make

decisions and act as active agents in their own lives, or 'negative assumptions and valuations about [...] their inadequate knowledge or their capacity to make decisions regarding their own lives' (De Jong and Love, 2016: 348). Thus, digital technologies are key to empowering children and adolescents to claim their rights to participate in civic, social and political matters that affect them and to counter the marginalisation and powerlessness they encounter in their everyday lives.

In the digital spaces, children have found a space 'to express resistance and imagine a new reality' (Simmons, 2019: 109). Digital activism allows them to organise collective actions for their own benefit and that of their communities. Digital technologies give children and adolescents unprecedented access to relevant information to identify problems that affect them and their environment, see possible solutions and even contact relevant actors to generate them. With these possibilities, they can have an active role in the search for political and social solutions that take into account their interests and needs as well as the particular circumstances of their contexts. By offering multiple possibilities for action and facilitating the means to do so, digital activism not only democratises politics but also guarantees that children and young people exercise their right to participation. It is in the experience of exercising their rights and being politically active 'in their own terms', based on their interests and responding to their specific concerns, that the importance of digital activism proves to be twofold. While the findings of *#EscolasEmLuta* occupations corroborate the relevance of digital spaces as educational environments for children's rights and citizenship, they also shed light on the possibilities of digital activism as a pedagogy. Pedagogy encompasses the knowledge, values, beliefs and practices that guide processes of teaching and shape relationships with learners. Pedagogy focuses on what is taught and learnt, how it is done and why.

Digital activism as pedagogy highlights how the new ways in which children and young people participate politically shapes their learning and the digital activism then becomes a laboratory to test their own skills and competencies. Fostering digital activism as pedagogy recognises the extrinsic as well as intrinsic value of political action for children and adolescents to develop their civic knowledge and skills such as communication, deliberation, collaboration and decision-making. The extrinsic value of digital activism is evident in the social, cultural and political transformations that occur as a result of their political actions; however, it is important to recognise there is value in

those actions even in the cases when the struggles continue, the outcomes of social movements are not the ones expected or when social change simply does not happen. In these cases, digital activism still has an extrinsic value as the means that allows individuals to develop their knowledge and skills to participate, that raises their awareness and motivates them to act. At the same time, following Arendt's theory of action, it is possible to emphasise the intrinsic value of digital activism as pedagogy as the political actions have a role shaping individuals' values, and identity through. In this sense, political action makes us more human while allowing us to imprint our own humanity and individuality in the efforts we carry out to create a more just and sustainable world. For DE, thinking about political action as pedagogy matters, not only because of the concerns in the field for a distinctive pedagogy (Bourn, 2015), but also because it embeds action not only as an outcome but as a guiding principle for the overall educational process.

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## Acknowledgments

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# All Aboard: Charting a Community-Linked Course in Development Education

## Gertrude Cotter

**Abstract:** In this article, I outline the outcome of a research study into how community-linked learning (CLL) can be integrated into university education to deepen students' experience of development education (DE). DE in this study takes a critical pedagogy, postcolonial, and justice-orientated approach to learning. This critical theoretical foundation is an integral aspect of the research. The article explores how I as an educator, together with university students and local and international community partners, can understand how to make connections between local and global societal challenges and take action for positive change. Through meaningful engagement with communities, this approach provides transformative learning experiences that equip students with critical skills, knowledge, values, and methodologies to tackle global challenges. The article reflects on a study conducted using a critical ethnographic methodology, that involved collecting data from interviews, personal and collective narratives, focus groups, and participant observation. It found that CLL is highly effective in bridging local and global contexts, promoting social justice, and empowering both students and community partners as agents of change. The insights gained from participants highlighted the transformative nature of DE and emphasised its political essence, which has the potential to contribute towards a more just and sustainable world by fostering proactive communities and empowering individuals. Drawing on the works of critical theorists such as Freire, Gramsci, and Bourdieu, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how power, ideology, and social structures influence individuals' perspectives and actions, and how historical, political, and economic forces shape local and global issues. The study also addresses ethical considerations around power imbalances, autonomy, and agency of community partners, and emphasises the importance of moving from the personal to the political in DE practice. It concludes with optimism, showcasing how this methodology can enhance our understanding of global interconnectedness and contribute to a more equitable world.

## Introduction

Higher education plays an important role in enabling students to become more socially conscious and globally aware people. DE, as a transformative pedagogy, facilitates students to act on global issues, with CLL as the bridge connecting academic insights to community interactions. By collaborating with communities, particularly those struggling in diverse ways, CLL offers experiential learning, grounding theoretical education in real-world scenarios. This article discusses one aspect of a five-year pedagogical study (including a one-year pilot study) using CLL, namely the use and impact of using storytelling in political activism. It examines the potential of CLL within DE, to understand local and global interconnectedness, foster change-driven narratives and take collection actions towards achieving more just societies.

The study and article take a critical pedagogical approach, involving the researcher as educator and mediator, connecting students and community partners for collective dialogue and action. The emphasis is on storytelling with a global social justice lens, while also addressing the ethical implications of this research model. Using narrative analysis, observation, surveys and interviews, a multi-faceted data collection captures the depth and range of experiences within the CLL-focused DE classroom. The article highlights the importance of moving from personal narratives to collective, political action both locally and internationally. This work aims to enrich discussions on CLL's merits and challenges in DE. It spotlights the perspectives of select community and student partners, showcasing the profound effects of a critical and justice-focused approach. By linking local challenges to global scenarios, the study equips participants with critical tools to challenge systemic disparities.

## Literature review

By embracing CLL, DE pedagogy moves beyond a transactional, apolitical approach and encourages students to critically analyse power relations and systemic injustices (Apple, 2012: 138; 2018: 114). Students become active

participants in their own learning, recognising their agency in contributing to global solutions. Incorporating CLL into DE pedagogy raises ethical considerations related to power dynamics, community engagement, and student learning outcomes (Nussbaum, 2016: 13). Collaboration with community partners requires mutual respect, cultural sensitivity, and acknowledgment of differing levels of power and expertise (Gramsci, 1971: 141-142). Ethical challenges may also arise when students confront complex issues that evoke emotional responses and necessitate ongoing reflection on their positions and responsibilities as learners and activists (Titchkosky and Aubrecht, 2015: 79–94). DE's radical roots call for a seamless integration of theory and practice, while CLL provides students with opportunities to apply theoretical concepts in real-world settings, fostering praxis-oriented learning (Freire, 2000). By engaging in meaningful action for social change, learners bridge the gap between academic knowledge and transformative practice.

The 'radical roots' referred to above, refer in part to the foundational belief that impactful understanding and meaningful change stem not from the mere absorption of information, but from an active engagement with pressing global challenges. DE emphasises the importance of a seamless merging of theoretical understanding and its real-world application. Freire's (2000: 34) seminal work highlights this perspective:

> "Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom…"

Likewise, hooks (1994: 167) speaks about the idea of education as a practice of freedom. She calls for an engaged pedagogy that fosters critical thinking, self-examination, and transformation. Education, for hooks, is not just about the acquisition of knowledge but the ability to use that knowledge to challenge and change oppressive structures in society. More recent scholarship has reiterated this call for action-oriented learning. As Biesta (2009: 26) notes, the learnification of education makes it harder to ask questions about the direction and the destination of the educational processes we are engaged in. Biesta's emphasis is

on the necessity of purposeful, directed learning, not learning for the sake of learning.

The radical ethos of DE also highlights the inherent link between knowledge and action, and this has seen continued validation. Reflecting on the value of experiential learning, Dewey (1938: 90) posited that we learn from reflecting on experiences. Noddings (2013: 32) suggests that education, both of children and of adults, is more about the formation of people for a society, rather than about the acquisition of knowledge alone. By grounding learners in a space where theory meets practice, DE not only equips them to critically address complex global issues but empowers them towards tangible, transformative actions. In this continuously evolving educational landscape, DE's approach resonates even more strongly, emphasising that to truly comprehend and effect change, understanding and action must perpetually intertwine. CLL provides a bridge between local and global issues, offering students the opportunity to understand the interconnectedness of global challenges and their local manifestations (Giroux, 2020: 187). Through engagement with community partners and front-line activists, students witness how global systems, such as neoliberalism and colonial legacies, impact communities at the local level (Ogunyankin, 2019: 1). This experiential learning encourages students to critically examine the root causes of global issues and empowers them to take informed action for social justice.

By immersing students in local contexts, CLL promotes a deeper understanding of social issues and the complexities of community-driven development. As students engage in reciprocal partnerships with community members, they build empathy and cultural competence, which are vital attributes for addressing global challenges. Fine and Torre (2021: 3) argue that this integration enables students to analyse local issues from a global perspective and vice versa, fostering a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of global challenges. Moreover, it empowers students to develop critical thinking skills and a deep commitment to social and environmental justice. The impact of CLL and front-line activism on students and community partners is multifaceted. Students often experience transformative learning as they witness the realities of social exclusion, poverty, and injustice through personal interactions with community

members (Sen, 2007: 71). Such experiences challenge their assumptions, deepen their understanding of global issues, and motivate them to be proactive advocates for change (Corbett and Guilherme, 2021: 477). Community partners, in turn, benefit from students' involvement by amplifying their voices, gaining access to resources, and building collective narratives for advocacy (McIllrath et al, 2012: 1).

By engaging in advocacy, community partners not only demonstrate their agency in seeking social change but also safeguard against the pitfalls of mere representation without actual empowerment. This shift from personal storytelling to active political engagement ensures community partners are not just given a platform to speak but are empowered to meaningfully influence policy and amplify their voices on wider platforms. Táíwò (2022: 1) warns of the risk of such 'passing the mic' without deeper politicisations or collectivisation. He emphasises how identity politics, once a tool for radical solidarity and social critique, can be co-opted by elites and stripped of their liberatory potential.

As DE grapples with the complexities of global challenges, the need to link local and global issues becomes paramount. The works of Nussbaum (2016: 8-9) and Sen (2007: 1) emphasise the capabilities approach, wherein DE seeks to enhance the capabilities of individuals and communities to address local and global problems. This approach nurtures a sense of interconnectedness, encouraging learners to understand the interdependence of global issues and the potential for localised solutions.

While not emphasised greatly in this article, the study also explored the use of multimedia learning (MML) methodologies in the pedagogical process. In the digital age, technology serves as a powerful tool for global connectivity and knowledge exchange. Digital storytelling and web page creation is used in the study as a pedagogical methodology as are community radio and the creative arts. These various forms of 'telling a story' amplify the voices of communities and foster intercultural dialogue (Simons and Hicks, 2006: 77-90). This multimedia dimension enhances students' understanding of global issues and facilitates collaborations with individuals and communities across borders.

This literature review highlights the significance of incorporating community-linked learning in university education for DE. CLL offers a transformative approach to link local and global issues, foster political consciousness, and empower students as active agents of change. By embracing CLL, DE pedagogy can reconnect with its radical roots and cultivate a new generation of socially conscious, engaged global citizens. As hooks reminds us, 'Education as the practice of freedom... is the means by which we deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of our world' (hooks, 2023: 1).

## Methodology

In this section I reflect on the outcomes of a research study conducted using a critical ethnographic approach, aligned with critical pedagogy, critical theory, and DE principles. Critical ethnography is a qualitative method that captures participants' perspectives while critically analysing power dynamics and inequalities. Carspecken (1996: x-xi) views critical ethnography as a form of social 'activism'. This resonates with the study's theoretical framework, facilitating a deep exploration of how CLL enhances DE pedagogy and bridges local-global connections. Embedded within this approach is Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), aligned with Freire's praxis concept. CPAR empowers participants as co-researchers, bridging theory and practice. It fosters collaboration among students, community partners, and educators, catalysing collective action for societal change (Fine and Torre, 2021: 3). Critical ethnography, as a qualitative research approach, goes beyond understanding social phenomena from participants' perspectives. It entails critically scrutinising power dynamics and systemic inequities that shape educational contexts (Carspecken, 1996: x-xi; Thomas, 1993: 31). This resonates with the broader theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, critical theory and DE principles.

Over five years, including an initial pilot with a minority ethnic group in Ireland, this study engaged with multiple student and community partnerships. The eventual study was informed greatly by the pilot study, as explained in the sections on 'Ethical Challenges' in the 'Findings' section below. This primary research engaged six student groups who voluntarily attended at least six sessions on DE. Embracing a Freirean-influenced critical pedagogical approach, sessions

covered DE theory, methodologies, skills development, and other student-selected themes like forced migration, climate justice, and gender issues. The study also involved working with community partners in Ireland and in global South countries. A broad range of projects were undertaken by participants, from digital storytelling and radio broadcasting to art exhibitions. The research explores the impact of this work on both partners and students and this article focuses on the 'storytelling' aspects of this work. Notable collaborations are summarised below:

## Year 1

*Project A. Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE).* In collaboration with a Lesotho-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), this involved real-time workshops bringing University College Cork (UCC) students together with Lesotho professionals. Key student participant (KSP) 'Andy', a UCC 'international student' from the United States, collaborated with local community development workers in Lesotho. Ten online sessions covered DE themes, community leadership, and intercultural communications. The main highlight was the development of the NGO's strategic plan, including an intercultural communications strategy, identified as important for this particular organisation. Andy also worked, along with other students, as part of this research, with a local family carers group as well as with a local community radio.

*Project B. Global Teacher Award Group (GTA 1).* Student teachers at UCC took part in a Global Teacher Award organised with the Galway One World Centre. They designed critical Global Citizenship and Development Education (GCDE)-focused lesson outlines for their second level classrooms. A digital storytelling workshop partnered some of the students with people who were refugees or asylum seekers, living in Cork, mostly also studying at UCC. KSP 'Claire', a student teacher, and key community partner (KCP) 'Obafemi', an asylum seeker living in a Direct Provision Centre (government provision of accommodation and basic needs to those seeking asylum), were the primary research participants in this study.

## Year 2

**Cross Disciplinary Group (CDG).** Fifteen students, including 'Andy', 'Claire', mentioned above, along with KSPs 'Finnuala', and 'Karen', took six, two-hour

DE workshops on a voluntary basis. They partnered with diverse community groups. For example, students working with family carers in Cork crafted digital stories, developed a website, created advocacy toolkits, and produced a radio show addressing global issues care workers face.

## Year 3

**Mixed Abilities Group (MAG).** UCC students partnered with three disability service organisations. Over six workshops, participants explored global issues. Key participants were KSP 'Finnuala', a first year UCC student, and KCP 'Vera', who was moving to her new home after forty years in residential care. They also collaborated internationally with a service in Kerala, India.

## Year 4

**Professional Master's in Education (PME) students and Digital Humanity Students.** These students, collaborating with a Yasidi Community in Northern Iraq, curated a public art exhibition reflecting the DE work in their second level classrooms. Notably, KSP 'Kerry' partnered with KCP 'Arba' a Yasidi representative from the displaced persons' camp. Her second-level students constructed a tent for the exhibition and recorded a radio programme.

This methodology helps to shed light on both the challenges and the transformative aspects of CLL's potential in DE. However, it is not without its limitations. The use of a small sample might pose challenges to generalisation, although the depth of understanding of the impact on individual students and community is deeply revealing. Furthermore, the researcher's dual role as both a participant and an observer can potentially influence data collection and analysis. However, it's worth noting that this dual role, often viewed as a limitation, also emerges as a considerable strength in this specific type of study. Engaging as both a participant and observer ensures a depth of understanding and an intimate connection to the subject matter that might be inaccessible through more detached research methods. This immersive approach fosters nuanced insights and a richer, more comprehensive understanding of CLL's impact in DE. The potential biases introduced by this closeness are mitigated by rigorous reflexivity, ensuring that the research remains both grounded and critically informed.

It should be noted that we worked with communities and not specifically with individuals, but for research purposes we focused on four key students (KSPs) and four key community partners (KCPs) who volunteered to be part of this study.

## Results and findings

Of the many findings that emerged from the study regarding the experience of community partners, three important sets of findings are highlighted here. The first is the significance of 'telling my story', the second is the importance of moving from the 'personal' to the 'political', and the third relates to the ethical aspects of doing pedagogy and research using CLL methodologies.

## The significance of 'telling my story'

One of the most significant findings of the study is the importance to community partners of 'telling their story', both individually and collectively. The theme highlights the often-overlooked reality that socially excluded individuals and communities frequently feel unheard. Providing a platform for unheard voices emerges as a cathartic experience for all community partners, students, and myself as the educator/researcher. In an era where technology provides the means for amplification, the accessibility to being heard can sometimes be taken for granted within a university setting. This finding cannot be overstated. Family carer Kathleen's powerful story about caring for her husband and not being heard by professionals around her, was of deep importance to her. This importance is encapsulated in a simple statement in her digital story, 'there is no denying it now'. However, months of producing three versions of her story, one for herself, one for advocacy reasons in her community of interest, and one for friends and family, brought a deep appreciation to students and to myself, of what that really meant to her. Somehow the existence of the recorded story on a public platform, meant that nobody could ever again deny that she had something to say but had been marginalised in the story of the husband she loved for fifty years.

Likewise Obafemi, living in the Irish Direct Provision accommodation system for people seeking asylum, echoed a similar sentiment in his digital story:

"I have these and safe forever now...my own story ... my own video in it. It's what it is. It's raw. It's going to pass across more emotions to people that watch it and bring questions to them".

Obafemi was aware that his narrative of life within the Irish Direct Provision system held educational and impact-driven value. He hoped his story would shed light on social injustices and at the same time the word 'dignity' was central to narrative. In the absence of a dignified life, his sense of autonomy over his own story was important to him.

Vera's personal journey out of institutional care after forty years also showcases the transformative potential of personal narratives. Vera's determination to move into her own home defied the scepticism she experienced from professionals, family and friends. She asserted:

"Believe in yourself and ignore the begrudgers because there will be people that will put you down anyway. If you want to do it, you do it. It's worth it to have your own front door".

Her story shows how the personal story can in itself be subversive, as she challenged powerful systems around her. It was an affirmation of self and an inspiration for others to embrace resilience and self-belief.

For Yasidi man, Arba, his desire to tell his story of despair and living in the harsh conditions of a refugee camp, was palpable. He sent copious numbers of images. They illustrate his interest in photojournalism and the power of images to tell a story. The images show the conditions of living in the camp. Some show the aftermath of a particularly harsh flooding event at the camp with images of people wading through the floods or the filth and debris inside tents in the wake of the storm.

## *Moving from the personal to the political and from the local to the global*

A key part of my own learning was understanding how to move, along with participants, from the personal story to the political, both at a local community level and within the global justice contexts. The key community partners wanted

to tell a personal story, but they each also understood the power of the collective stories in relation to their communities of interest, each advocating for changes of various kinds. How community and student participants negotiated the transition from the personal to the political, differed depending on personal and community interests and strengths, but there are some overarching learnings. Wheelchair user Vera was highly aware of the subversive reality of her personal story. It was a story of personal courage but her desire to advocate for people with disabilities was always evident as she often said: 'I want to talk about what life is like for people with disabilities', to anyone who would listen, particularly with professionals she came into contact with. 'Sometimes people want to tell us what's good for us. I know my own mind'. Her advocacy was recognised by the Lord Mayor of Cork, with an arts award celebrating her and others.

Vera's story resonated with Nora, a refugee living and studying in Cork who spoke to the class. Vera identified with Nora's experiences, noting, 'we are on the same page'. Fionnuala, a first year social science student, described this moment as a revelation about power, privilege, and genuine connection, remarking, 'I would never have learned like this in the usual classroom'. For me as the educator, it was also a profound moment. While it seems like a simple exchange, in reality it was a multi-layered and complex 'knowing' by two people who had experienced institutional worlds, and a student who happens to have a particular interest in prisons. Such a comment also comes within a wider context of understanding the background to individual lives. Meanwhile an exchange with a disability service group in Kolkata highlighted the shared global pursuit of dignified lives. The group as a whole made a radio programme about what they had learned in the class. Fortuitously, one participant's sister, working in a Kenyan development agency, spoke to the group about her work in local radio to promote health across rural areas. KSP Finnuala found this 'real-world' learning transformative, boosting her confidence and fuelling her passion for advocating for human rights. The recurring theme of institutionalisation across the study, from asylum seekers to disability services, was of great interest to her. The students examined this through the lens of Gramsci's theory, exploring how institutions maintain dominance over socially excluded groups.

Family carer, Kathleen, also harnessed her personal experiences to fuel a collective advocacy. She and her group, working with some of the students, worked on their collective messaging in a run up to a general election in Ireland. Along with students, they created an advocacy toolkit and made videos about their stories, which are available on a website and engaged with politicians. With regard to their interest in professional formation they also visited UCC's nursing and social science staff and students. In Kathleen's words, 'the personal is political and the political is personal'. Andy, partnering with the carers' group, extended his advocacy to a global scale. In the classroom with other students and on a radio show, he emphasised the importance of care work in economies and how this related to gender inequality. He highlighted Oxfam's campaign on the experiences of Malian women. This international perspective encouraged mutual learning. For the visiting family carer delegation who came to meet the class, global economic realities were clearer and they realised that in fact they were the teachers in this context. The local-global nexus was now much closer and no longer remote or irrelevant.

Claire, a student teacher, believed that CLL could advance DE, viewing it as the ideal space for students to experience engaged citizenship. 'How else can we gain DE skills?', she said. Claire thought of DE as challenging broader global systems, often discussing the impact of neoliberalism. She felt that promoting solidarity and deep dialogue was very important. Her ability to correlate global gender norms with personal experiences was evident as she collaborated with Andy, and her support for younger students was invaluable. She also played a key role in establishing UCC's 'Friends of Refugees' group, along with other students. Claire attended a three-day digital storytelling workshop along with other participants, some of whom were from refugee communities in Cork. Referring to the film-making process, she felt that the group were 'creating something together' and she highlighted in particular the significance of informal learning spaces, in the car, over lunch or simply at the coffee break, where 'deeper', 'authentic', sometimes 'uncomfortable' conversations took place. She was interested in Freire and referred to his ideas about dialogue. In her more formal journal reflection, she wrote about how Freire does not consider dialogue as simply the interaction between people to explore the world together, it is also

a sign of freedom, equality, and responsibility in discovering and transforming the world of every human being.

Obafemi, sharing his journey of living in Direct Provision, emphasised the emotional power of stories but was also interested in the educational impact of the stories of this group. Waleed, a Palestinian-born doctoral student, offered a critical perspective, questioning the real beneficiaries of this type of education. This kind of critical conversation was welcome, as Claire said 'uncomfortable', but necessary. The question of 'who benefits' concerned me greatly as an educator throughout this process to such an extent that I wrote a poem about my dilemma. It seemed the only way to truly express the conflict between 'doing nothing' and the complex questions about 'who benefits'.

Arba, a Yazidi representative, shared the harrowing experience of his community's displacement due to persecution by ISIS in 2014. The subsequent art installation, guided by trainee teacher Kerry, showcased the empathy and understanding of secondary school pupils. Their action included raising awareness at a public exhibition, where they remade the tent they had made in class. They also participated in a radio show and with the help of UCC digital humanities students also contributed to making a website, thus leaving lasting digital footprints.

The educator's role went beyond teaching. It involved identifying learning opportunities and understanding that personal experiences happen in the context of broader societal structures. By transitioning from personal stories to political activism, community partners and students took actions to impact policy or raise their voices on broader platforms. This speaks to DE's action-led origins, which emphasise challenging power hierarchies and advocating for justice. At the heart of this pedagogy is attention to Táíwò's (2022) work on critiquing identity politics and how stories can be coopted by elites. Instead, DE in this study attempts to focus on being a community-led, co-creation, challenging power, advocating justice, and seeking a society where representation translates to genuine change.

## Ethical challenges and practical considerations

The study was not without challenges. Some of the most important findings of the research relate to integrity or ethical considerations as the various partnerships progressed. These were great learning moments for all, leading to ongoing discussions and negotiations with individuals, students, and community groups. An important issue was the autonomy of community partners and their ability to lead and benefit from such research. This lesson was learned very well in the pilot year of the study, which deeply informed the approach to the study. I had hoped to work with a particular women's group in a local minority ethnic group for this research. I found that such was the power of local barriers and the 'pre-developmental' stage at which this group found themselves, their willing participation in an autonomous manner was deeply problematic. While I completed my commitments to this group, I learned much about the importance of autonomy and the ability of partners to lead and benefit from this particular type of GCDE research. Organisations like Family Carers or the Lesotho community were much further along their community development or activist journeys. Their prior learnings and engagement with ongoing initiatives enabled them to benefit from what the partnership could offer but also to lead and teach students from their real-world experiences, both personal experiences and their community and activist experiences.

Another ethical challenge related to accreditation, especially in postcolonial contexts like Lesotho or with people who were asylum seekers. Despite efforts to manage expectations, issues of European qualification and privilege persisted. The Lesotho group desired Irish accreditation, demonstrating the complexities of global education dynamics. Additionally, the financial expectations of some participants, including Arba, created ethical dilemmas, raising questions of exploitation, agency, and autonomy. Questions also arose within class and workshop dialogues regarding who benefits from research of this kind. Obafemi, living in Direct Provision, questioned the impact of storytelling on decision-makers. As a member of one of the bigger political parties in Ireland, where he heard much about how happy they were to include him in their party, he was confused to find himself, after nine years, in the Direct Provision system. In our conversations, he emphasised the importance of clarity of purpose and meaningful engagement in educational work of this kind. One critique by

students at the digital storytelling workshop also related to clarity of purpose. While the purpose of the workshop became clearer as the three days unfolded, some earlier scaffolding would have helped. While this relates to my own shortcomings as an educator, it is very helpful in understanding the student experience. Also in this workshop, the external facilitator's influence on stories raised concerns about agency and public representation, with varied and nuanced perspectives on whether decisions should be made for participants.

Practical challenges, such as time, technology access, and support for vulnerable individuals, emerged throughout the research. The resource-intensive nature of the CLL and MML approaches required recording online classes, addressing technical difficulties, and significant time investment in creating digital stories with carers and people with disabilities. Organisational support, both in Cork and Lesotho, was crucial for success, leading to a recognition that normalising this level of support within the education system would be needed in order to align with community needs and also carry out meaningful research of this kind. To conclude, the study's insights highlight the need to go beyond what a standard ethical statement might contain. Ethics and integrity were relational and needed to be negotiated and renegotiated. There also needed to be clearer communication with students at initial stages to clarify purpose, and meaningful institutional alignment with community needs.

## Discussion and conclusion

In terms of development education as a field of study, this research highlights the relevance of DE in challenging times and it reaffirms the discipline's radical roots, emphasising the importance of challenging power structures and advocating for justice. It counters the dangers of superficial engagement and underscores the need for substantive change rather than token gestures that serve elite interests. The importance of ethics and integrity in DE cannot be overstated. The study has shown that these principles are not static but dynamic, requiring ongoing negotiation and communication. Clarity of purpose, meaningful institutional alignment with community needs, and ethical considerations are essential for the successful practice of DE. In terms of research in this field, for this particular study critical ethnography very much aligned with the deliberate focus on active citizenship engagement with political and justice frameworks. The

study shows that DE is not confined to the classroom but extends to the heart of society, challenging power structures and advocating for a more just and equitable world. It exemplifies how individual voices, when united, can amplify their impact and drive positive change. DE's radical tradition can and must thrive, ensuring that independent voices within academia and society have the safe spaces they need to challenge injustice.

In summary, the pedagogy involved students, community partners and educator engaging in an intentionally political, critically reflective and action-orientated pedagogy, with a DE lens. We walked from the personal to the political and the global through integrated personal narratives, critical analysis, grounded theory, justice focused intercultural dialogue and transformative pedagogy. This approach allowed for a deep understanding of how local experiences are interconnected with broader political and global issues, fostering transformative learning and empowering participants to become advocates for change.

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# Perspectives

## MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: HOW FORUM THEATRE CAN REVEAL THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS ON LOCAL AND GLOBAL JUSTICE ISSUES

CHRISZINE BACKHOUSE, SARAH ROBINSON AND CLAUDIA BARTON

**Abstract:** What is the connection between the genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the rapid spread of mis- and dis-information and the rise of mental health and attention difficulties? Whilst seemingly disparate, each of these issues have been exacerbated by the widespread use of engagement-based algorithms on social media platforms. Engagement-based algorithms are designed to captivate our attention to keep us engaging with the platform for longer, thereby raising advertising revenues for the companies. These algorithms pick up on content which is showing strong engagement and suggest it to users. Engagement means interaction with the content, such as 'likes', sharing the content, or commenting on the content. Engagement can also simply be the amount of time the user spends looking at content. As well as the adorable kitten videos, extreme content holds our attention, inducing algorithms to promote this material. There is a lack of awareness amongst the public about how these social media algorithms are amplifying alarming content, causing polarisation and driving inequality.

To highlight these issues, a theatre group working with Creativity and Change in Munster Technological University (MTU) explored the local and global impact of social media engagement-based algorithms. This took place through a mentorship with Brazilian theatre practitioner, Julian Boal. In this article, we explore algorithmic awareness as an important missing aspect of global citizenship education (GCE), before illustrating what we learned from exploring this topic through forum theatre. We conclude by drawing some lessons for GCE on using socially engaged theatre to explore complex, invisible topics. We also draw on the links between forum theatre and Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, including forum theatre as a form of praxis, conscientisation and collective action that makes invisible power structures visible.

## Introduction

Algorithms are increasingly important in shaping decisions that impact our lives, from what music or television shows we are recommended, to whether we get a mortgage, insurance, or a job (Birhane, 2021; Gran et al., 2021; O'Neil, 2016). Research suggests that many people are unaware of what an algorithm is, or that social media platforms like Facebook use algorithms to filter their feeds, deciding what we see and read on that platform (Eslami et al., 2015; Gran et al., 2021; Oremis et al., 2021; Smith, 2018). Scholars of critical algorithm studies suggest that this is a digital divide that needs to be addressed to enable people to meaningfully participate in democratic life (Lythreatis et al., 2022). In contexts such as Myanmar, this is likely to be even more important, as Facebook is often essentially the Internet (The United Nations' Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar [IIFMM], 2018). By this, we mean that, as Facebook offers participants free data, it is often the only platform used to access information. A lack of algorithmic awareness indicates a lack of awareness about engagement-based algorithms designed to keep us 'engaging' by capturing our attention. Engagement-based algorithms favour sensationalism, misinformation and extremism. Engagement-based approaches have been associated with an increase in youth mental health difficulties, attention deficit, the rapid spread of mis- and dis-information, and in worst instances, genocide (Amnesty International, 2022; Barger et al., 2016; Center for Humane Technology, n.d.; Golbeck, 2020; Jin and You, 2023; Naughton, 2022; IIFMM, 2018). At a widespread level, GCE has not yet critically engaged with software as a global justice issue, particularly how algorithms impact the global South. In this article, we demonstrate how forum theatre, an innovative form of theatre for development, is an effective tool to increase algorithmic awareness as a form of GCE. This approach supports an embodied form of conscientisation, that is, a process of developing a conscious awareness of algorithmic justice and how to bring about change. First, we introduce the problem of algorithmic justice as an important focus for GCE, and then introduce the process by which we developed a play based on this issue. Finally, we discuss lessons learned from using a socially

engaged art approach that might be used by others wishing to explore this issue within GCE.

## Algorithmic justice

Algorithmic justice is a concept increasingly used to highlight growing concern about the impact of AI and 'Big Data' enabled algorithmic decision-making (Birhane, 2021). We draw on this concept to highlight the need to address the harm associated with social media platforms' engagement-based algorithms. An engagement-based algorithm is designed to boost platform engagement (i.e., time and interaction), through prioritising content that will provoke a reaction. Unfortunately, high engagement-based content is often sensational, divisive and/or a form of misinformation, reportedly contributing to a worsening of youth mental health (Haugen, 2022; Naughton, 2022), racist and anti-immigrant actions (Michael, 2023), violence in counties in the global South, including Ethiopia, India and Myanmar (Haugen, 2022; McIntosh, 2021; Paul, 2021) and interference in democratic processes (Wong, 2019). The more engaged a user is, the more social media companies profit from advertising revenue (Naughton, 2022). Engagement is based on how much attention and interaction each piece of content receives, how often it is shared, liked, commented on and so on. In tandem, the algorithms capture what each person likes, and suggests other content that they may like. If a user is depressed, they are likely to be shown content about depression. For example, British teenager Molly Russell, died by suicide months after harmful content was pushed her way by Instagram and Pinterest. The Coronor stated that social media content had contributed 'in more than a minimal way' to Molly's death (Walker, 2022). Social media whistle-blower Frances Haugen revealed that Facebook was aware that Instagram, for example, was harmful for teenage girls and led to an increase in body image issues (Haugen, 2022).

In Myanmar, the same algorithmic approach has incited genocide against the Rohingya minority (Amnesty International, 2022; IIFMM, 2018). The rise of hate speech against the Rohingya on Facebook wasn't moderated effectively. To reduce hate speech that may have been unknowingly shared, Facebook and Burmese civil society developed a design feature that acted like a sticker to alert users of hate-speech. When users applied the sticker, the Facebook

algorithm recognised it as 'engagement', and as a result the machine-learning algorithms of Facebook actually increased the sharing of tagged hate speech rather than reducing it (Amnesty International, 2022).

Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen showed that the company spent 87 percent of its budget preventing misinformation on English features, whilst only 9 percent of users are reportedly English speakers (Paul, 2021). This means that there are less (if any) misinformation detection Facebook features and moderators in the global South, and especially in minority languages, leading to disproportionate harm (Amnesty International, 2022; McIntosh, 2021; Paul, 2021; IIFMM, 2018).

In Ireland, activist Mark Malone wrote an open letter which named social media algorithms as an underlying cause of the rise of anti-migrant racism (Michael, 2023). The Far Right Observatory (FRO) group brought these concerns before the Oireachtas (Irish Parliamentary) committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, in February 2023. In her opening statement to the committee, FRO director, Niamh McDonald stated:

> "Algorithms drive the content people see - amplifying toxic and manipulative content that fosters engagement via shares, likes, views. The scale and speed of viral content circulating has been instrumental to amplifying protests, and flashpoints, resulting in multiple violent incidents and escalation of vigilante mobs" (McDonald, 2023: 1).

What we see happening in Ireland is part of a larger pattern where racist groups exploit the infrastructure of online algorithms to disseminate hateful messages about migrants and refugees (Noble, 2018). Ireland is the home of many social media platforms, and whistleblower Frances Haughen pointed out how Ireland has a unique role to play in accountability (Molony, 2022). She also suggested that moderators for contexts like Myanmar have jobs based in Dublin. Whilst we have introduced what we mean by algorithmic injustice, we will now introduce the method of forum theatre which we used to explore this topic.

# Method

## Forum theatre

Forum theatre was initially developed in 1973 by Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal (Boal, 1985) as a form of participatory theatre used to engage with spectators, called spect-actors, in meaningful dialogue and action on social issues that impacted their lives. In what becomes a 'rehearsal for life' a team of actors present a social issue to the spect-actors. A protagonist is often depicted as trying to overcome a form of oppression and the everyday barriers they face whilst trying to bring about social change. The spect-actors are then able to enter the play, replacing the protagonist, to offer alternative solutions and strategies. The actors respond in character, which gives the spect-actors instant feedback about the potential effectiveness of each strategy that is performed (Ibid.). Through this process, pathways of change become clearer, and hope is affirmed. Forum theatre has been used all over the world to make systems of oppression visible from gender-based violence, to housing, and to what has been called 'theatre of the techno-oppressed' which makes visible the ways in which technology can obscure new types of labour exploitation such as the exploitation of Uber drivers or Amazon Turk workers (van Amstel and Serpa, n.d.). It is a particularly good method at making visible, the invisible, and making the abstract concrete.

## Creativity and Change mentorship on forum theatre

Through an Irish Aid innovation funded mentorship with Brazilian theatre practitioner Julian Boal (son of Augusto) and facilitated by Creativity and Change, a group of artists, activists and academics prepared and performed forum theatre plays in Ireland that reflected local and global social issues. The mentorship began with a three-day in person face-to-face workshop with Julian in Cork in December 2022, where we devised plays related to forms of oppression that impacted our lives including gender-based violence, housing, care and in our case, algorithmic injustice. Based on the thematic areas of interest, we separated into small groups and continued to research and develop plays on these topics between December 2022 and an initial public performance in April/May 2023. Each month we sent videos of our work to Julian and then met with him online for feedback. The algorithm group began with six participants, which over time

became a core group of writers/actors including Sarah Robinson, Claudia Barton, Pat McMahon, and Chriszine Backhouse. We were greatly supported by the wider forum theatre mentorship group who improvised new scenes, provided feedback, and performed in the play, particularly actors Ivy Favier and Kevin McCaughey, and later Catherine Murray who performed in the final version of the play.

In March 2023, the algorithm group invited a group of software engineers from diverse backgrounds (Iran, Pakistan and Ireland) from Lero, the Irish Software Research Centre, members of the Comhairle na nÓg (n.d.), and members of Jigsaw's (n.d.) Youth Advisory Panel to give us feedback on our scenes. Jigsaw is Ireland's Centre for Youth Mental Health and Comhairle na nÓg are child and youth councils in the 31 Irish local authorities, which give children and young people the opportunity to be involved in the development of local services and policies. Some of the young people who attended pointed out that the youth voice was not adequately expressed in the play, while some of the software engineers thought the play lacked nuance regarding the infrastructure of algorithms. The feedback helped us to identify areas of improvement, as well as build connections with people directly impacted by the issues we were portraying.

## Synopsis of the play

Finding ways to connect the local and global impacts of algorithms was a key task we aimed to achieve through our forum theatre play. We had to choose characters, locations, and dilemmas that would create meaningful opportunities for the spect-actors to engage with the complexity of the issue. After many iterations, we chose to centre the play on a mother who becomes alarmed by the negative impacts of social media on her teenage daughter. The mother makes discoveries that the same algorithms that have negatively impacted her daughter have implications on everything from a rise of misogyny in schools to genocide in Myanmar. The spect-actors are invited to go on this journey with the protagonist, putting together the pieces of the algorithmic puzzle and discovering routes to systemic change.

In a strong forum theatre play, the protagonist will try and fail to find allies in each intervention scene. As Julian Boal taught us, 'Forum theatre is not

about life as it is, it's about life as it is when you're trying to change life itself'. As the protagonist tries to make allies, the allies reflect the societal conflicts and contradictions which maintain the oppression. For example, a school dean who is concerned about the reputation of the school if they go to the media, or a software engineer who is afraid of losing their job if they perform a virtual walk out.

As we created our play, Julian encouraged us to develop a protagonist who is trying to change the structures of oppression. To allow for a realistic scenario which encompasses local and global areas for activism, and to emphasise the personal as political, the protagonist is a parent and an employee of a social media firm, with potential to effect changes in both areas of her life. The following is a synopsis of the scenes we developed for the forum theatre play:

Scene one: <u>Suggested for you/Click on me</u>
Adolescent Anna is scrolling on her phone and after a few 'likes' is suggested posts promoting eating disorders. The charismatic algorithmic suggestions are personified by actors who vie for Anna's attention.

Image One: 'Click on me' scene. Actors: Ivy Favier, Sarah Robinson, and Chriszine Backhouse (Photo: Helen O'Keeffe).



Scene two: School run
Anna's mother (our protagonist) is getting Anna ready for school. Anna is absorbed with the phone and rejecting suggestions for breakfast. Anna accidentally leaves her phone behind when running out of the door, giving her mother an opportunity to see the content Anna has been engaging with.

Scene three: Timeprime TV show
In a current affairs programme, a whistleblower and a representative from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) are interviewed on the global consequences of

social media algorithms, connecting the amplification of extreme content to genocide in Myanmar and declining mental health in adolescents in the UK and Ireland. Questions are invited from the audience with actors planted amongst the spect-actors, who raise questions about how restricting social media companies might affect jobs in Ireland and how moderating content could undermine freedom of speech. This is a 'dirt' scene which conveys information, but also allows for questions from the spect-actors. Real newspaper articles are projected as a backdrop.

Image Two: 'Timeprime TV Show' scene. Actors: Sarah Robinson, Ivy Favier, and Claudia Barton. (Photo: Helen O'Keeffe).

Scene four:  Team building

Workers at the fictional social media company 'Facebox' are brought together for a team building exercise to boost morale after the 'Timeprime' broadcast.  A content moderator, a software engineer, a product manager and our protagonist, who works in accounts, discuss the viability of changing the engagement-based algorithms at Facebox.  Each suggestion proves to be unrealistic due to the importance of the attention economy in sustaining company profit.

Image Three: 'Facebox team-building day'. Actors: Chriszine Backhouse, Sarah Robinson, Ivy Favier, and Claudia Barton. (Photo: Helen O'Keeffe).

Scene five:  Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meeting
The agenda discussed is an upcoming sports event and a teacher's concern about the rise of misogyny at the school.  The protagonist links the misogyny to social media's engagement-based algorithms and highlights the school's power to raise awareness.  The issues she is confronted with are the dean's reluctance to have the school labelled as 'misogynistic' and other parents aligning the problem to the children having access to technology, which is counter-intuitive when they are an iPad school.

Image Four: Parent Teacher Association meeting – 'how not to be a misogynistic school'. Actors: Sarah Robinson, Claudia Barton, Catherine Murray, Chriszine Backhouse, Ivy Favier. Projections from news articles about the rise of misogyny in schools due to social media algorithms (Photo: Helen O'Keeffe).

Scene six: <u>Mother and daughter talk</u>
At home Anna is frantically looking for her phone. Her mother returns the phone and tries to have a heart to heart about the dangers Anna and her friends are being exposed to. Anna is half listening, then returns to being absorbed with her phone catching up with her online life.

Scene seven: <u>Mother falls down a parenting rabbit hole</u>
The play is bookended with the personified algorithms now taking advantage of the protagonist's insecurities about parenting and she falls into a negative chamber of posts about bad parenting.

## Challenges with making the invisible impact of algorithms visible

Creating the play was not straightforward. In our March 2023 feedback session with spect-actors, we found that the spect-actors gravitated towards dealing with the problem the algorithms were amplifying e.g. worsening mental health or ethnic violence, rather than addressing the infrastructure of engagement-based algorithms itself. Similar to how we as theatre practitioners struggled with the topic initially, the spect-actors couldn't see the specific problem engagement-based algorithms posed and we had to restructure our play to make this more visible. We did this in two ways. Firstly, we devised a scene in the format of a primetime show which we called Timeprime, where the host interviewed characters based on real-life activists including Facebook whistleblower Francis Haugen (see for example the Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy, 2022) and an Amnesty international representative who claimed that Facebook's algorithms promoted genocide in Myanmar. We projected real newspaper clippings throughout the scene to further develop the audience's understanding of the impact of engagement-based social media algorithms. Secondly, to make the issue visible we also created a scene where the algorithms were embodied by actors (as evident in Image One) representing the way content on social media can quickly become extreme and polarised. Within the scenes where our protagonist was trying to change the algorithms, we clarified what she was asking for, with lines like 'we need to get to the root cause... We have to hold the social media companies accountable'.

As an ongoing mentor, Julian Boal also helped us to shape our play - refining the characters we created, bringing in more theatrical elements - as he said, 'we are making theatre for change, but it is theatre and must be engaging'. We embraced opportunities for humour while parodying a television show in our Timeprime scene, or in the pedantic constraints of a school meeting in our PTA meeting scene. Making the play entertaining was important to hold the spect-actors' attention, as well as creating an environment where an important dialogue could take place. As one spect-actor said, 'the actors were very engaging and talented and really demonstrated the different viewpoints which was important for the discussion after'.

Apart from the protagonist, the actors had to play multiple parts and used simple costume changes (wigs, spectacles, moustaches, hats, etc.) to distinguish their roles, which permitted an informality engendering confidence for the spect-actors to take part. Expressing traits stereotypical of posts suggested by algorithms in, for example, our final scene, 'five reasons where you are failing as a parent' etc... allowed actors to embody the loud and often crude means of garnering attention on social media, which became animated and comedic. We included some verbatim text for the characters in the television show, taken from research material, and used a combination of real people for the development of the back story for all the roles. For example, we were inspired by the experience of Molly Russell and her family who sought justice after her death. The believability of the characters for the audience and the actors was essential for the improvised intervention scenes.

As the aim of forum theatre is to co-create possible solutions to social problems with spect-actors, and not to didactically present solutions, we also wanted to provide different pathways that spect-actors could take to create change. Our target audience included software engineers, young people, and members of the general public. To reflect the diversity of ways that change could occur, we created scenes in different settings. We set a scene in a fictional social media company to explore how change can happen within tech companies, and we created a scene in a parent teacher association meeting to explore how change can happen in local communities.

## Impact of the play

Ultimately knowing whether a forum theatre play is effective or not is down to what happens during and after the performance. To ensure that the play is participatory, we continuously blur the line between actor and spect-actor. To help us do this, we have what is called a 'Joker'. The Joker acts as the spect-actor's guide through the performance, discussion, and interaction. At the beginning of our play, the Joker, played by Kevin McCaughey as seen in Image Five, got the spect-actors down onto the stage to play a simple game. He developed rapport with the spect-actors and encouraged them to see themselves as part of the action. The actors then performed the play. When it was over, the Joker began a discussion with the audience about the play - what they thought, what challenges they saw, and what changes could be made.

Image Five: Joker (Kevin McCaughley) talking to the the spect-actors about the interventions they'd like to make in the play. Photo:Helen O'Keeffe.

Then, the play began again and the Joker invited the spect-actors to come on stage to replace the protagonist at key moments to try to arrive at a different outcome. One impactful moment was when a spect-actor replaced our protagonist in a scene set in a fictional social media company. The spect-actor initiated a call to unionise so that the workers would have more power to ask for change within the company. After the intervention, this led to a powerful discussion about individual versus collective action with many more interventions taking place to fine-tune how this might happen.

In the scene set in a parent teacher association meeting, we saw spect-actors finding ways to unite a diverse group of parents and teachers to work together to solve the challenge of algorithms. Over and over, the most effective interventions from spect-actors involved bringing people from different perspectives together; finding common ground through empathy, listening, ensuring all voices are heard, and bridge-building. One spect-actor said, 'we can't improve large societal issues without cooperation and input from more than the individual'. Through the forum theatre, these foundational age-old skills of change-making were applied to the new problem of algorithmic justice, reminding us all that we already have the tools to make a change.

In response to the question, 'What stood out to you about the performance?', some of the responses were: 'How it linked local and global harm caused'; 'The scope of the challenge and the variety of ways in which it needs to be addressed'; and 'social media is giving the notion of freedom of speech but is showing extreme opinions'. In terms of making the invisible visible, one spect-actor said they were struck by the 'emotional resonance of scenarios that were previously unfamiliar to me'.

Eisner (2002) said that the arts teach that a problem can have more than one solution. This value of using a creative process to address an issue as complex as algorithms is huge. Through forum theatre we were able to creatively make an invisible issue visible to an audience, while supporting them to explore a variety of responses. One spect-actor said that what stood out to them about the performance were the 'different opinions from spect-actors and usefulness of gathering different options'.

## Lessons for global citizenship education

There are several lessons from the theatre process that are specifically applicable to the GCE/development education (DE) field. Firstly, many elements of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy are reflected in forum theatre, e.g., the model of 'praxis' which is a process that incorporates both practice and action in a continuous cycle of reflection and application (Freire, 1970). In forum theatre, the spect-actors see the issue, discuss the problem, and then immediately have the opportunity for action by intervening in the scene to arrive at a different outcome. This rehearsal for change allows the spect-actors to experience how different actions could effect change, building momentum and possibility that can then more easily flow into real-world applications. This kind of immediate action could be used by global citizenship educators to move from reflection and theory to action.

Through this process of praxis, generative themes were created by the audience. Generative themes are the social issues, constructs and topics that are important to the participants (Ibid.). The themes were arrived at through dialogue that took place through the succession of interventions posed by the spect-actors on the stage and the debate that took place about the effectiveness of each intervention. For our performance the themes that emerged from the spect-actors included empathy, hearing all voices, collective action versus individual action, and the power of making invisible power structures visible. Another lesson is the way that forum theatre embeds an expectation of action. Spect-actors aren't merely observing, but they are constantly reminded that they are part of the action - both on stage and in real life. In GCE we also must remind people that they are actors in this world and that they can use their agency for change. One spect-actor said that this methodology was 'a good way to talk about the issue instead of a lecture about it'. Humour also helped facilitate this. A lecture is a passive experience, whereas in GCE/DE we want to create opportunities for people to actively become involved.

A third lesson from forum theatre is the importance of participatory processes. Several of Freire's key concepts are evident in the participatory model of forum theatre. For example, dialogue takes place between spect-actors both verbally and then through the interventions the spect-actors enact. After each intervention the Joker asks the spect-actors – 'was that intervention successful?'

The spect-actors decide themselves what has worked in the play or not. This approach demonstrates the opposite of a 'banking' learning approach as the spect-actors bring their own experience, knowledge and perspective to the discussion and interventions (Ibid.). The outcome is not pre-determined.

Lastly, forum theatre exploration also supports 'conscientisation', which Freire describes as the process by which people develop critical awareness of the social inequalities and power dynamics that affect them (Ibid.). Through the forum theatre play, we aimed to support the spect-actors in making conscious what is often implicit. In our initial feedback performance, our spect-actors did not get a tangible sense of how algorithms were affecting the characters in our play. To bring awareness into the spect-actors' consciousness, we developed new scenes, including one that showed the embodiment of algorithms. In the subsequent performance with these changes made, a spect-actor said that 'the acting of (algorithmic) notifications' physical manifestations was very powerful'. The algorithms had become visible, tangible, and thus something that the spect-actors could engage with meaningfully as we worked together to imagine and enact change. Before the algorithms felt tangible to the spect-actors, we couldn't successfully find ways to address the issue. As an application to GCE, it is sometimes necessary for educators to find creative ways to develop critical awareness of social inequalities and power dynamics, which can seem remote or abstract, by making them palpable. We did this in our play through embodiment, but this could also happen through other creative means including visual art, poetry, and discussion.

Finally, we learned the importance of connecting with people directly affected by the issue we were addressing and building community. When forum theatre was first developed in Brazil, plays were performed and devised within a community to reflect the power structures they were facing. In this mentorship, with participants hailing from broad practices, the formula was extended to connecting with other activists already at work on the issue. Throughout his mentorship, Julian Boal encouraged mentees to reach out to activists and organisations working in the same field to learn from their experiences and provide a support network with strength in numbers. The algorithm justice performers researched by analysing international news stories, joining a course

with the Center for Humane Technology (n.d.) and interviewing software engineers and software design strategists.  The research gathered and connections made became a reserve pool of information useful during the improvisational intervention scenes and for creating a play embedded in real life.  Their personal research gave actors agency within the forum theatre play and leverage for continued activism in the area.  This approach could also be applied more broadly to GCE as it's important in the field to collaborate, build community, and learn from each other.

## Conclusion

In summary, the forum theatre play about algorithmic justice was an effective way to raise awareness and community engagement about a complex topic that has both local and global impacts but is rarely considered in GCE.  Making the invisible visible through forum theatre allowed the spect-actors to engage with the complexity of this topic in a new, more critically conscious way.  The methodology has lessons for the GCE sector, particularly regarding the application of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, leading to participants who are ready to take an active role in change-making.

We suggest that there are several methodological and curricula implications for GCE. Firstly, algorithmic justice is an important topic for further exploration within GCE that could be mainstreamed into existing curricula. Whilst we did not explore the climate change links, Greenpeace (2014) indicates that if the Cloud was a country, it would be the sixth highest global emitter.  Our everyday technology practices contribute yet are underexplored in GCE.  Secondly, whilst we have only performed this play once as a forum theatre play, it is important to connect with a variety of audiences to engage civil society more fully on this issue.  Lastly, our process also illustrated the importance of engaging with sectors and disciplines that may not traditionally be considered GCE.  Our focus on an element of software has led us to consider software more broadly and its ethical implications for GCE.  We hope to explore software as a global justice issue with software engineers and developers from Lero (the Science Foundation Ireland Research Centre for Software) where the second author, Sarah Robinson, works.  This is a new community of engagement for both Creativity and Change

and Lero, and we hope to create dialogue between the public and the software sector on issues of global importance.

As we've seen, there is tremendous potential in using forum theatre to not only make the issue of algorithmic justice visible, but to draw on the creativity, insights, and passion of the spect-actors to develop solutions that are based on the collective learning of the group to form an innovative response to a complex issue. As we found, many of the solutions explored by our spect-actors involve skills we already have within the GCE field, such as drawing on empathy, and building meaningful engagement to develop collective action. Forum theatre was an innovative way to rehearse these existing strategies to combat this new issue of algorithmic injustice with both local and global implications.

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# Youth Work as Transformative Education: A Reflection on the National Youth Council of Ireland's Pedagogical Bootcamp

## Sally Daly and Aidan Farrelly

**Abstract:** Following two years' delivery of the National University of Ireland (NUI) Global Youth Work and Development Education Certificate, 2019/20 and 2021/22, and within a wider context of programme development, a space of learning and sharing for a group of youth workers engaged with the programme was created. As part of a continued commitment to supporting youth workers in addressing and engaging issues of inequality, poverty and injustice, as both local and global phenomena, a bootcamp was facilitated as the latest in a series to resource their work as educators. Importantly, using an anti-oppressive framework, youth workers were invited to consider their positionality as educators, and to identify and step into their pedagogical approach and to support them to see their work in this way. This approach is an attempt to bring to the surface much that often goes unsaid or remains unexamined in day-to-day practice. This article will present a reflection on this bootcamp as a means of contributing to the discussion on youth work as a model of transformative education.

**Key words:** Global Youth Work; Anti-Oppressive Approaches; Community of Practice/Hope; Non-Formal Education; Pedagogical Approaches in Youth Work.

## Introduction

Youth work as an intentional learning space is one where the young person generates the learning as part of an engaged process with the youth worker and other peer learners. Good youth work seeks to support young people to learn from one another alongside practitioners and to address identified needs and interests collectively (Sapin, 2013). This approach, underpinning a youth work ethos as a non-formal learning environment, draws upon Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy in which 'culture circles' (Freire, 1970) provide a context for a negotiated learning experience. In this way, a critical pedagogical approach understands knowledge as something we create through dialogue with each other, one that

seeks to educate the oppressed about their situation (Ibid.), while promoting consciousness and encouraging action to address inequalities (Sallah, 2014).

Global youth work (GYW), as Sallah (Ibid.) notes, combines the critical tools of development education and youth work.  At the core of a GYW approach lies the promise of transformation through reflection.  This approach is explicit about facilitating discussion to produce knowledge generated initially from the learner's own experience, but importantly, it then seeks to engage the learner in knowledge production about the wider world.  The non-formal negotiated nature of youth work and the lack of predetermined learning goals can be understood as a strength of GYW, along with the ability to engage often-disadvantaged young people in flexible, suitable learning about the world and their place in it.  It invites young people to explore their capacity to effect change at a personal and structural level, by contributing to local, national and global communities whilst developing their own social capital (Adams, 2014), and critical consciousness (Sallah, 2014).

According to Adams (2014), GYW is aligned to a Critical Social Education model from which Hurley and Treacy (1993) suggested that *outcomes* include:

> "Young people have developed the ability to analyse and assess alternatives and the capacity to define 'their position' in their world and the skills to act to change it; Young people are aware of the inequities which institutions promote; Young people are active in mobilising groups at local level to seek changes within existing structures" (Ibid.: 41-43).

## Global youth work as anti-oppressive practice

It is recognised that an ethical obligation exists for youth workers to contest the social structures that cause young people to be subjected to discrimination, with Howard Sercombe suggesting that youth work '…that takes ethics seriously cannot be comfortable with cleaning up the consequences of injustice while allowing injustice to continue' (Sercombe, 2010: 151).  Youth work is an ethical practice which is concerned with the promotion of the rights, voices and interests of young people within a human rights and equality frame (D'Arcy, 2016).  Flowing from

this ethical commitment, a global youth work approach encourages and supports both practitioners and young people to identify, explore and address oppressive social structures locally and globally (Daly et al., 2023).

An anti-oppressive approach to practice brings to attention an awareness of power differentials, challenging wider injustices in society and working towards a model of empowerment and liberation. It is a practice that requires youth workers and youth practitioners to understand the nature of oppression and power, to make a commitment to empowerment, and to develop the ability to reflect, critically analyse and change their practice (Chouhan, 2009: 61).

## Centering, de-centering and re-centering

"Despite claims of globality and inclusion, the lack of analysis of power relations and knowledge construction in this area often results in educational practices that unintentionally reproduce ethnocentric, ahistorical, depoliticized, paternalistic, salvationist and triumphalist approaches that tend to deficit theorize, pathologize or trivialize difference" (Andreotti and De Souza, 2012: 13).

There are many issues within the broad field of global citizen education (GCE), of which GYW is a part, starting with its colonial roots of development (Andreotti, 2011; Arshad-Ayaz et al., 2017). This development of 'helping' the Other through projects of civilising 'them' are seen in common, 'soft' or uncritical forms of GCE (Andreotti, 2006).

The empowerment model of youth work which involves raising critical consciousness is part of a response to addressing global issues, and an understanding of the world as an interdependent arena. By examining the interconnectedness of the globe, it is easy to see that inequality is a global phenomenon, and the suffering that is caused by the current neoliberal hegemony (Daly, Regan and Regan, 2016). By questioning the system that allows these inequalities to exist, we must also question our role as youth workers within that system.

## How to be an effective disruptor

As part of a continued commitment to supporting youth workers in addressing and engaging issues of inequality, poverty and injustice in their work, the GYW team at the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), i.e., Youth 2030, hosted a summer school in June 2023. The NYCI (2023) is the lead partner in the Youth 2030 consortium which also includes Concern Worldwide, Trocaire and the Centre for Youth Research and Development in Maynooth University. The programme, titled 'How to be an effective disruptor', is funded by Irish Aid, at the Department of Foreign Affairs and facilitated by Youth 2030, as the latest in a series of opportunities for a collective of youth workers to share experiences, question their practice, and to bring a critical gaze to their work as educators. The group was composed of 23 individuals, working within a variety of youth work contexts and representing a diversity of identities.

The programme was delivered across two days of workshops, with an introductory evening to support connection and a spirit of inquiry across the group. While many relationships already existed across this gathering, new connections had yet to be forged, and some connections were waiting to reignite and deepen. After two years of delivery of the NUI Global Youth Work and Development Education Certificate, 2019/20 and 2021/22, and within a wider context of programme development, a space of learning and sharing for this community of practitioners was created. Not all invitees had participated in the Certificate, but each participant had a stated commitment to addressing social justice issues in their work. Moreover, all invitees worked with an understanding of systemic inequality, and how this is manifest as a local and global issue. Professor Momodou Sallah, a scholar-activist engaged in disruptive pedagogy, co-facilitated the bootcamp as someone who is interested in both bringing real life learning into the classroom and transformative learning within communities.

## The bootcamp: a space of hope and possibility

With the expressed need by youth workers for a negotiated and consistent space to share, reflect and learn together, the bootcamp was not conceived to prescribe a community of practice but rather to be a space of hope and possibility. Importantly, youth workers were invited to consider their positionality

as educators, and to identify and step into their pedagogical approach in the work of challenging inequality as a local-global phenomenon. This article presents a reflection on the bootcamp as a non-formal educational context to support understanding about the nature of oppression and power, and an opportunity to develop or enhance the ability to reflect, critically analyse and inform practice.

## Disruptive pedagogy

Disruptive pedagogies establish a learning context that intentionally seeks to disrupt mainstream or common thinking (normalising discourse), to provide spaces for new possibilities to emerge (Mills, 1997). The process of engaging with productive disruption challenges us to reconsider commonplace assumptions that may seem neutral or natural in dominant discourse but may create or reinforce structures of inequity in educational contexts (Buyserie et al., 2021). The approach encourages disruption to be considered as a form of engaged, productive pedagogy – one that places emphasis on individual lived experiences as well as structures of injustice or inequity (Ibid.).

Being an intentional and effective disruptor is an approach that asks us to get comfortable with asking difficult questions, it asks us to dig into our own constructed reality and work with a level of discomfort, towards socially just outcomes. Our starting point recognises youth workers as offering a critical role as educators, and that young people enter the youth work space as voluntary participants. The relationship developed between a youth worker and a young person/group of young people, underpinned by the voluntary nature of their participation allows a youth work process to evolve from activities towards liberation (Young, 2006). This voluntary nature informs an educational context which is based on relationships and dialogue, and where the principle of voluntary engagement is central (Adams, 2014). Youth workers are in a unique position to disrupt and not replicate dominant notions of teaching and learning reflected in what Freire (1970) called the 'banking' model of education. In this framing, knowledge is recognised as socially produced (Giroux and McLaren, 1986), and all of us are in a process of 'human meaning making' with the socially constructed world around us, including the legacies of colonialism, immigration, and discrimination (Sallah, 2014).

Importantly, we know that youth work is a practice of empowerment, and that to support young people to see and challenge the inequality in their own lives and in the world around them, youth workers need to develop the skills to *effectively* challenge and disrupt inequality (Fitzsimons, 2011).

## Setting up the bootcamp

Nurturing skills in an educational context is a practice that takes time, competence, commitment, relationship, courage and trust. Such nurturing happens where we see ourselves as both welcome and belonging in a space; where we find both familiarity and curiosity in each other; somewhere that personal and professional growth can happen, and a place where the skills and expertise that we bring are acknowledged and considered as a core element of the space. An environment like this can only work where outcomes are negotiated.

We opened the bootcamp by inviting participants to a community gathering and followed this with a group meditation process the following morning. We made space to connect across the group, while also fostering an environment that allowed people to look inward and ground themselves in the natural world. Using grounding moments, taking care of ourselves and acknowledging not only our minds, but our bodies and spirits, can help to resource ourselves in committing to anti-oppressive practice (Ng, 2012; Macy and Brown, 2014).

## What is your pedagogical approach?
### The points along the thread that connect the work

Starting with a silent reflection on disruption allowed participants to reflect on their understanding of disruption from lived experience. Professor Sallah then invited the group to enter an exploration of individual pedagogical approaches present in the room. Five themes in disruptive pedagogy were explored as part of this delivery: Pedagogy of Ambiguity, Pedagogy of Discomfort, Pedagogy of Compassion, Critical Pedagogy and Pedagogy of Hope. It was an opportunity to think through individual educational styles and lived experiences as well as structures of injustice and inequity. It was a calling to step into the awareness of the practice of youth work as an intentional education space. The gathering moved through a process of creative reflection and group work to a dialogic

context, exploring and uncovering teaching styles. For many, it created a framing of youth work practices in the room through a different lens.

Aligned with this, there was a call to take a step back and think about ways to disrupt systems and structures, to challenge inequality. Attuning to the tension of working within a system, while also disrupting it, requires us to understand different aspects of the system, and understanding what feeds the system, the supply routes that resource the front line. This requires us to be strategic in our approach, in considering how we can disrupt those supply routes, to get behind them, to influence and impact outcomes. We need to be ready and resourced to have a plan for what might come, e.g., the loss of core funding for the work, a change in a policy context, so that we are not thrown off track. Importantly, to understand the construction of our own world, we must actively reflect on this, by centring ourselves in our story. As part of this exploration, we created space to consider positionality.

## Positioning the self as part of a critical pedagogical approach

To understand the social construction of reality, we need to actively reflect on this, centring ourselves with questions like: who am I and where do I come from, and what is it that I believe in? Then, to decentre is to take a figurative step back from our beliefs and thoughts, and challenge these beliefs, some of which may be hidden from us. It may take some exploring and stepping into discomfort to uncover that which is not at the surface. Only when we have actively made some discovery about ourselves, and worked through some discomfort, can we recentre ourselves, and in doing so, we may have to accept that the discovery work, and centring, decentring and recentring may be part of an ongoing path. In our role as youth worker educators, we are called upon to do this work with young people, so that they may go on their own voyage of discovery with themselves and the world around them.

A wider discussion followed on different manifestations of oppression. Reflections from the group on disruption through lived experience, included the following:

"Sometimes disruption is necessary to counter an act of injustice. Yet, even where this is a non-violent protest, this can be called an act of violence by the authorities. Challenging injustice is vital".

One of the key issues here was how people from minority identities experience oppression as a form of violence, and how this violence can be manifest in different ways, including as a disruption to the self:

"There are different faces of violence. Violence happens through language too, not just a physical act. People who are minoritised can feel violated through language even where it has good intent".

"The constant feeding of stereotypes in the media can create an internalised violence for people who are themselves from minoritised identity. This is a fear response".

"Being from a minoritised ethnic background does not make you immune from being impacted by the frenzy of fear generated in the media. This fear unchallenged is a form of violence. A disruption to the self".

Cho (2010: 315) describes knowledge as 'democratic, context dependent, and appreciative of the value of learners' cultural heritage'. The creation of this evolving knowledge is an active democratic process that warrants us not just accepting the diversity in the room, and accepting people's views of culture, but it is an interrogation of the world by all parties (Seal, 2021). In understanding anti-oppressive practice, knowledge is something we create with each other through dialogue and may entail challenging and changing cultural norms (Freire, 1970).

Making an anti-oppressive framework explicit is an attempt to bring to the surface much that often goes unsaid or remains unexamined in group work. Bringing attention to centring, decentring and recentring is creating space for that which may lay below the surface of a group and is an important part of a growth process at an individual and collective level.

## Pedagogy as part of the intentional path of an educator

With all this talk of pedagogy, at one point during our collective reflection, a question was posed to the group on the role of youth workers as educators. What unfolded was a rich conversation about the role youth workers play in young people's lives, with many participants visibly processing the notion of being a teacher. In many ways, despite some apparent disagreement in the room about this, further probing identified a shared set of ideas about youth work and education.

### Example one

When discussing points of convergence and divergence in relation to youth workers and teachers, the apparent absence of a curriculum in youth work in Ireland was an obvious difference. While teachers are provided with a curriculum to teach young people, youth workers often approach the learning process in a mutual way i.e., 'I don't know the answers to your questions, but let's find out some information together'. In this example, the youth worker is not necessarily teaching the young person about the topic, but instead showing how young people can embark on a learning journey which young people themselves lead. Rooted in the Freirean model of education for the purpose of liberation, not domestication, a youth work process facilitates young people to learn experientially, developing the capacity to think critically and engage in 'sense-making' (Young, 2006: 79).

### Example two

When considering the perspectives of a youth work process as opposed to the outcomes of youth work - the notion of assessment being a binary indicator of learning was also discussed. In contrast to formal education, whereby assessment is based on exams and essays to repeat back what a student has learned during their schooling, in youth work there is a broad hesitation in focussing on the outcome of a youth work intervention. Instead, youth workers prioritise the process of learning throughout an engagement rather than focussing on the end product. Ultimately, the conversation drew to a close with some participants suggesting that while it's important for youth workers to sit comfortably with the responsibility of education, and being educators, it is not the responsibility of youth workers to know and impart information but display an ability to facilitate

an informal learning process. Not only will this enrich the relationship between youth worker and young person but can also provide young people with an important template to use in future settings. This speaks to the 'accompaniment model' of youth work identified by Janet Batsleer (2008), where the relationship is nurtured between youth worker and young person by simply joining a young person on a journey of exploration and education.

The elements that make youth work a distinctive and powerful form of education are reflected in the established definitions of youth work; where the content of the curriculum is less important than the principles of dialogue, voluntarism and participation (Adams, 2014). The negotiated learning context is key here, along with the capacity to provoke a deeper consciousness and engagement for young people with their socially constructed worlds.

## Emerging community of practice (CoP)

As this group has continued to meet, and membership has evolved over time, an emergent need has arisen within its membership to continue meeting. From its beginning as a collective of youth workers participating in the Certificate programme, others have stepped into the space as practitioners working from a similar set of values and aspirations. The Youth 2030 Global Youth Work programme at NYCI has been a cornerstone in the evolution of this *emergent* CoP from the outset. With the expressed need for further engagement and the creation of a negotiated and consistent space for youth workers to share, reflect and learn together, NYCI has continued to offer its resources in convening this CoP.

Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023) have written extensively on the concept of communities of practice and their more recent publications have characterised CoP by the following three traits;

The Domain - What is the community about? What do people identify with?

The Community - Who should be at the table? What relationship should they form?

Practice - What should they do together? How can they make a difference in practice? (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023: 12).

As this group continues to evolve, and needs emerge, the value participants place on the domain is clear. When events are planned, either in person or remotely, members of this CoP continue to attend when available. Whilst membership criteria are not necessarily defined, those involved demonstrate a consistency both in terms of values and commitment to practice youth work in a way that is committed to challenging inequality and promoting consciousness raising through non-formal education. There was an intention on behalf of the organising team to further seed and nurture this CoP, by structuring spaces for participants to be together. On the opening night for example, participants were invited to get to know each other more through icebreakers and activities that allowed opportunities to share personal and professional stories.

Reflecting the conversational nature of youth work practice, participants were encouraged to get to know each other more, in the hope of providing a trusting foundation for the days to come. With a breadth of experience in the room, youth workers also actively stepped into hosting activities on the opening night. It is this that further supports the assertion that this group has become a CoP, encouraging 'buy-in and ownership' of the space, the activities and the membership (Davis-Manigaulte, 2012: 152).

> Participant Reflection: "I have a deeper respect for our collective practice. I am taking away new knowledge and confidence to continue practising the art of disruption in my practice. I have a renewed sense of energy".

Relationships have formed and developed over time in this emergent CoP, and the benefits of these have far-reaching outcomes. From individual support and friendship to cross-organisation collaboration, the membership of this CoP has embraced the potential of using each other as a resource.

> Participant Reflection: "I am taking away the absolute pleasure it has been to share this space with other youth workers and knowing I am not isolated in this work".

## Participant voices

Creating a space for participants to reflect on their experiences during this bootcamp was an important step in evaluating the work. The ways in which participants could reflect were provided for throughout the bootcamp and in the days and weeks following. In acknowledging the space, three participants reflected the following:

"It's like a dystopian future – all the spaces I am in the world, there are people fighting to be heard and acknowledged just for being a person. Everyone in this space constantly humanises people".

"It's a sneak preview into what the world could be like. There are lots of unique relationships here. These spaces can become deep, and it's amazing to see all the work people have done on themselves and with each other in the last 48 hours. It's existing in this space".

"I want to acknowledge how unique it is that we have such different perspectives in the room, and the vulnerability of the space. It was healing for me personally. I want to bottle this up and give it to every young person. The honesty of it all, even in our learning – we are unlearning. I am so proud to be here, and so grateful to be here".

As a follow up to the bootcamp, participants were invited to complete a short online survey to reflect on their experiences to understand the impact of the bootcamp, and more importantly to inform the future for this community of practice. The responses received in this question focussed on three C's: commitment, confidence and collegiality. How do you intend to put the learning into practice?

"I commit to bringing the learning with me - to be more reflective, analytical, questioning and supportive".

"I intend to move out of my comfort zone to enhance the experience of my learners and to encourage growth in my pedagogical approaches to working with groups".

In terms of confidence, participants noted a greater sense of consciousness in their practice.

> "I intend to put my confidence in my ability to disrupt effectively, acknowledge the times where I have done it and create my many war and battle plans for future disruption".

> "Personally, I have the confidence to talk about uncomfortable topics that I usually will shy away from. And, to transfer this confidence, creating space for young people to speak up and speak their truth".

The great sense of collegiality shone through in the bootcamp, but remarkably, many participants shared a desire to communicate their learning with others.

> "I intend to use the learning I have gathered to challenge and reflect on my own pedagogical approach on an ongoing basis. I intend to support other youth workers in doing this work also".

> "Specifically, around the area of encouraging more of our organisations to challenge the current racist systems in regard to people seeking protection and their rights".

It's clear that participants have placed value on different elements of the bootcamp. For some, the opportunity to be in a space with like-minded individuals and to share experiences was important. For others, the bootcamp acted as a form of restart in their professional journey.

> On reflection, what are you taking away from the experience?

> "The takeaway from this experience for me is that the spaces to co-exist, support and challenge each other as humans for the purpose of growth and development can exist when mindfully resourced".

"*Lots!* The conversation about centring is a standout. Also, being ok to call myself a teacher and educator without having to know it all. We learn together".

"Understanding it is a privilege to be a disruptor, to provoke consciousness according to means/abilities".

"Knowledge! The bootcamp gave me a new lens from which to view reflection of my practice, with centring and re-centring, and to start thinking on multiple pedagogies".

## Community of hope

Youth workers offer a critical role in shaping transformative socially just outcomes in collaboration with young people. The empowerment model of youth work which involves raising critical consciousness is part of a response to addressing global issues that understands the world as interdependent. Youth workers therefore need spaces of collective engagement, informed by an anti-oppressive practice to develop the skills and knowledge to work towards understanding the nature of inequality and their role in challenging this. During this bootcamp, youth workers were invited to consider their positionality as educators, and to identify and step into their pedagogical approach in the work of challenging inequality as a local-global phenomenon. Understanding pedagogy as a core aspect of youth work is a critical part of a commitment to transformative outcomes that places emphasis on individual lived experiences as well as structures of injustice or inequity.

The youth workers who participated in this bootcamp are from diverse backgrounds and have their own socially constructed realities that shape their practice. Utilising an anti-oppressive framework is an attempt to bring to the surface, much that often goes unsaid or remains unexamined in day-to-day practice. Accepting this as part of the work is aligned with an invitation to continue the ongoing work of centring, decentring and recentring. As this emergent CoP continues to evolve, what is evidently clear is the value participants place in the domain to support understanding on the nature of oppression and power, and an opportunity to develop or enhance the ability to reflect, critically

analyse and inform practice.  This is part of the 'human meaning making' of an active youth work practice.

Those involved demonstrate a consistency both in terms of values and commitment to practice youth work in a way that is committed to challenging inequality and promoting consciousness raising through non-formal education.

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# THE FAR RIGHT AND OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT AID (ODA): NARRATIVES, POLICIES AND IMPACT

## BARRY CANNON

**Abstract:** There has been an increasing level of far right activity in Ireland, particularly in protests against the siting of asylum seeker accommodation. An under-explored aspect of this emergent political activity has been its impact on overseas development aid (ODA). This article reviews a selected number of recent academic and policy articles on the rise of the far right and ODA with a view to understanding the nature and content of anti-ODA far right narratives. It considers counterstrategies that can be used by the ODA supporting community to combat far right anti-ODA narratives and policy changes. They include increased coordination between national and global issue campaigns, greater emphasis on positive rather than negative narratives based on alternative policy responses, and better messaging in these campaigns working closely with local affected communities to frame those messages. Ultimately, some of these recommendations could have implications for the political neutrality of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

**Key words:** Far Right; Overseas Development Aid; International Development.

## Introduction

Ireland is one of the few remaining countries where the far right does not have an institutional presence, but there is increasing concern that this might change with far right involvement noted in protests against COVID-19 health measures during the pandemic and, more recently, against the siting of asylum seeker accommodation. One under-studied aspect of the rise of the far right is its impact on overseas development aid (ODA). In this article I approach this subject, seeking answers to the following questions: What are the ideological features of far right movements and parties that make it anti-ODA inclined? What is the nature and content of anti-ODA far right narratives? What impact do these narratives have on public opinion and on ODA policy? What counterstrategies can be used by the ODA supporting community to combat far right anti-ODA narratives and policy changes?

The article reviews a selected number of recent academic and policy articles on the theme and, hence, cannot pretend to answer these questions fully. Nonetheless, despite such limitations, it aims to contribute to an emerging debate on far right criticisms of overseas aid within the Irish ODA supporting community in the context of growing public concern around far right activity in Ireland. The article will first provide some definition and characteristics of the far right to help orient the discussion, putting particular emphasis on the characteristics of nativism and populism. It will then provide some answers to the questions outlined above. First it will develop the theme of the ideological background to far right distrust of ODA, locating this not just in nativism but also in populist anti-elitism. Then it will outline a few suggested policy impacts, noting that far right presence in public institutions, in or out of government, can have policy impacts on ODA. Such impacts are not confined to cuts in ODA, but also seek its reorientation to nationalistic goals and the control of immigration. Then a range of counterstrategies are suggested, drawing mostly from Galasso et al.'s (2017) detailed study for Oxfam on the relationship between the far right and ODA. Among their suggestions are increased coordination between national and global issue campaigns, greater emphasis on positive rather than negative narratives based on alternative policy responses, and better messaging in these campaigns working closely with locally affected communities to frame those messages. Ultimately, some of these recommendations could have implications for the political neutrality of NGOs.

## Definitions

Before defining the far right, it is important to define the right. Cas Mudde (2019), arguably the most influential scholar in the field of far right studies, defines the right, following Bobbio (1996), as those parties and movements which, traditionally at least, view social inequalities, particularly class, gender and racial inequalities, as 'natural and positive, [which] should be either defended or left alone by the state' (Mudde, 2019: 7). Nonetheless, what divides the mainstream right from the far right is attitudes to (liberal) democracy. The mainstream right, 'such as conservatives and liberals/libertarians' (Ibid.), accepts liberal democracy, including its key values of tolerance and pluralism, as the sole means to compete for power. The far right, divided into the extreme right on the one hand and the radical right on the other, is 'hostile to liberal democracy' (Ibid.). The extreme

right in the tradition of fascism, reject democracy *tout court* while the radical right 'accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers' (Ibid.). Hence, the right in general defends social hierarchy, but is divided over strategies to achieve this: democratic compromise and consensus with non-right parties (mainstream right); or, rejection of compromise with non-right parties and movements but within a liberal democratic framework (radical right) or outside it (extreme right).

Mudde (2019) ascribes four key ideological characteristics to the far right: populism, nativism, authoritarianism, and familialism. By 'populist' he means a political grouping that:

> "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Ibid.: 7).

As the radical right accepts democracy, but not liberal democracy, he argues, then it is predominantly populist in the current context. Such a stance is questioned by others, arguing that the populist label obscures, for example, the far right's historical links to fascism (see, for example: Rydgren 2018; Mammone, 2009; and Traverso, 2019 among others). Despite such reservations, most analyses on the far right use populism as an analytical frame, particularly as it emphasises the far right's anti-elitism, which is a key theme used against ODA.

Importantly, for the purposes of this article, the far right is considered above all to be nativist. Nativism holds 'that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native groups (the nation) and that non-native (or "alien") elements, whether persons or ideas, are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state' (Mudde, 2019: 27). The ultimate goal for the radical right is an ethnocracy, that is 'a democracy in which citizenship is based on ethnicity' (Ibid.: 26). As a result, 'aliens' must either 'assimilate' or be expelled from the country and the 'national culture' must be protected from threats, among which immigration is the most important. In both extreme and radical rights

(and increasingly in centrist politics on both right and left) immigration is seen as problematic at best, or fundamentally inoperable at worst. Such dislike of immigration is particularly salient against people of Muslim background and Islamophobia is a characteristic of many far right parties and movements, an attitude which is increasingly being expressed in mainstream centre-right politics. This emphasis on nativism leads to a nationalist, if not isolationist, approach to foreign policy which negatively affects ODA.

The far right is also identified as authoritarian in that they believe in 'a strictly ordered society, in which infringements on authority are to be punished severely' (Mudde, 2019: 29). Social problems (alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, violence etc.) need to be dealt with as law and order issues. The origins of these problems are often blamed on 'elites', specifically supposed 'left-wing' teachers and academics 'who corrupt youth with "cultural Marxism" and other "perverse" ideas' (Ibid.: 35), such as gender, sexual diversity and multiculturalism. These processes of 'indoctrination', alongside immigration, are seen to weaken the nation, which is equated with ethnicity and the nuclear family. The authoritarian aspect has implications also for foreign policy as it suggests punitive rather than cooperative solutions to problems whose origins are identified as stemming from overseas, such as immigration.

Finally, familialism is, according to Kemper (cited by Mudde, 2019: 148):

"a form of biopolitics which views the traditional family as the foundation of the nation and subjugates individual reproductive and self-determination rights [of women in particular] to the normative demands of the reproduction of the nation".

This can translate into sexism and traditional binary views of gender, and feminism and feminists as well as LGBT+ groups are viewed very negatively as a result (Ibid.: 151). While this can vary among the far right in different areas of Europe, with some western and northern European, radical right parties nominally accepting gender and sexual equality achievements, most would not advocate further legislation in these areas, arguing that 'equality' has been

achieved. Such attitudes can translate into socially regressive re-designing of ODA priorities, such as, for example, the former United States' (US) President Donald J. Trump's use of the Global Gag Rule (Taylor and Norris, 2017), which withdraws USAID support from any organisation construed as supporting abortion.

## ODA in far right discourse

As seen above, the four basic identifying characteristics of the far right are potentially inimical to ODA as a policy frame, or certain aspects of ODA policy, such as reproductive rights. Galasso et al. (2017: 9), for example, find that the far right uses 'anti-elite narratives, anti-globalization narratives, and anti-immigration/refugee narratives' in service of anti-ODA narratives. Nativism is at the root of far right questioning of foreign aid, as it is a frame used 'in the othering of the have-nots of the world and stressing a preference for taking care of the in-group first' (Burcu Bayram and Thomson, 2022: 5). Burcu Bayram and Thomson (Ibid.: 2) find, for example, that the far right argues against foreign aid, characterising it as a cosmopolitan policy that prioritises 'foreigners' at the expense of 'patriots', in the context of scarce resources. In such a context, 'the people' wish to prioritise helping their own poor and needy citizens rather than those of foreign countries (Ibid.: 4). In this narrative, ODA is conceived as a policy driven by elites seeking to protect their own priorities or by elites in recipient countries who disproportionately benefit from ODA (Ibid.).

Heinrich et al. (2021) argue that far right actors exploit the absence of the usual policy feedback loop in foreign aid discourse. They argue that even those who approve of ODA have little way of knowing whether aid is effective or not. In an age of increasing lack of trust between ruler and ruled, this problem becomes particularly acute, a fact that the far right is happy to exploit. Such discursive tactics result in mainstream parties promising to reduce aid to seek re-election (Ibid.: 1047). Hence, they find a direct correlation between increases in anti-elitist and nativist moods in a donor country, and declining ODA spending levels (Ibid.: 1048). Suzuki (2023: 6) goes further and finds a link between the reduction of aid and the establishment's failure to control immigration. In such a context, arguments emerge to use ODA funding to augment border control or

other domestic welfare programmes for the people deemed most in need of government protection.

## ODA policy changes by governments that have far right members or are influenced by the far right

As noted above, the far right can have direct impact on ODA policy whether they are in power or not. Hammerschmidt, Meyer and Pintsch (2022), for example, in their study of 25 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries between 1990-2016 found that foreign aid commitments are likely to decrease when populist radical right parties have a higher share in the legislature and even more so when they are part of the executive. Burcu Bayram and Thomson (2022: 3) point out that the anti-foreign aid stance of far right populists moves mainstream conservatives further to the right on the issue. Indeed, Galasso et al. (2017: 8) argue that far right influence is more due to this indirect influence over the mainstream than being part of government; the latter being the exception rather than the rule.

> "[T]heir influence on government comes from: their effect on public opinion; their ability to push other parties further right; their influence on government to develop more authoritarian policies on issues like migration; and their broader influence on the political systems of Europe" (Ibid.: 8).

Heinrich et al. (2021: 1057) find that:

> "...anti-elitist and nativist attitudes are systematically associated with negative attitudes toward aid...regardless of whether the government is run by populists. It is through changes in mass preferences that anti-elitism and nativism can affect donor countries' aid spending".

Burcu Bayram and Thomson (2022: 2) point to ostensibly centre-right administrations' anti-ODA policies as proof of this, such as that of the Trump administration's cutting ODA, Boris Johnson, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, redirecting ODA funds to support national foreign policy priorities rather than poverty reduction, and the use of fiscal conservatism

narratives in Australia to reduce ODA.  As Burcu Bayram and Thomson (2022: 2) observe with regard to such policy moves, the far right, 'unlike traditional fiscal conservatives...do not simply wish to reduce aid spending; they seek to redefine the purpose of aid and development co-operation to serve their countries' economic and political interests'. Hence, they point out that, 'Populists will often set out to use foreign aid to limit the numbers of immigrants and refugees, sometimes going as far as to include plans to resettle them back to their countries of origin' (Ibid.).  Hammerschmidt, Meyer and Pintsch (2022: 480) additionally argue that such rhetoric may not only result in reductions in ODA but also reduced inclination 'towards multilateralism in terms of payments to and memberships in international organizations or being less cooperative in finding solutions to common problems'.  This far right focus on domestic issues means that they are 'less compromising in foreign policies when these do not entail an immediate gain for a country' (Ibid.: 482).  Hence, hostility to ODA found among the far right and, indeed among some mainstream conservative parties is part of a wider rejection of cooperative multilateralism to solve common global governance problems, a stance which in turn has impacted on ODA policies, such as supporting climate change initiatives.

## Counter-strategies

Despite the negative of the far right impact on ODA, Burcu Bayram and Thomson (2022) are optimistic that the impact of far right anti-ODA rhetoric on public opinion is limited.  They argue that while it can lead to a decrease in support for ODA, this effect is conditioned by 'whether people think populist leaders stand up for the little guy or scapegoat out-groups' (Ibid.: 1).  This suggests that one part of counter-strategising is to ensure that people think the latter rather than the former.  Galasso et al. (2017) make a number of recommendations to help ensure that this is the case.  They suggest, for example, that ODA supporting communities develop 'campaigns pointing to the interconnectedness of causes and solutions across political, economic, social and cultural fields at global, regional and other scales' (Ibid.: 54).  In other words, the interconnectedness of these problems at a scalar level from the local to the global should be emphasised.

They additionally suggest greater coordination between global and nationally based narratives and campaigns, emphasising positive benefits and

outcomes and avoiding a 'politics of blame' (Ibid.: 51). In parallel to such campaigns, positive, non-adversarial, and propositional visions could be explored, such as 'those represented in work on alternative economic paradigms' (Ibid.: 54). Equally, there is a need to defend 'civil society advocacy and action spaces' at home and abroad, also threatened by the far right, using cross-sectoral collective campaigns, including government and voluntary sectors (Ibid.: 52). Other coordinated and cross-cutting campaigns could be 'on inequality, pointing to change to particular drivers of this (i.e. corporate tax rates); migration and global displacement', using 'more nuanced and locally relevant ways to engage diverse audiences rather than a global, one-size-fits-all approach' (Ibid.: 54). Additionally, they recommend making 'better use of social media to communicate and develop appropriate language consulting with local communities to refine messaging' (Ibid.).

Galasso et al (2017) also point out that civil society is not a homogenous space but requires review to understand how right-wing discourses take hold. Part of the answer to this question can be found in Bob (2012: 7), in which he argues that 'global civil society is not a harmonious field of like-minded NGOs [but] a contentious arena riven by fundamental differences criss-crossing national and international borders'. For every network of institutions and individuals pursuing progressive causes, Bob (2012) argues, there is a counter-network seeking to consistently undermine this work. In this respect, ODA is no different, and research should be done to help understand such networks, including their origins, objectives, strategies and impact. Such findings, however, raise questions about the political nature of NGO campaigns, particularly if there is a need to provide positive alternatives to neoliberal forms of globalisation (Galasso et al, 2017: 50).

## Conclusions

This article sought to outline some key issues and challenges for ODA in a political context increasingly influenced by far right organisations and ideology. First, it defined and characterised the right and the far right, identifying key features which are threatening to ODA, policy impacts of such threats, and some suggested counterstrategies that could be used by ODA supporting communities. In this discussion it noted the far right's rejection of key liberal democratic

features, such as pluralism and protection of minorities, if not democracy itself, and the influence and impact of far right nativism and populism in creating a hostile environment for ODA. This crystallizes in a far right rejection of public support for non-nationals, both abroad and, in some cases, at home (the 'out' group) prioritising state support for nationals (the 'in' group). Anti-elite, anti-globalisation, and anti-migrant/refugee narratives are enlisted to support this viewpoint as well as a supposed need for fiscal conservatism. Policy impacts can be cuts to ODA, re-orientation of ODA to more explicit nationalistic aims, and the rejection of multilateralism. The far right can orient policy in these directions even without achieving power through a process of 'mainstreaming', i.e. adoption of such narratives and policies by centre-right and even centre-left parties in the hope of heading off the electoral threat of the far right.

In order to counter-strategise against this threat from the far right, ODA supporting communities can reorient their own narratives to support national objectives by pointing to a confluence of interest between the global and the national in heading off common threats. They can offer explicit policy prescriptions which point to positive outcomes rather than simple problematisation of the issues. Such messaging, however, needs to be informed by and constructed with local communities, especially those most vulnerable to far right targeting. These counterstrategies, however, may entail explicit politicisation of ODA supporting NGOs which may leave them vulnerable to far right attacks and state disapproval, a risky occurrence if such NGOs are dependent on state funding and/or cooperation. Further research may be required to assess how such NGOs have strategised against the far right in other jurisdictions, including how they managed such risks and how the far right formed coalitions and marshalled their own anti-ODA strategies.

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# Viewpoint

> "Everything clean can be soiled and everything beautiful can be corrupted. There's no better example for it than greenwashing" (Kippar, 2022).

## The colour green

Green is synonymous with Ireland, or so we like to think. We play in green. The boys in green. And now the girls in green. We market in green. *Origin Green* is the Bord Bia sustainability programme (Bord Bia, 2023). We schmooze in green. Every year at the seat of the United States' (US) government in the White House on St. Patrick's Day. And now we wash in green. Green washing. Every day we witness corporate Ireland's greenwashing agenda (Robinson, 2022). Greenwashing that, for the most part, goes unchallenged in the Irish media. A greenwashing that is facilitated, in the case of one fossil fuel company, *Texaco*, by a media 'personality' and former Irish rugby international.

Alongside *Texaco*, other household names – *BP, ExxonMobil, Shell, Circle K* and *CERTA* are involved. It's not just the oil industry that is awash with greenwashing. *IKEA,* the Swedish multinational conglomerate furniture company, the 90 per cent *Coca-Cola*-owned *Innocent* drinks company, the Canadian coffee company *Keurig*. The fast-fashion Swedish *H&M* company, the US cleaning product company *Windex*, the Irish airline *Ryanair*, the US plastics company *Hefty*, the London-headquartered *Unilever* company. The Filipino-based *Monde Nissin* food company. The British-based *HSBC* banking and financial services company. The Swiss-based *Nestlé* food company. The US-based *Starbucks* coffee houses. The German car company *Volkswagen*. The US-based *Apple* company (Ibid.).

## Greenwashing and its ubiquity

In 2018, as part of their 'eco-drive', fast-food multinational *McDonald's* ditched their plastic straws in favour of paper straws. However, following criticisms of its replacement, *McDonald's* admitted that the substituted paper straws are not 'fully recyclable' (BBC, 2019). An attempted greenwashing that was found out and left the conglomerate scurrying for cover.

In its 1971 advertising campaign, *Coca-Cola* hit upon a hit song to further burnish its product's image in what was one of the early entrants into the greenwashing arena (Coca Cola, 1971). Often cited as quite possibly the greatest advertisement in television history, the jingle was subsequently re-written and became a major hit for the British band The New Seekers.

> "I'd like to buy the world a home
>
> And furnish it with love.
>
> Grow apple trees and honey bees
>
> And snow white turtle doves.
>
> I'd like to teach the world to sing
>
> In perfect harmony.
>
> I'd like to buy the world a coke
>
> And keep it company.
>
> That's the real thing" (Ibid.).

Curiously, it was composed by US advertising executive Bill Backer while sitting in the airport café in Shannon, Co. Clare, after the plane he was travelling in was forced to land due to blanket fog in London. It cost $250,000 and was, for its time, the most expensive advertising campaign ever produced (Andrews and Barbash, 2016).

Bizarrely, *Coca-Cola*, the world's top plastic polluter over four successive years (2017-2020) (Branded, 2021), was a key sponsor of the United Nations' (UN) COP-27 climate summit, held in November 2022 in the Egyptian coastal resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Quite apart from the incongruity of having one of the top polluters as a sponsor of a climate change conference, Egypt is one of the most autocratic countries, with the fourth worst human rights record in the world (The Global Economy, 2022). As Emma Priestland, a coordinator for Break Free From Plastic, a global alliance of organisations and individuals, argued: 'Coca-Cola sponsoring the Cop27 is pure "greenwash"' (Green and McVeigh, 2022).

In 1997, the giant US energy company *Chevron* initiated the *People Do* campaign, one of the most egregious examples of corporate greenwashing (Chevron, 1997). Featuring cuddly bears, sea turtles and butterflies, the advertising campaign highlighted *Chevron's* erroneous claims that it was its policy and practice to restore marshes once used for oil exploration (Watson, 2016). Another featured a fox cub and thirsty animals at waterholes. All might have passed as a promotion for a David Attenborough film.

All of the companies referred to above have been cited for greenwashing activities that include misrepresentation of practices, overstating ambitions, false and misleading certification, non-verifiable and exaggerated claims, vague and aspirational targets, the corruption of language and more (Robinson, 2022).

## Greenwashing: a word gone viral

It all started with a towel in a hotel in a resort in Fiji and a young ecologist with an interest in clam shrimp, bog turtles and the northern cricket frog. In 1983, Jay Westerveld was on a research trip to Samoa when he stopped in Fiji to surf. Staying at a rough little guesthouse, he ventured into a sprawling luxury beach resort to avail of the facilities. On reading a note in the hotel's bathroom, something jarred with Westerveld. To protect the island's reefs and eco-system, which the hotel claimed to care deeply about, guests were invited to re-use their towel rather than throwing them on the floor after one shower.

But here's the rub.

With scant, if any, regard for the fragile eco-system, the hotel was at the time pouring tonnes of concrete to construct new bungalows on a prime stretch of coastal land, metres away from the imperilled reefs. The 're-use towel request', Westerveld concluded, was nothing more than a ruse to reduce costs and increase profits. Reflecting on that experience later, he coined the phrase 'greenwashing', the reality with which we have all become too familiar.

Corporate deception goes to the heart of greenwashing. It is the green jacket it wears. Such is its usefulness it has morphed into many other arenas. Sportswashing. Perhaps the most spectacular example of sportswashing took place during the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar where sport was used to 'wash' an appalling human rights record. Or take Gulf States' involvement in the English Premier League, or Saudi Arabia's attempted takeover of international golf and its investment of US$6.3 billion in sports deals in a period of just six years (Michaelson, 2023).

Not everyone has been demurely passive when confronted with the sportswashing juggernaut. Reflecting on the decision to award Russia the hosting of the World Cup in 2018, television presenter and former England football captain Gary Lineker simply said in reference to the decision to award Russia the hosting of the World Cup in 2018: 'we were sportswashed' (Lineker, 2022). 'Looking back now, we should have spoken out more', Lineker noted (Ibid.).

Another who spoke out was Irish journalist Eamon Dunphy who characterised the action of FIFA, soccer's world governing body, as 'the ultimate sportswashing decision', in hosting the World Cup in Qatar in 2022 (Dunphy, 2022). Catherine Cleary, a contributor to *The Irish Times* and founder of *Pocket Forests*, has also spoken out on the social dimension of greenwashing sponsorship: 'Sponsorship buys "social licence" to continue polluting activities. We are the society that is granting this licence and it is up to us to withdraw it' (Cleary, 2023).

## Greenwashing Irish style

Green Ireland has witnessed its share of both greenwashing and sportswashing. For example: *Certa*, Ireland's largest fuel supplier's sponsorship of the Ireland Women's cricket team; *Applegreen's* 'BioDive' project; and *Texaco's* Children's Art and 'Support for Sport' competitions. *Texaco* wears its sponsorship of the children's art competition as a badge of honour. According to its website, the children's art competition 'has acquired the status of an institution and become a part of the fabric of Irish life that has endured and developed across the generations' (Texaco, 2023). The Department of Education and Science, Boards of Management, school principals, teachers, subject associations, teacher unions, non-governmental organisations, along with a host of past advocates, past participants and winners including a former president (Mary Robinson) and a former government minister (Ruairi Quinn) have remained silent on *Texaco's* sponsorship of the children's art competition.

The entrenchment of fossil fuel agendas and perspectives across Irish society remains significantly unchallenged even in contexts where the topic of climate change is actively discussed and engaged with. The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland (DES, 2018) was one of the Irish government's key strategies for 'Education for Sustainability' underpinning the Action Plan for Education (DES, 2016). In the former, the word 'green' gets forty-two mentions.

Side-by-side with the green rhetoric sits the *Texaco* Children's Art competition. Pupils and students are expected to uncritically engage with the green school agenda and the *Texaco* agenda. This incongruous synchronicity directly challenges some of the key recommendations of the Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (The Citizens' Assembly, 2023). The Assembly concluded that 'children and young people are integral to ensuring the environment is protected (Ibid.: 20). Recommendation 62 called on all involved in education – The Department of Education and Science, the Teaching Council, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the Teacher Education Support Service(s) – 'to engage in meaningful curriculum reform and teacher education to explicitly incorporate teaching and learning on biodiversity in early childhood, primary and post-primary curricula' (The Citizens' Assembly, 2023:

20).  Recommendation 64 stated that: 'school grounds and local public amenities need to be developed as a support to a diverse and meaningful nature education. In line with this, basic biodiversity training for school staff, including maintenance and grounds staff, should be rolled out on a national basis' while Recommendation 65 stated: 'the Green Schools Initiative should be reformed to ensure nature and biodiversity feature in the initial stages of the programme (Ibid.).  Few cultural institutions have challenged *Texaco's* association with a children's art competition.  Fewer still members of the media.

*Texaco's* 'Sport for All' agenda provides the second leg of its greenwashing strategy.  For a paltry €5,000, camogie, Gaelic football, handball, hurling, rugby, soccer, and other clubs across the country are expected to compete against each other.  The total fund available is a modest €130,000.  RTÉ 2FM broadcaster and former Munster and Ireland international rugby player, Donnacha O'Callaghan, is the brand ambassador of the Texaco 'Support for Sport' competition:

> "I'm very excited to take part as I truly believe that a fund of this size can make a very real difference to the betterment and running of any club in this country.  I truly believe that... €5,000 from Texaco ... can make a very real difference to the betterment of any club... Only 26 clubs were that lucky in 2022" (Martin, 2020).

Donnacha O'Callaghan is also an Ambassador for UNICEF Ireland, an organisation dedicated to the improvement of children's lives across the world, especially in countries most at risk from climate change.  According to UNICEF Ireland, 'virtually every child on the planet is already affected by climate change', yet its management appears to see no contradiction in sharing a brand ambassador with a fossil fuel company (UNICEF, n.d.).

It is in contexts such as these that the debate on greenwashing has taken on greatest importance – as the public struggles to come to terms with the implications of climate change.  As the urgent need for radical engagement grows exponentially, greenwashing becomes a deliberate and deceptive strategy used by the fossil fuel sector to sow doubt, confusion, and divisiveness in public

discussion. It is a core element in polluting public awareness and public judgement on climate change issues. In November 2022, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations asserted that:

> "We seem trapped in a world where fossil fuel producers and financiers have humanity by the throat. For decades, the fossil fuel industry has invested heavily in pseudoscience and public relations – with a false narrative to minimise their responsibility for climate change and undermine ambitious climate policies. They exploited precisely the same scandalous tactics as big tobacco decades before. Like tobacco interests, fossil fuel interests and their financial accomplices must not escape responsibility" (Guterres, 2022).

## A deafening Irish silence

With some justification, Irish international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) claim to have played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion on a wide range of international justice and human rights challenges. On issues such as spiralling inequality and the not unrelated spiralling military industrial complex, gender-based violence, the campaign for debt cancelation, apartheid in South Africa and Israel along with a host of human rights abuses across Africa, Central and South America and Southeast Asia, Irish INGOs along with trade unions, some returned missionaries, an assortment of centre-to-left wing political parties and many other activists have routinely been at the forefront of advocacy and campaigning on international human rights abuses. This is also true with respect to environmental issues generally and climate change more particularly.

There is a broad corpus of NGO-led work on climate justice, climate change and greenwashing per se. This is as it should be and as we have the right to expect. The work of Trócaire (2017) on climate justice and that of DE.ie on greenwashing (Kendrick, 2023) are just two examples of that ongoing work. But on the specific issue of the conflict of interest involving Texaco and UNICEF, all NGOs (individually and collectively), with the exception of Just Forests, have been singularly silent. The unwillingness of UNICEF Ireland and other Irish INGO platforms, specifically Dóchas: the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations and IDEA (the Irish Development Education

Association), to acknowledge what we regard as a clear conflict of interest in Mr. O'Callaghan's dual ambassadorships of Texaco and UNICEF is deeply troubling, if not indefensible. Remaining silent on this issue is tantamount to colluding in *Texaco's* sportswashing agenda.

It is not just civil society organisations but the Irish media, too, that have been silent on greenwashing. Following a profile of the *Texaco* Children Art competition (artswashing in practice) on the Ray Darcy Show (RTÉ Radio One), we sought an opportunity to reply so that we could highlight Texaco's greenwashing agenda. This request was rejected. We were informed that this was a light entertainment programme. Clearly, promoting Texaco's greenwashing agenda is in line with the national broadcaster's light entertainment remit but challenging Texaco's greenwashing agenda is not. All broadsheet newspapers in this country were asked to provide commentary on *Texaco's* sportswashing agenda in Ireland and, with the exception of the *Sunday Times* (2023), none responded to our request. However, a number of regional newspapers did, including *The Offaly Express* (2023), *The Tullamore Tribune* (2023) and *The Limerick Leader* (2023).

In response to what we perceived as that deafening silence, we produced a Just Forest published twenty-page resource (King et al., 2023) on sports and arts washing that focuses on the Texaco oil company's efforts to greenwash its image by inserting itself into the social and cultural life of the country. Each of us has come to this story from very different perspectives but with one overarching aim – to challenge the greenwashing activities of corporate power internationally and in Ireland.

## Truth to power

Holding truth to power is an oft-cited mantra of the fourth estate. In that struggle it would appear that the powerful have won out. Holding truth to power is also the self-cited task of the international development NGO sector. Holding global institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the UN Security Council, The G7, and the EU among others is the stuff of engaged NGO work. Important as that work is, it is low-hanging fruit. Holding each other to account, when being held to account is warranted as we believe it is in this case,

is an altogether different but no less important challenge. Human nature being what it is, it is always difficult to hold our friends to account. But if we fail on the latter, we undermine our credibility in the former.

The struggle to ban, restrict and challenge greenwashing by fossil fuel and related companies has taken on increased urgency given the arguments and findings summarised by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in February 2023 (IPCC, 2023). In 2021, under a new climate law, France became the first European country to ban fossil fuel advertising. The ban includes provisions related to greenwashing advertisements, specifically banning the use of any wording on a product, its packaging, or in advertising promoting a product or service, indicating that the product, service, or activity of the manufacturer is carbon-neutral or has no negative impact on the climate (Insights, 2021).

A new law is currently (August 2023) making its way through South Korea's National Assembly that would slap a three million won ($2,271) fine on companies judged by the country's Ministry of Environment to have deceived the public about their green credentials. The law is likely to pass before the end of 2023 (Kapron, 2023). There have been parliamentary calls for similar bans in The Netherlands, Spain, and Belgium as well as calls from civil society organisations in Australia, Canada, and the UK.

In an effort to reduce risks of false claims (greenwashing) in 2019, the European Commission announced a series of legislative and non-legislative initiatives. This was followed in March 2023 with a *Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on substantiation and communication of explicit environmental claims*, otherwise known as the Green Claims Directive (European Commission, 2023). This includes 'a commitment to tackle false environmental claims by ensuring that buyers receive reliable, comparable, and verifiable information to enable them to make more sustainable decisions and to reduce the risk of "green washing"'. The need to address greenwashing was subsequently set as a priority both under the New Circular Economy Action Plan 5 and the New Consumer Agenda (European Commission, 2020).

The European Commission has stated that 53 per cent of green claims give vague, misleading, or unfounded information, 40 per cent of claims have no supporting evidence, and half of all green labels offer weak or non-existent verification. In 2023, there were 230 sustainability labels and 100 green energy labels in the EU, with vastly different levels of transparency (European Commission, n.d.). To ensure green claims are demonstrated, EU member states will be requested 'to set up a system of verification for the substantiation of environmental claims', that will have to be carried out by 'independent verifiers' (ibid). Most importantly, EU countries will be put in charge of ensuring that 'those rules are enforced and place 'penalties' on offenders that 'should be effective, proportionate and dissuasive'.

Despite the evidence and calls for more sustainable energy, the fossil fuel industry has continued to explore, exploit, and extract with little, if no, evidence of commitment to real change. Business as usual remains the mantra. As the chorus against greenwashing grows, *Texaco* and its parent organisation *Chevron* are continuing to clamp down on those who seek to challenge its greenwashing agenda. US human rights lawyer Steven Donzinger remains at the centre of that clampdown. In 2011, Mr. Donzinger took a class action on behalf of the indigenous people of Lago Agrio in which a court in Ecuador found that *Texaco* had deliberately and systematically discharged billions of gallons of toxic, cancer-causing oil waste onto indigenous ancestral lands between 1964 and 1992 (Global Justice Program, 2021). The legal case raised critically important issues related to global warming, indigenous rights, and international judgment enforcement. Since then, Texaco has systematically pursued Mr. Donzinger through the US courts for fraud, bribery, and racketeering activities. Other less well-known human rights activists have suffered even more. The non-governmental organisation Global Witness estimates almost 2,000 climate activists have been assassinated across the globe in the last ten years. Tens of thousands more have been jailed without trial or due process of law (Global Witness, 2022). Peaceful protest on human rights and environmental issues is under systematic and often violent attack in the United States and around the world.

## Conclusion

The fossil fuel sector and big oil in particular are at the core of the most urgent climate emergency issues we face locally, nationally, and internationally. Challenging fossil fuel companies in all dimensions of their agenda, including their greenwashing activities, remains a priority. Collectively, we have made substantial progress in promoting public awareness of the dangers of accepting the fossil fuel 'business as usual' agenda. Building further on that progress is fundamental. Accepting or ignoring the greenwashing agenda of fossil fuel companies such as *Texaco* and its partners, locally and internationally, is a basic requirement for accelerating that progress.

In the context of our collective climate emergency and the wholly negative role of the fossil fuel sector, the unwillingness of UNICEF Ireland and the other Irish INGO platforms (Dóchas and IDEA) to acknowledge or engage with the many conflicts of interest described above is indefensible. It betrays not just a number of core national strategies and plans to tackle climate change; it also betrays many key values we have come to associate with Ireland's INGO movement. Additionally, it makes a mockery of our commitment to education for sustainability in the education system overall as well as undermining many of the stated aims of national sporting organisations. While it often appears to be about a single cause or issue, it is never just about a single issue; it's always more than that.

Greenwashing is that issue. Rather than being a single, stand-alone cause, it is a critical cross-cutting issue that goes to the heart of the global power imbalance and the deepening inequality that has become such a hallmark of contemporary society. To ignore its perfidious presence, to gloss over its insidious nature, to be indifferent to its single-minded determination to deceive, is to act as its enabler. Collectively and individually, we have a choice. That choice falls in a particular way on civil society organisations and in particular on internationally focused NGOs, teachers, school administrators, educational policy makers, artists and art administrators, sportspeople, and sports administrators, and on which we all have a responsibility. It also falls on mainstream Irish media who are prepared to feature articles on international sportswashing but are, at best, reluctant to feature greenwashing or sportswashing.

We either stand with the majority of the world's population who in their everyday lives feel the heat of the fossil fuel companies or we stand with the fossil fuel oil companies.  Sports and cultural organisations, all actors within Irish education and the Irish development NGO sector, have a similar choice and, as citizens of one of the wealthiest countries in the world and least affected by the extremes of climate change, so do we as individuals.  A clear binary choice. Collude with the Texaco greenwashing agenda or disassociate themselves from that agenda.  Stand with the oppressed people of the world who suffer desperate deprivations because of the activities of the billion-dollar fossil fuel industry or stand with the billion-dollar oil companies and their apologists.

'Looking back now', Gary Lineker stated, 'we should have spoken out more' (Lineker, 2022).  He is right.  It's that simple.  And we still have time.  It's late but not too late.  On this there is no middle ground.

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# CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE AGE OF FASCIST POLITICS

## HENRY A. GIROUX

### Ghosts of fascism

The long shadow of domestic fascism, defined as a project of racial and cultural cleansing, is with us once again both in North America and abroad. Educators have seen the ghosts of fascism before in acts of savage colonialism and dispossession, in an era of slavery marked by the brutality of whippings and neck irons, and in a Jim Crow age most obvious in the spectacularised horror of murderous lynchings. More recently, we have viewed fascist acts of terror in a politics of disappearances and genocidal erasures under the dictatorships of Adolf Hitler, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and others. And in each case, history has given us a glimpse of what the end of humanity would look like (Toscano, 2020). Yet the lessons of history with its language of hate, machineries of torture, death camps and murderous violence as a political tool are too often ignored.

The promise and ideals of democracy are receding as right-wing extremists breathe new life into a fascist past. This is particularly true as education has increasingly become a tool of domination as right-wing pedagogical apparatuses controlled by the entrepreneurs of hate attack workers, the poor, people of colour, trans people, immigrants from the global South, and others are considered disposable. Confronting this fascist counter-revolutionary movement necessitates creating a new language and the building of a mass social movement in order to construct empowering terrains of education, politics, justice, culture, and power that challenge existing systems of white supremacy, white nationalism, manufactured ignorance, civic illiteracy and economic oppression.

### Rise of predatory neoliberalism

We now live in a world that resembles a dystopian novel. This is a world marked by new crises and the intensification of old antagonisms. Since the late 1970s, a form of predatory capitalism or what can be called neoliberalism has waged war on the welfare state, public goods and the social contract. Neoliberalism insists that the market should govern not just the economy but all aspects of society. It

concentrates wealth in the hands of a financial elite and elevates unchecked self-interest, self-help, deregulation, and privatisation to the governing principles of society. Under neoliberalism, everything is for sale, consumerism is the only obligation of citizenship, and the only relations that matter are modelled after forms of commercial exchange. At the same time, neoliberalism ignores basic human needs such as universal healthcare, food security, decent wages, and quality education. Moreover, it disparages human rights and imposes a culture of cruelty upon young people, people of colour, women, immigrants, and those considered disposable.

Neoliberalism views government as the enemy of the market except when it benefits wealthy corporations, limits society to the realm of the family and individuals, embraces a fixed hedonism, and challenges the very idea of the public good. Under neoliberalism, the political collapses into the personal and therapeutic, rendering all problems a singular matter of individual responsibility, thus making it almost impossible for individuals to translate private troubles into wider systemic considerations. This overemphasis on personal responsibility depoliticises people by offering no language for addressing wider structural issues such as the call for better jobs, schools, safer neighbourhoods, free education, and a basic universal wage, among other issues. It also stresses the language of emotional self-management, producing a kind of ethical tranquilisation and indifference to wider democratic struggles for racial, gender, and economic reforms. Moreover, under neoliberalism economic activity is divorced from social costs further eviscerating any sense of social responsibility at a time when policies that produce systemic racism, environmental destruction, militarism, and staggering inequality have become defining features of everyday life and established modes of governance.

Clearly, there is a need to raise fundamental questions about the role of education in a time of impending tyranny. Or, to put it another way, what are the obligations of education to democracy itself? That is, how can education work to reclaim a notion of democracy in which matters of social justice, freedom and equality become fundamental features of learning to live in a society?

## Rise of fascist education in the United States

In the current historical moment, the threat of authoritarianism has become more dangerous than ever - one in which education has taken on a new role in the age of upgraded fascism. This authoritarian project is particularly evident in the United States as a number of far-right governors have put into place a range of reactionary educational policies that range from disallowing teachers to mention critical race theory and issues dealing with sexual orientation to forcing educators to sign loyalty oaths, post their syllabuses online, give up tenure, allow students to film their classes, and much more. Regarding the banning of books, Judd Legum (2023) notes:

> "Across the country, right-wing activists are seeking to ban thousands of books from schools and other public libraries. Those promoting the bans often claim they are acting to protect children from pornography. But the bans frequently target books 'by and about people of color and LGBTQ individuals'".

Many of the books labelled as pornographic are actually highly acclaimed novels (Ibid.). Such policies echo a fascist past in which the banning of books eventually led to both the imprisonment of dissidents and the eventual disappearance of bodies (Ibid.).

Not only are these attacks on certain books and ideas aimed at educators and minorities of class and colour, this far-right attack on education is also part of a larger war on the very ability to think, question, and engage in politics from the vantage point of being critical, informed, and willing to engage in a culture of questioning. More generally, it is part of a concerted effort to destroy public and higher education and the very foundations of civic literacy and political agency. Under the rule of this emerging authoritarianism, political extremists are attempting to turn education into a space for killing the imagination, a place where provocative ideas are banished, and where faculty and students are punished through the threat of force or harsh disciplinary measures for speaking out, engaging in dissent, and holding power accountable. In this case, the attempt to undermine public schooling and higher education as public goods and democratic public spheres is accompanied by a systemic attempt to destroy the notion that

they are vital democratic public goods. Schools that view themselves as democratic public spheres are now disparaged by far-right Republican politicians and their allies as socialism factories, government schools, and citadels of left-wing thought.

In fact, as Jonathan Chait (2022) observes, what is being said by a right-wing Republican Party about American schools echoes a period in history in which fascist regimes used a similar language rooted in the cold war rhetoric of McCarthyism. For instance, Senator Marco Rubio of Florida has called schools 'a cesspool of Marxist indoctrination'. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claims that 'teachers' unions, and the filth that they're teaching our kids', will 'take this republic down'. Donald Trump has stated that 'pink-haired communists [are] teaching our kids' and that 'Marxist maniacs and lunatics' run higher education (Pengelly, 2023). Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, stated on Fox News that if he won the presidency in 2024, he 'will ... destroy leftism in this country and leave woke ideology in the dustbin of history' (Ibid.).

This is more than anti-democratic, authoritarian rhetoric. It also shapes poisonous policies in which education is increasingly defined as an animating space of repression, violence and weaponised as a tool of censorship, state indoctrination, and terminal exclusion. The examples have become too numerous to address. A short list would include a Florida school district banning a graphic novel version of *Anne Frank's Diary*, the firing of a Florida principal for showing her class an image of Michelangelo's 'David', and the publishing of a textbook that removed any hint of racism from Rosa Park's refusal to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. It gets worse and appears to be updated with each passing day.

## Freire's making education central to politics and rise of fascist policies

It is hard to imagine a more urgent moment for taking seriously Paulo Freire's ongoing attempts to make education central to politics. At stake for Freire (2018) was the notion that education was a social concept, rooted in the goal of emancipation for all people. Moreover, his view of education encouraged human agency, one that was not content to enable people to only be critical thinkers, but also engaged individuals and social agents. Like John Dewey (2018), Freire's political project recognised that there is no democracy without knowledgeable and

informed citizens.  Today this insight is fundamental to creating the conditions to forge collective international resistance among educators, youth, artists, and other cultural workers in defence of public goods, if not democracy itself.  Such a movement is important to resist and overcome the tyrannical fascist nightmares that have descended upon the United States, Italy, Hungary, India, and a number of other countries plagued by the rise of right-wing populist movements, far-right militias such as the Proud Boys, and neo-Nazi parties.

The signposts of America's turn towards a fascist notion of education are everywhere. Trans students are under attack, their history is being erased from school curricula, and the support of their caregivers is increasingly criminalised. African American history is sanitised and rewritten, while teachers, faculty, and librarians who contest or refuse this fascist script are being fired, demonised, and in some cases also subject to criminal charges.  Mirroring an attack on trans people similar to the one that took place in the early years of the Third Reich, far-right politicians and white supremacists are waging a vicious war against trans youth and their teachers who are now treated as social pariahs while their supporters are slandered as paedophiles and groomers.

The growing threat of authoritarianism is also visible in the emergence of an anti-intellectual culture that derides any notion of critical education.  What was once unthinkable regarding attacks on education has become normalised. Ignorance is now praised as a virtue and white supremacy and white Christian nationalism are now the organising principles of governance and education in many American states and a number of countries globally.  This right-wing assault on democracy is a crisis that cannot be allowed to turn into a catastrophe in which all hope is lost.  This suggests viewing education as a political concept, rooted in the goal of empowerment and emancipation for all people, especially if we do not want to default on education's role as a democratic public sphere.  This is a pedagogical practice that calls students beyond themselves, embraces the ethical imperative for them to care for others, embrace historical memory, work to dismantle structures of domination, and to become subjects rather than objects of history, politics, and power.  If educators are going to develop a politics capable of awakening students' critical, imaginative, and historical sensibilities, it is vital to engage education as a project of individual and collective empowerment - a

project based on the search for truth, an enlarging of the civic imagination, and the practice of freedom.

Fascism begins with the language of hate, and as Thom Hartmann (2023) observes:

> "Before fascism can fully seize power in a nation, it must first be accepted by the people as a 'patriotic' system of governance, representing the will of the majority of the nation. This is why fascists always scapegoat minorities first ... before they acquire enough power to subjugate the entire nation itself".

Against this warning, it is important for us as educators to note that the current era is one marked by the rise of disimagination machines that produce manufactured ignorance and concoct lies on an unprecedented level, giving authoritarianism a new life. As the historian Federico Finchelstein (2020: 1) notes, it is crucial to recall that 'one of the key lessons of the history of fascism is that racist lies led to extreme political violence'. We live at a time when the unthinkable has become normalised so that anything can be said and everything that matters unsaid. Moreover, this degrading of truth and the emptying of language makes it all the more difficult to distinguish good from evil, justice from injustice. Under such circumstances, the American public is rapidly losing a language and ethical grammar that challenges the political and racist machineries of cruelty, state violence and targeted exclusions (Wilderson, 2012).

Education both in its symbolic and institutional forms has a vital role to play in fighting the resurgence of false renderings of history, white supremacy, religious fundamentalism, an accelerating militarism, and ultra-nationalism. As far-right movements across the globe disseminate toxic racist and ultra-nationalist images of the past, it is essential to reclaim education as a form of historical consciousness and moral witnessing. This is especially true at a time when historical and social amnesia have become a national pastime, further normalising an authoritarian politics that thrives on ignorance, fear, the suppression of dissent, and hate. The merging of power, new digital technologies, and everyday life have not only altered time and space, but they have also expanded the reach of culture

as an educational force.  A culture of lies, cruelty, and hate, coupled with a fear of history and a 24/7 flow of information now wages a war on historical consciousness, attention spans, and the conditions necessary to think, contemplate, and arrive at sound judgements (Crary, 2022).

## Education as a cultural force

It is crucial for educators to learn that education and schooling are not the same and schooling must be viewed as a sphere distinctive from the educative forces at work in the larger culture (Mayer, 2019).  The point of course is that an array of cultural apparatuses extending from the social media and streaming services to the rise of artificial intelligence and corporate controlled media platforms also constitutes a vast educational machinery with enormous power and influence.  What both schooling and the wider cultural sphere of education have in common is that they often work in tandem with each other to shape and orchestrate dominant social relations, constitute prevailing notions of common sense, and open up conceptual horizons, modes of identification, and social relations through which consciousness and identities are shaped and legitimated.

In the current age of barbarism and the crushing of dissent, there is a need for educators to acknowledge how the wider culture and pedagogies of closure operate as educational and political forces in the service of fascist politics and other modes of tyranny. Under such circumstances, educators and others must question not only what individuals learn in society, but what they must unlearn, and what institutions provide the conditions for them to do so.  Against those cultural apparatuses producing apartheid pedagogies of repression and conformity - rooted in censorship, racism, and the killing of the imagination - there is the need for critical institutions and pedagogical practices that value a culture of questioning, view critical agency as a fundamental condition of public life, and reject indoctrination in favour of the search for justice within educational spaces and institutions that function as democratic public spheres.

## Call for a shift in consciousness

Any viable pedagogy of resistance needs to create the educational and pedagogical visions and tools to produce a radical shift in consciousness; it must be capable of recognising both the scorched earth policies of neoliberalism and the twisted

fascist ideologies that support it. This shift in consciousness cannot occur without pedagogical interventions that speak to people in ways in which they can recognise themselves, identify with the issues being addressed, and place the privatisation of their troubles in a broader systemic context.

An education for empowerment that functions as the practice of freedom should provide a classroom environment that is intellectually rigorous, critical, while allowing students to give voice to their experiences, aspirations, and dreams. It should be a protective and courageous space in which students should be able to speak, write, and act from a position of agency and informed judgment. It should be a place where education does the bridging work of connecting schools to the wider society, connect the self to others, and address important social and political issues. It should also provide the conditions for students to learn how to make connections with an increased sense of social responsibility coupled with a sense of justice. A pedagogy for the practice of freedom is rooted in a broader project of a resurgent and insurrectional democracy - one that relentlessly questions the kinds of labour practices, and forms of knowledge that are enacted in public and higher education.

If the emerging authoritarianism and rebranded fascism in the United States, Canada, Europe and elsewhere is to be defeated, there is a need to make critical education an organising principle of politics and, in part, this can be done with a language that exposes and unravels falsehoods, systems of oppression, and corrupt relations of power while making clear that an alternative future is possible. Hannah Arendt was right in arguing that language is crucial in highlighting the often hidden 'crystalized elements' that make authoritarianism likely (Arendt, 2001). The language of critical pedagogy and literacy are powerful tools in the search for truth and the condemnation of falsehoods and injustices. Moreover, it is through language that the history of fascism can be remembered and made clear that fascism does not reside solely in the past and that its traces are always dormant, even in the strongest democracies.

Ignorance now rules America. Not the simple, if innocent ignorance that comes from an absence of knowledge, but a malicious manufactured ignorance forged in the arrogance of refusing to think hard and critically about an

issue, and to engage language in the pursuit of justice. James Baldwin was certainly right in issuing the stern warning in *No Name in the Street* that 'Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have' (Baldwin, 2007: 147). For the ruling elite and modern Republican Party, thinking is viewed as an act of stupidity, and thoughtlessness is considered a virtue. Traces of critical thought increasingly appear at the margins of the culture, as ignorance becomes the primary organising principle of American society and a number of other countries across the globe. A culture of lies and ignorance now serve as a tool of politics to prevent power from being held accountable.

Under such circumstances, there is a full-scale attack on thoughtful reasoning, empathy, collective resistance, and the compassionate imagination. In some ways, the dictatorship of ignorance resembles what John Berger once called 'ethicide', defined by Joshua Sperling (Appignanesi, 2019) as:

> "The blunting of the senses; the hollowing out of language; the erasure of connection with the past, the dead, place, the land, the soil; possibly, too, the erasure even of certain emotions, whether pity, compassion, consoling, mourning or hoping".

Words such as love, trust, freedom, responsibility, and choice have been deformed by a market and authoritarian logic that narrows their meaning to either a commodity, a reductive notion of self-interest, or generates a language of bigotry and hatred. Freedom in this context means removing oneself from any sense of social responsibility making it easier to retreat into privatised orbits of self-indulgence and communities of hate. Such actions are legitimated through an appeal to what Elisabeth R. Anker has called ugly freedoms. That is, freedoms emptied of any substantive meaning and used by far-right politicians and corporate controlled media to legitimate a discourse of hate and bigotry while actively depoliticising people by making them complicit with the forces that impose misery and suffering upon their lives.

Given the current crisis of politics, agency, history, and memory, educators need a new political and pedagogical language for addressing the changing contexts and issues facing a world in which anti-democratic forces draw

upon an unprecedented convergence of resources - financial, cultural, political, economic, scientific, military, and technological - to exercise powerful and diverse forms of control. As a political and moral practice, critical pedagogy combines a language of critique and a vision of possibility in the fight to revive civic literacy, civic activism, and a notion of shared and engaged citizenship. Politics loses its emancipatory possibilities if it cannot present the educational conditions for enabling students and others to think against the grain, and realise themselves as informed, critical, and engaged individuals. There is no emancipatory politics without a pedagogy capable of awakening consciousness, challenging common sense, and creating modes of analysis in which people discover a moment of recognition that enables them to rethink the conditions that shape their lives.

## Academics as public intellectuals

Against the emerging fascism, educators should assume the role of public intellectuals and border crossers within broader social contexts. For example, this might include finding ways, when possible, to share their ideas with the wider public by making use of new media technologies and a range of other cultural apparatuses, especially those outlets that are willing to address critically a range of social problems. Embracing their role as public intellectuals, educators can speak to more general audiences in a language that is clear, accessible, and rigorous. As public school teachers organise to assert their role as citizen-educators in a democracy, they can forge new alliances and connections to develop social movements that include and expand beyond working simply with unions. For example, we see evidence of such actions among teachers and students organising against gun violence and systemic racism and doing so by aligning with parents, unions, and others in order to fight the gun lobbies and politicians bought and sold by the violence industries.

Education operates as a crucial site of power in the modern world and critical pedagogy has a key role to play in both understanding and challenging how power, knowledge, and values are deployed, affirmed, and resisted within and outside of traditional discourses and cultural spheres. This suggests that one of the most serious challenges facing teachers, artists, journalists, writers, parents, and other cultural workers is the task of developing discourses and pedagogical

practices that connect, as Freire (2018) once suggested, a critical reading of the word and the world.

## On educated hope

In taking up this project, educators should create the conditions that enable young people to view cynicism as unconvincing and hope practical. Hope in this instance is educational, removed from the fantasy of an idealism that is unaware of the constraints facing the struggle for a radical democratic society. Educated hope is not a call to overlook the difficult conditions that shape both schools and the larger social order, nor is it a blueprint removed from specific contexts and struggles. On the contrary, it is the precondition for imagining a future that does not replicate the nightmares of the present, for not making the present the future.

Educated hope provides the basis for dignifying the labour of teachers; it offers up critical knowledge linked to democratic social change, affirms shared responsibilities, and encourages teachers and students to recognise ambivalence and uncertainty as fundamental dimensions of learning. Without hope, even in the darkest times, there is no possibility for resistance, dissent, and struggle. Agency is the condition of struggle, and hope is the condition of agency. Hope expands the space of the possible and becomes a way of recognising and naming the incomplete nature of the present. Such hope offers the possibility of thinking beyond the given.

As Martin Luther King Jr, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Nelson Mandela argued, there is no project of freedom and liberation without education and that changing attitudes and institutions are interrelated. Central to this insight is the notion advanced by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Grass, 2000: 26) that the most important forms of domination are not only economic but also intellectual and pedagogical and lie on the side of belief and persuasion. This suggests that academics bear a certain responsibility here in acknowledging that the current fight against an emerging authoritarianism and white nationalism across the globe is not only a struggle over economic structures or the commanding heights of corporate power. It is also a struggle over visions, ideas, consciousness, and the power to shift the culture itself. It is also, as Arendt points out, a struggle against 'a widespread fear of judging' (Arendt, 2003). Without the

ability to judge, it becomes impossible to recover words that have meaning, imagine a future that does not mimic the dark times in which we live, and create a language that changes how we think about ourselves and our relationship to others. Any struggle for a radical democratic order will not take place if lies cancel out reason, ignorance dismantles informed judgments, and truth succumbs to demagogic appeals to unchecked power. As Francisco Goya (1799) warned, 'the sleep of reason produces monsters'.

Democracy begins to fail, and political life becomes impoverished in the absence of those vital public spheres such as public and higher education in which civic values, public scholarship, and social engagement allow for a more imaginative grasp of a future that takes seriously the demands of justice, equity, and civic courage. Without financially robust schools, critical forms of education, and knowledgeable and civically courageous teachers, young people are denied the habits of citizenship, critical modes of agency, and the grammar of ethical responsibility. Democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting pedagogy to the practice of freedom, social responsibility and the public good (Giroux, 2019). I want to conclude by making some suggestions, however incomplete, regarding what we can do as educators to save public and higher education and connect them to the broader struggle over democracy itself.

## Elements of reform

First, in the midst of the current assault on public and higher education, educators should reclaim and expand its democratic vocation and in doing so align itself with a vision that embraces its mission as a public good. Second, they should also acknowledge and make good on the claim that there is no democracy without informed and knowledgeable citizens. Third, education should be free and funded through federal funds that guarantees a quality education for everyone. The larger issue here is that education cannot serve the public good in a society marked by staggering forms of inequality. Rather than build bombs, fund the defence industry, and inflate a death-dealing military budget, we need massive investments in public and higher education. This is an investment in which youth are written into the future, rather than potentially eliminated from it.

Fourth, in a world driven by data, metrics, and the replacement of knowledge by the overabundance of information, educators need to teach students to be border crossers, who can think dialectically, comparatively, and historically. Educators should teach students to engage in multiple literacies extending from print and visual culture to digital culture. Students need to learn how to think intersectionally, comprehensively, and relationally while also being able to not only consume culture but also produce it; they should learn how to be both cultural critics and cultural producers. Fifth, educators must defend critical education both as the search for truth, and also the practice of freedom. Such a task suggests that critical pedagogy should shift not only the way people think but also encourage them to shape for the better the world in which they find themselves. As the practice of freedom, critical pedagogy arises from the conviction that educators and other cultural workers have a responsibility to unsettle power, trouble consensus, and challenge common sense. This is a view of pedagogy that should disturb, inspire, and energise a vast array of individuals and publics. Such pedagogical practices should enable students to interrogate common-sense understandings of the world, take risks in their thinking, however difficult, and be willing to take a stand for free inquiry in the pursuit of truth, multiple ways of knowing, mutual respect, and civic values in the pursuit of social justice. Students need to learn how to think dangerously, push at the frontiers of knowledge, and support the notion that the search for justice is never finished and that no society is ever just enough. These are not merely methodical considerations but also moral and political practices because they presuppose the creation of students who can imagine a future in which justice, equality, freedom, and democracy matter and are attainable.

Sixth, educators need to argue for a notion of education that is viewed as inherently political - one that relentlessly questions the kinds of labour, practices, and forms of teaching, research, and modes of evaluation that are enacted in public and higher education. While such a pedagogy does not offer guarantees, it defines itself as a moral and political practice that is always implicated in power relations because it produces particular versions and visions of civic life, how we construct representations of ourselves, others, our physical and social environment, and the future itself. Seventh, in an age in which educators are being censored, fired, and in some cases subject to criminal

penalties, it is crucial for them to fight to gain control over the conditions of their labour. Without power, faculty are reduced to casual labour, play no role in the governing process, and work under labour conditions comparable to how workers are treated at Amazon and Walmart. Educators need a new vision, language and collective strategy in order to regain the power, rightful influence, control and security over their work conditions and their ability to make meaningful contributions to their students and larger society.

It is crucial to remember that there is no democracy without informed citizens and no justice without a language critical of injustice. The central question here is what the role of education in a democracy is and how we can teach students to govern rather than be governed. There is no hope without a democratically driven education system. The greatest threats to education in north America and around the globe are anti-democratic ideologies and market values that believe public schools and higher education are failing because they are public and should not operate in the interests of furthering the promise and possibility of democracy. If schools are failing it is because they are being defunded, privatised, and modelled after white nationalist indoctrination spheres, transformed into testing centres, and reduced to regressive training practices.

Finally, I want to suggest that in a society in which democracy is under siege, it is crucial for educators to remember that alternative futures are possible and that acting on these beliefs is a precondition for making social change possible. At stake here is the courage to take on the challenge of what kind of world we want - what kind of future we want to build for our children? The great philosopher, Ernst Bloch (Thompson, 2013), insisted that hope taps into our deepest experiences and that without it reason and justice cannot blossom. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin adds a call for compassion and social responsibility to this notion of hope, one that is indebted to those who will follow us. He writes: 'Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them.... [T]he moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us, and the light goes out' (cited in Morrison, 1998: 710). Now more than ever educators must live up to the challenge of keeping fires of resistance burning with a feverish intensity. Only then will we be able to keep the lights on and the future open. In addition to that eloquent appeal, I would say that history is open and it is time to

think differently in order to act differently, especially if, as educators, we want to imagine and fight for alternative democratic futures and build new horizons of possibility.

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# Resource reviews

## INSURRECTIONS: EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

## LYNETTE SHULTZ

Giroux, Henry A (2023) *Insurrections: Education in an Age of Counter-Revolutionary Politics*, London: Bloomsbury Press.
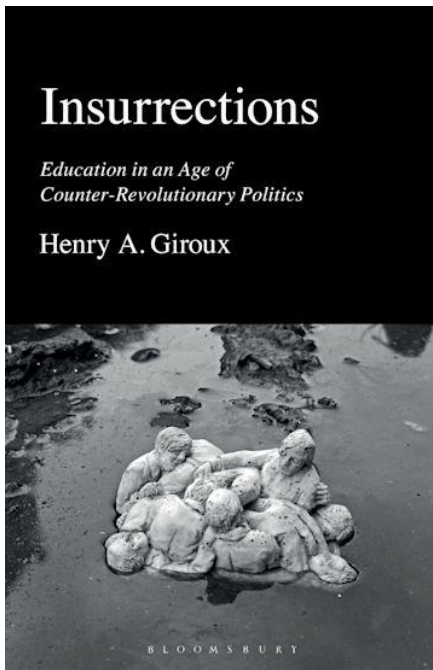


This book, a collection of eighteen short, blog style chapters, expresses an overall despair with the direction of American politics and a call for remembering the collective protests in American history; a call to 'merge a sense of moral courage with a sense of civic courage and collective action' (Giroux, 2023: 141) to address the rising fascist threat, and a warning call to anyone in liberal democracies. In this, Giroux's narrative style and the short but dense chapters, supported by 43 pages of endnotes and references, reads like a call to political and cultural battle more than a call to raising consciousness in the public spheres of democracy. With chapter titles such as 'Social Media as a Disimagination War Machine', 'Weaponizing Culture', 'Gangster Capitalism and the Politics of Ethicide', 'Hideous Freedoms', and the use of Achille Mbembe's (2019) *necropolitics* in chapter two, 'Necropolitics and the Politics of White Nationalism', a sense of

absolute brutality winds its way throughout the description of American and, in some chapters, Canadian society. If you have read his previous work, you will recognise Giroux's conclusions on the necessary re/action needed, expressed here in *Insurrections* on page 130:

> "The challenge of changing public consciousness and the social imagination through the merging of political education and popular culture has to be aligned with the struggle to change material relations of power. There is more to consider here than the repudiation of manufactured ignorance, the scourge of white supremacy, and a corrupt political system. In the shadows of this escalating crisis, it is imperative to mobilize a multi-cultural, mass-based movement to uncover and fight on multiple levels this rebranded notion of fascism and its mounting wreckage before hope becomes an empty slogan and democracy a relic of the past".

Giroux describes in chapter eleven, how 'fascism thrives on the breakdown of shared values and becomes normalised by creating a cultural politics and modes of commonsense that subvert language, agency, truth, and democracy' (Giroux, 2023: 78) and he draws on C W Mills to locate education and the pedagogical power in a society that tackles the 'depoliticizing politics of commonsense' (Ibid.: 80). He calls on us to remember the rich counterrevolutionary work of critical educators such as W E B Du Bois, Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, bell hooks, Maxine Greene, Frederick Douglas, Antonio Gramsci, and more, as guides in the difficult work ahead.

Giroux's long commitment to education and critical pedagogy are also woven into much of the book. In chapter sixteen, 'Making Education Central to Politics and Everyday Life', Giroux writes:

> "The urgent need to make education fundamental to politics demands a new language, a different regime of desires, new forms of identification, and a struggle to create new modes of thinking, subjectivity, and agency. It is important to stress repeatedly that direct action, cultural politics, and political education are essential tools to mobilize public attention as

part of a broader campaign both to inform a wider pubic and create the conditions for mass struggle" (Giroux, 2023: 127).

A gap in the work is that Giroux tends to keep his distance from the actual people who support the political right as well as the people who make up the many collective movements that are emerging that counter the conditions he describes. If he laments the loss of hope caused by the rise of authoritarianism, he hasn't offered any specific examples of how it might be different. While his descriptions of the conditions under neoliberal capitalism are powerful, the call to action seems weary.

A key audience for this book will be young people enrolled in higher education courses and their instructors. The work will be helpful in understanding the history of anti-capitalist struggle and how that history can frame a reading of current events that signal how democracy is under threat. How will this be taken up by students with highly tuned digital capabilities and online social connections or those who describe how they are 'quiet quitting' work in highly corporatised environments? Or those students racked with anxiety about the climate crisis and an imminent collapse of the systems that sustain life on the planet? Or by students or instructors, who with their communities have been transformed by social crises and a new experience of community through movements like Black Lives Matter or Idle No More, and the resurgence of Indigenous land protectors? Giroux uses Achille Mbembe's (2019) description of global systems of (neo)colonialism as *necropolitics* and I am reminded of Mbembe's more recent work, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (2021) a work that is deeply embedded in knowledge of African resistance. I take seriously Mbembe's position that what he describes is for understanding the African context and not a statement of a shared or universal decolonial project but I will use his words as a way to foreground the work by Indigenous people and Black and other racialised communities in North America which is Giroux's focus. Mbembe (2021: 2) writes:

"If decolonisation was an event at all, its essential philosophical meaning lies in an active will to community – as others used to speak of a will to

power. This will to community is another name for what could be called the will to life".

Giroux's lack of acknowledgment of the significant movements of Indigenous people's resurgence, of young climate activists shaping public space and government policies, or of racialised communities' strength and collective transformation away from things being done 'as usual', is a gap in this book. There needs to be attention to how strong, new movements are emerging around issues of, for example, land and water protection, climate change, food insecurity, permaculture, non-industrial agriculture. Each of these movements create spaces where we can see life being lived differently. At the core, we can witness people reimagining life as a part of community rather than as neoliberalism's resilient individuals and the building of new relations. These are not abstract acts of revolution; they are everyday commitments of a *will to life* and the stories of these lives can be the guide out of the battlefields of capitalism and colonialism and into the resurgence of 'the enormous work of reassemblage' (Mbembe, 2021: 5) even as it evokes its partner: destruction (Ibid.).

This brings us back to the book's beginning. The title *Insurrections: Education in an Age of Counter-Revolutionary Politics*. The folks who mobilised to attack the United States' Capitol Building in January 2021 and the Truckers' Convoy that arrived to take over the government of Canada in 2022 promoted themselves as insurrectionists taking back control of their lives and protecting their livelihoods. In the battle grounds of Giroux's *Insurrections*, we are left on our own to imagine a path forward. Without examples and stories and the lived experiences of people reconvening in communities, the only vision is endless war.

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# SpoArts Wash: Exposing Ireland's Fossil Fuel Sponsorship Culture

## Sian Cowman

Just Forests (2023) *SpoArts Wash: Exposing Ireland's Fossil Fuel Sponsorship Culture*, Rathcobican, Offaly: Just Forests.

The resource 'SpoArts Wash: Exposing Ireland's Fossil Fuel Sponsorship Culture' covers the practices of 'sportswashing' and 'artswashing'. These are techniques used by fossil fuel companies to improve their public image in the face of potential negative connotations due to the damage they cause to the environment, the climate, and people's health and human rights. The resource has been developed by Tom Roche of Just Forests, in collaboration with Colm Regan, founder of 80:20, and Peadar King, documentary filmmaker. It is divided into two parts – a report focused on sports and artswashing by oil company Texaco in the Irish context, and a schools' resource.

The report is aimed at a diverse audience - arts centres, schools, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), sports clubs, activist groups, and interested individuals - in order to build a campaign to boycott Texaco's sports and

artswashing activities. The strongest parts of the report are the sections focusing on Texaco owner Chevron's brutal environmental and human rights abuses in Ecuador, and the criminalisation and mistreatment of those trying to hold them to account. In 2011, courts in Ecuador found that Chevron deliberately and systematically discharged billions of gallons of cancer-causing oil waste onto Indigenous ancestral lands in the Amazon region of Ecuador when it operated in the country under the Texaco brand from 1964 to 1992, which caused an epidemic of cancer and other oil-related health problems and decimated Indigenous communities (Sharife, 2021).

This focus in the report takes three parts – an infographic with key points; a write-up by Peadar King of his experiences witnessing the devastation of Indigenous communities in Ecuador caused by Texaco/Chevron's activities; and an article on Stephen Donziger, a human rights lawyer who was criminalised by Chevron for his work in holding the company to account through the courts. Donziger spearheaded the legal case which found Chevron guilty of deliberate oil pollution in the Amazon, leading to devastating human rights and health impacts on Indigenous peoples of the region. Chevron then filed a lawsuit against Donziger in the US courts on charges of extortion and fraud, and the court case was subject to multiple irregularities – for example, the state authorities refused to prosecute, so the judge appointed a private, Chevon-linked law firm to prosecute – and ultimately placed Donziger on house arrest for more than two years, eventually finding him guilty of contempt and sentencing him to the maximum sentence of six months in prison (O'Cearuil, 2022).

Those sections focusing on this history of Texaco in Ecuador are interspersed with information and critique of Texaco's attempts to clean up their image in Ireland through its long-running sponsorship of a children's art competition and more recent support for a sports initiative. Texaco's 'Support for Sports' awards sports clubs €5,000 if they are successful in a judging process; 26 clubs were awarded funding in 2022 (Just Forests, 2023). The report makes a strong case for the hypocrisy of Texaco and calls out their artswashing in Ireland as 'A fuzzy feelgood competition for Irish children, while children in other parts of the world where Texaco extracts its oil painfully suffer from its extractive practices' (Just Forests, 2023: 6). The sports initiative is more recent than the arts

competition, and the resource argues 'that Texaco USED school teachers and children in Ireland for decades to clean up their image through children's art and they want to do the same through sport' (Ibid.: 11).

Fossil fuel companies' strategies in promoting arts and sports activities, the resource argues, are actively obscuring the destructive reality of fossil fuel extraction, and obstructing climate action. Because of this, climate activists have long called for fossil fuel financing to be removed from cultural institutions. The most prominent example is Liberate Tate's campaign to end BP's (formerly British Petroleum) sponsorship of the Tate Art galleries in Britain (Tate, 2015), which achieved its goal in 2016, although BP said their decision to end their relationship with the Tate had nothing to do with climate activists' demands (Clark, 2016). As the financial corporate world is multiplicious, companies who are not involved in fossil fuel extraction directly may be financially entangled with them, and also engaging in art- or sports-washing. For example, activists in Northern Ireland have recently been campaigning against Citibank's sponsorship of an educational exhibition on nature in W5, a science centre in Belfast (Act Now, 2023). Citibank is the second largest financial backer of fossil fuel projects in the world (Bank.Green, 2023).

Just Forests' report outlines some of the actions they have taken in their campaign against Texaco's artwashing, including contacting arts centres who have been participating in the children's arts competition as judges and alerting them to Texaco's record in Ecuador. The report features some of the positive responses they have received from organisations like the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The report provides template letters for any readers who might want to take similar action, and could form the basis for an action with a group of participants in an educational setting. Just Forests also outlines how people can support their campaign by boycotting Texaco's sports and art-washing activities.

The second part of the resource – a separate, shorter, document for secondary school teachers – contains a number of activity ideas, such as holding a debate on sports and arts washing, writing an editorial or making a video on sports and artswashing practices. For these activities to work in a classroom setting, some time would need to be given to building knowledge and confidence

around the issues by presenting the information in the main report in a youth-friendly format, and developing deeper methodologies to support the activities. The educational resource also contains a section with links to additional resources and documentaries. For use in any type of educational setting, it might be worth spending some time exploring in more detail the history of Texaco's activities in Ecuador, and overall the significant role of fossil fuel companies in driving climate change through extractive projects. While there is good content in the main report on these points, it is somewhat dispersed and might be hard for some facilitators and participants to follow.

Fossil fuel corporate greenwashing is an important topic in climate change education. Given the urgent need for political action on climate change and the imperative on all sectors of society to push for and make deep, lasting changes to the way the economy works, fossil fuel companies' extremely high profits - and the damaging activities which earn those profits - should no longer be possible as part of a truly sustainable and fair economy. Just Forests' resource is a positive step towards building knowledge and action to counteract fossil fuel companies' greenwashing activities to improve their image.

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# GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES

## EMMA SOYE

Bosio, E and Waghid, Y (eds.) (2023) *Global Citizenship Education in the Global South: Educators' Perceptions and Practices*, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill.
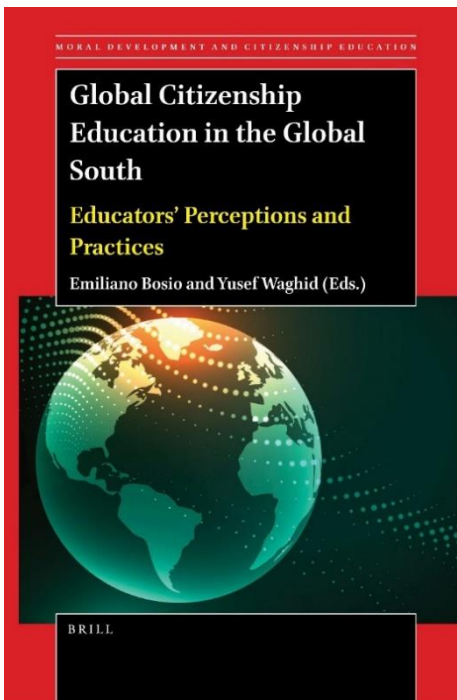
Global citizenship education (GCE) aims to help learners become critical and emancipated citizens of the world. Yet most theoretical and empirical work on GCE is focused on North America and parts of Western Europe, with little attention to how educators in the global South perceive and implement GCE in their practices. This book seeks to redress the imbalance by introducing case studies and theories from the global South to contemporary academic debate on GCE. Building on Freire's work on 'conscientisation', the book aims to move beyond a Western, market-oriented, and apolitical approach towards a more sustainable model, centred on principles of criticality, reciprocity, and mutuality. The book is framed as an opportunity to assist learners, particularly those in the global South, to engage critically with GCE and to help create a new future rooted in social justice and sustainability. It is presented as a pedagogical tool for educators, researchers, and a general audience interested in understanding the philosophy, history, and practice of GCE.

So does the book achieve these (ambitious) aims? Yes – to a large extent. The book's plurality of voices challenges homogenous understandings of the 'global South', which the editors stress should be understood not only in terms of geographic location but as political, pedagogical, economic, cultural, and theoretical. The book contains chapters from multiple contributors reflecting on GCE in South Africa, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Malawi, Ghana, India, China, Zimbabwe, Mexico, and Jordan. These contributors have extensive expertise in international studies and comparative education, and the diversity of their perspectives highlights the multiple ways in which 'citizenship' and 'education' can be understood. This diversity also mirrors a strong thematic focus in the book on value pluralism, closely linked to ideas of interconnection and relationality. These ideas are richly expounded in Hungwe's reconceptualisation of 'ukama' or 'relatedness' in the context of higher education in Zimbabwe (chapter twelve). The book's editors, Bosio and Waghid, argue that the concept of 'interconnectedness' must include all living beings and the environment, proposing an 'eco-critical' GCE that reconstitutes and disrupts Western industrial attitudes by rejecting the 'ego' (chapter one). Several contributors also propose a move beyond an anti-colonial approach in GCE towards 'dialogue' as an iterative process of articulation, listening and creating spaces for others to talk back. These contributors do not ignore structural inequalities, but rather argue that these must be understood as historically and politically situated and as inherent to globalisation.

There is a strong focus on local realities throughout the book, and compelling theoretical visions of a 'yet-to-come' for GCE based on empirical case studies. Pathak-Shelat and Bhatia, for example, explore how the socio-political realities of students in India influence their understanding of the world (chapter five). Echoing other chapters, they build on postcolonial theory to critique GCE as an Anglo-European concept involving the universalisation of western values and static and teleological views of history. They also critique the assumption that global technologies automatically subvert methodological nationalism. Pathak-Shelat and Bhatia convincingly show how place-based and spatial politics influence individual experiences of global identities and interactions, including technologies, which are ascribed meaning and functions based on the local realities of which they are part. They make the case for a critical and reflexive

'remembering' which recognises how the past influences our views of others in the present, but also call for a 'conscious forgetting' that involves new (and more effective) ways of healing the memory of trauma experienced through various forms of colonisation. In doing so they underscore the important role of emotion in GCE, an element which is somewhat under-recognised elsewhere in the book. Future work could usefully build on Pathak-Shelat and Bhatia's thoughtful analysis to examine the significance of affect in GCE.

Other chapters effectively explore southern theory through case studies to promote the value of GCE as a critical-transformative practice in the global South. Felix, for example, foregrounds the importance of GCE in contrast to the dominant neoliberal discourse on higher education in Trinidad and Tobago (chapter six). Several authors discuss GCE in contexts of migration and displacement, including with refugees in Jordan and migrants in South Africa (Waghid and Al-Husban, chapter two) and with the children of migrant workers in China (Hong, chapter nine). These chapters foreground the importance of GCE in migration contexts while drawing attention to the structural, political, and institutional barriers to GCE for migrants and refugees across the world. Future research might further examine the role of GCE in migration contexts in the global South as well as in the global North, where migration-related inequalities continue to persist.

The book has fourteen chapters grouped into three 'themes'. Part one looks at 'Critical Consciousness, De-colonialism, Caring Ethics, Eco-critical Views, and Humanity Empowerment in Global Citizenship Education'. Part two explores 'Equality and Diversity in Global Citizenship Education Policy and Practice' and part three deals with 'Defamiliarisation, Ukama and Active Protest in Global Citizenship Education'. While thematising the chapters makes sense in theory given their significant number, in practice its success has been limited – the themes are very broad and each chapter's relevance to the theme at hand is not always obvious. Neither is the book consistently readable. In discussing the global South, fluency in the English language is certainly not to be assumed or, indeed, expected. Yet some further editing would have been useful as great variation across the chapters is jarring and distracting. While some pieces are easy to read, others contain significant grammatical errors, missing words, and

messy quotations (which in some instances flirt with plagiarism). These inconsistencies also make the book's goal of targeting a 'general audience' less achievable – it already contains a number of complex concepts and ideas, and a lack of fluency sometimes makes them obscure if not entirely incomprehensible.

On balance, though, this book makes a timely and significant contribution to the discourse on pedagogical and theoretical approaches to GCE at the local level. It foregrounds ideas of relatedness and pluralism, advocating for a GCE which does not supplant the global North with the global South but rather puts the two in conversation, celebrating the specificity of both in relation to each other. At the same time, it is alive to the structural inequalities inherent in, and created by, globalisation and sees it as critical that these are addressed in and through GCE. Indeed, the book makes a solid attempt to rectify the ongoing inequalities that can be found in GCE itself by amplifying the diverse voices of educators in the global South. While language inconsistencies mean that the book is not always an easy read, it paves the ground for future research and theorisation in this area and is sure to be an inspiring resource for anyone seeking to engage with a critical-transformative, post-colonial, and dialogical GCE.

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# CLIMATE CHANGE, EXTRACTIVISM AND COLONIALISM: FACILITATORS' AND LEARNERS' HANDBOOK

## LYNDA SULLIVAN

Cowman, Sian (2022) *Climate Change, Extractivism and Colonialism: Facilitators' and Learners' Handbook*, Dublin: Friends of the Earth Ireland.
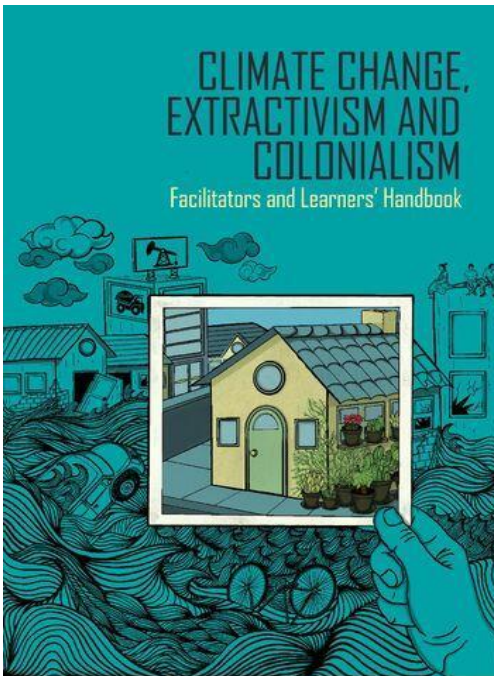


*Climate Change, Extractivism and Colonialism* (Cowman, 2022) is a peer-reviewed facilitators' and learners' handbook which aims to make the historical and present-day connections between the climate crisis, extractive capitalism and colonialism. Written by Sian Cowman for Friends of the Earth Ireland with a train-the-trainer methodology, it is aimed at environmental activists in order to deepen their understanding of systemic oppressions and encourage justice-based solidarity with communities who are most affected by climate change drivers and impacts. However, despite the stated target group, it could also be effectively used by development practitioners, educators and policy-makers towards similar aims.

The handbook is divided into four key learning (and unlearning) modules: historical colonisation, modern-day colonisation, extractivism and colonialism, and solidarity and justice. Firstly, however, facilitation guides and

activities are shared that can be used throughout the modules when opening and closing sessions and for times when reflection is needed. The first learning module - historical colonisation - encourages recognition of how today's environmental and climate crises have colonial roots. Through a mixture of reading and video, group discussion and case study analysis, participants are guided through the history of racialisation: its invention used to aid European colonial expansion and its continuation in the form of modern-day environmental injustice. The important learning here is that colonial expansion relied on environmental destruction (mass deforestation, mono-cropping, extraction) as well as savagery towards newly racialised peoples (slavery, genocide). Capitalism, similarly, depends on the exploitation of nature (intensive production, extraction, pollution) and of racialised people. Tilley (2021), in a video lecture which is included in the handbook as an additional resource, further explains how this idea of racial capitalism 'helps us to remain attuned to the constant production and reproduction of difference; and the exploitation and expropriation of those who are differentiated as "inferior"'. Examples of current outworkings of this are poor/unstable labour conditions, the industrial prison complex, polluted environments, and racialised communities being the most vulnerable to climate breakdown. Thus, environmental and climate justice is also a matter of racial justice.

In the second learning module we delve deeper into the out-workings of modern-day colonisation. Again through video, text and group discussion, and also creative art, we explore the five dimensions of colonialism: economic, political, social, cultural and geographic. Of particular importance to global educators and practitioners is the learning that the cultural dimension of colonialism embedded the belief that there is one universal knowledge and it is drawn from Western society. The understanding of 'development' is still often understood by development institutions as being mono-directional, with funds, efforts and structural adjustment conditions still being funnelled into detrimentally diverting global South peoples away from their own culturally appropriate development pathways (Sinkala, 2022). We are encouraged to consider narrative - and how the dominant narrative being promoted in educational, media and political spaces continues to propagate injustice. To expand on this, the resource quotes from another toolkit, 'The Uprising':

"It has created a state of amnesia, leaving many with a false assumption that the stories they are being told are neutral and objective... It requires an understanding of the mechanisms and tactics that are being used to shape stories and therefore our collective memory of history.   Once we understand those mechanisms, we're better able to address the missing links in those stories" (Baboeram, 2020: 36).

Practical examination of this idea is facilitated through study of three recent media stories of environmental injustice, accompanied by group discussion.

Theme three covers the concepts of extractivism and colonialism, both of which are defined in an easily followed reading from the 'Still Burning' website. Extractivism includes not just the extraction of raw material from the earth, but 'the whole economic system and ideology, as well as the social and human-nature relations through which the extraction of natural resources is mediated' (Still Burning, 2023).   It also ties extractivism more firmly into the tangle with colonialism and capitalism.   We further explore their connections by hearing from communities with lived experiences of harm from extractive industries through different mediums including a 'Watch Party' (where a video is watched by the group at the same time and then discussed) and a World Café style discussion.  We also consider how 'an understanding of the colonial foundations of extractivism, global inequalities, and vulnerability to climate impacts might change approaches to climate activism' (Cowman, 2022: 28).

This leads nicely onto the final learning theme: solidarity and justice.  In this module we have an opportunity to look at case studies of solidarity in action - to discuss and critically evaluate them from a decolonial perspective.   We're brought back to capitalism and racism, as we're reminded in the stimulus documentary 'Geographies of Racial Capitalism' that 'Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it' (Wilson Gilmore, 2020).   There is a useful table in the handbook, taken from Decolonial Futures (2012), which could be used to assess the actions of activists, however, it could also be used by educators, practitioners and policy makers as a guide to decolonise the institutions of power in which they operate, as well as their own activities within them.  For instance, under hegemonic practices we're asked, 'What assumptions and imaginaries

inform the ideal of [solidarity] development and education in this initiative?' To challenge ahistorical thinking, we're asked, 'How is history, and its ongoing effects on social/political/economic relations, addressed (or not) in the formulation of problems and solutions in this initiative?'. Or to tackle depoliticised orientations, the following questions are posed: 'What analysis of power relations has been performed? Are power imbalances recognised, and if so, how are they either critiqued or rationalised? How are they addressed?'. The module ends with a process to help the learner define their ideas of justice (Cowman, 2022: 37).

In terms of overall accessibility of this handbook, the diversity of activities and the flexibility afforded the facilitator make the resource easily adaptable for groups from diverse contexts, abilities and learning styles. It works both online and in person optimally for groups from a minimum of six and maximum of twenty. Videos will soon be      made accessible with captions and transcripts and the resource also points to other tips for tailoring accessibility according to the needs of learners.      No prior knowledge of colonialism/colonisation is required, however it states that a good working knowledge of climate and environmental justice and climate change drivers, such as extractivism, are required. Yet, despite this stipulation, as this is a group-directed learning experience, there is space and flexibility for the group to stop to fill any gaps in knowledge, therefore the resource shouldn't be out of reach for any knowledge level.

The importance of this resource is underlined by the fact that racism and neo-colonialism still permeate institutions of power in rich nations, further embedding the deep roots of environmental and climate injustice. Practitioners, educators and policy makers can play their part in decolonising their practice and their spheres of influence by engaging with the invitations to unlearn and learn anew which this handbook presents. This resource necessarily concentrates on the historic and present injustices perpetrated on the global South, and the inspiring resistances that persist across centuries of oppression.      A recommendation for further exploration in future editions is to look at neo-colonial dynamics behind extractivism and environmental and climate injustice in the global North; focusing as well on racialised and marginalised communities. There are possibilities for learning about solidarity between these communities -

how it is flourishing and challenging the long-imposed feelings of separation, while still recognising and addressing imbalances in privilege and access to resources. Yet the foundation that this handbook affords is essential before progressing on this never-ending task of reflective action, of becoming better acquainted with reality so that 'by knowing it better, he or she can transform it' (Freire, 1970: 13).

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# POVERTY, BY AMERICA

## STEPHEN MCCLOSKEY

Desmond, M (2023) *Poverty, By America*, London and New York: Allen Lane.
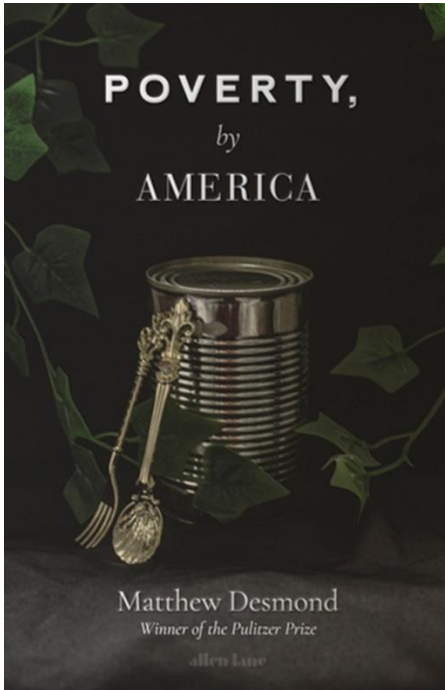
Matthew Desmond is Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for his last book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, in which he followed the lives of eight families in Milwaukee, Wisconsin faced with the threat of eviction during the 2008 financial crisis. His latest book, *Poverty, By America* (2023), is a companion to *Evicted* with a broader focus on the richest country on earth which has 'more poverty than any other advanced democracy' (Desmond, 2023: 6). The aim of the book is to explain why there is so much poverty in the United States (US) despite having a per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of over $70,000 (The World Bank, 2021). The answer offered by Desmond includes: racism; punishment of the poor (particularly Black and minority ethnic communities) with appalling incarceration rates; state subsidies to the rich and under-claimed welfare payments by the poor; tax evasion by corporations and the rich; zoning laws that keep the poor off the property ladder; state disinvestment in public services; lack of affordable healthcare; and the loss of labour power in the workplace. Seventy-six pages of notes suggest that Desmond has done his homework and there is a compassion to his writing that draws from his own early exposure to poverty. His family home

was taken by the bank when he was a child and he got through college with a scholarship, loan and lots of low-paying jobs. He was often in the company of the homeless and the book has an authenticity that stretches beyond secondary research into lived experience.

There are 39 million Americans unable to 'afford basic necessities', two million lack running water and more than one million public school children are homeless (Desmond, 2023: 6). The poverty line in America is $13,590 a year for a single person and $27,750 for a family of four with the poor spending a third of their income on food (Ibid.: 10) and most tenants spending half their income on rent (Ibid.: 15). Despite the passing of the Affordable Care Act in 2010 to widen access to health insurance, thirty million Americans remain uninsured (Ibid.: 14). One in four children in poverty have untreated cavities (Ibid.) and low pay combined with rising rents is driving more of the poor into slum accommodation that 'spreads asthma, its mold and cockroach allergens seeping into young lungs and airways, and it poisons children with lead, causing irreversible damage to their tiny central nervous systems and brains' (Ibid.: 140).

The declining quality of jobs in America in terms of pay, security and benefits is deepening poverty as 3.6 million eviction notices are served on average per annum as tenants struggle to meet rent (Ibid.: 5). A total of 5.3 million Americans live on less than $4 a day or less (Ibid.: 18) which ludicrously leaves them above the official poverty line used by The World Bank that was increased by 13 per cent in Autumn 2022 from $1.90 per day to $2.15 per day (The World Bank, 2023). The legion of supporters of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should take note that the Goals use the Bank's appallingly low poverty line to assess progress in 'poverty eradication'.

## Race and poverty

Race remains one of the leading determinants of poverty in US society. The unemployment rate for Black men is twice that of the white unemployed and the life expectancy of poor Black men is similar to that of males in Pakistan and Mongolia (Ibid.: 22, 23). In 2019, median white household income was $188,200 compared to $24,100 for Black median household income. In the average American city, the cost of fuel and utilities has increased by 115 per cent

(Ibid.: 26) and yet, Desmond finds that 'a fair amount of government aid earmarked for the poor never reaches them' (Ibid.: 28). The reason is that multiple applications are often required to access food stamps, disability support and public housing assistance and an attorney may be needed to ensure success (Ibid.: 31). And so the federal government spent $193 billion on 'homeowner subsidies' benefiting the wealthy in 2020 compared to expenditure of $53 billion on housing assistance for low income families (Ibid.: 91). Employer-sponsored health insurance is exempt from federal taxation and cost the US government $316 billion in 2022 (Ibid.: 93). Desmond argues that this subsidy is dependent on having a decent job and income and, therefore, mostly bypasses the Black and minority communities who need it most. Government subsidies to high-income Americans in the form of tax breaks, mortgage assistance and employment-based health insurance are largely invisible whereas government support of the poor is part of the public domain. Desmond describes two Americas combining 'private opulence and public squalor' with gentrification through ring-fencing zoning laws and tax evasion creating 'a barricaded, stingy, frightened kind of affluence' (Ibid..: 180). 'The public world', he argues, 'was abandoned to Blacks and the private one to whites' (Ibid.: 111), with increasingly under-funded and failing public services blamed on the poor.

But in a failing, grossly unequal society even the very wealthy 'feel diminished and depressed' (Ibid.: 179). This will be a familiar reprise for readers of Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) *The Spirit Level* which argues that economic growth is not only a source of material inequality but social malaise. They argue:

> "Not only have measures of wellbeing and happiness ceased to rise with economic growth but, as affluent societies have grown richer, there have been long-term rises in rates of anxiety, depression and numerous other social problems" (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009: 5).

In the US, problems multiply for those on low income, particularly the poor Black population. Race and exploitation feed off each other with landlords charging extortionate rents for dilapidated properties with Black neighbourhoods described as 'mortgage deserts' (Desmond, 2023: 71). As the poor struggle to survive to the next pay cheque, they fall into the hands of payday lenders and cheque cashing

stores that charge between one and ten percent of the value of the cheque (Ibid.: 73). It is the poor who are most likely to overdraw their bank accounts and receive an average overdraft fee of $33.58 (Ibid.: 71). In 2019, just nine per cent of accountholders accounted for 84 per cent of bank fees with the penalties falling on customers with average balances of $350 (Ibid.).

The race card is also used to scapegoat immigrants to the US despite their ineligibility for federal programmes. Half of America's immigrants live in three states, California, Texas and Florida, that have prospered, not become poorer, from their arrival. That the poor are lazy, dependent on welfare, lack agency and responsibility is another stereotype skewered by Desmond. He tells the story of Julio, a permanent resident from Guatemala, who works two jobs; an overnight shift in McDonalds, and wherever he is dispatched by Aerotek, an employment agency. His combined working hours are 16 a day, seven days a week and he finally faints in the aisle of a grocery store (Ibid.: 45). 'I want to buy one hour of your time', Julio is told by his brother, as he rushes from one shift to the next (Ibid.). 'Complexity is the refuge of the powerful', argues Desmond, 'more often a reflection of our social standing than evidence of critical intelligence' (Ibid. 44). It is designed to obscure a simpler reality that corporate and political elites, property owners and lobbyists are facilitating the transfer of most of America's wealth to the already affluent. 'The ultra rich pay only 75 percent of the taxes they owe', finds Desmond, with the US losing 'more than $1 trillion a year in un-paid taxes, most of it owing to tax avoidance by multinational corporations and wealthy families' (Ibid., 125, 126).

## Neoliberalism and American poverty

Desmond challenges the idea that the ascendancy of neoliberalism has reduced spending on the poor (2023: 26). 'Neoliberalism is now part of the left's lexicon', he argues, but found no evidence of cuts to federal aid to the poor. But the evidence presented in his book suggests that the classic neoliberal playbook has been implemented in the US to disastrous effects on the poor. Like prime minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain, President Ronald Reagan set out in the early 1980s to decimate the power of trade unions and severely weaken their bargaining capacity for workers. In 1981, he sacked 13,000 unionised air traffic controllers, a signal to corporations that they 'could crush unions with minimal

blowback' (Ibid.: 49). Over ninety per cent of private sector workers are not unionised today (Ibid.) and the quality of jobs has consequently depreciated as the gig economy has flourished. The deregulation of the banking system in the 1980s has resulted in those hefty charges for overdrawn accounts (Ibid.: 71) and between 1955 and 2021, government spending on services declined from 22 per cent to 17.6 per cent (Ibid.: 108). There has also been a significant depreciation of wages since 1979 with real wages growing by 0.3 per cent per annum, while the wages of the top one per cent doubled (Ibid.: 50). Neoliberal reforms have also seen attacks on welfare programmes by successive administrations with President Clinton, for example, announcing a plan in 1996 to 'end welfare as we know it' as it creates a 'cycle of dependency' for millions of Americans (Ibid.: 85). Light touch government has also seen the decline of corporation tax to 21 per cent, its lowest level for eighty years (Ibid.: 127). It had been as high as 46 per cent between 1979 and 1986 (Ibid.).

In short, while Desmond claims that federal programmes for the poor have not declined in the period of neoliberalism from the 1980s onward, the prolonged deregulation of the American economy characterised by tax cuts, attacks on trade unions, suppressed wages and removal of social safety nets have unduly impacted the poor and middle-income Americans. This view is reinforced by the 2022 *World Inequality Report* which found that the 1950-1980s in the US were marked by rapidly rising average incomes. This is starkly contrasted by the 1980s onward when the report found:

> "deregulation, privatizations, decreases in tax progressivity and a decline in union coverage all contributed to a formidable rise in the top 10% income share (from around 34% in 1980 to 45% today) and a drop in the bottom 50% (from 19% to 13%)" (Chancel et al., 2022: 225).

## Finding solutions

As Desmond has ditched the systemic neoliberal source of America's social and economic ills, his solutions focus on individual policy fixes such as: the introduction of a Universal Basic Income (UBI); passing inclusionary zoning mandates to end segregationist planning laws; clawing back the national right to abortion following the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe versus Wade*

(Desmond, 2023: 154); increasing corporation tax and closing tax loop-holes exploited by the very rich; and rebalancing the social safety net from high earners to the poor. One senses in Desmond an aversion to *isms* with redistributive ideologies like socialism or Marxism not given an airing. 'Redistribution', says Desmond, 'I hate the word. It distracts and triggers, causing us to instinctively fly to our respective political corners and regurgitate the same old talking points' (Ibid.: 131-32). Perhaps, but the polarised and polarising nature of contemporary politics in the US has accompanied the commodification of all aspects of society engendered by neoliberalism under which 'the only obligation of citizenship is consumerism' (Giroux, 2022: 112). The far-right authoritarianism in the US Republican Party has thrived in the neoliberal era of voter disconnection from mainstream politics as wages have flatlined and poverty accelerated. As Giroux and Paul (2023: 16) argue:

> "The growing authoritarianism in the United States (US) and a number of other countries led largely by far-right politicians has revealed, in all its ugliness, the death-producing mechanisms of white supremacy, systemic inequality, censorship, a culture of cruelty, and an increasingly dangerous assault on public and higher education".

Unless and until we name the problem and address poverty at its systemic roots, the trenchant levels of poverty identified in this fine book are likely to persist.

With the wealth share of the top ten per cent in the US amounting to more than 70 per cent, America has regressed to inequality levels last observed at the beginning of the 20th century (Chancel et al., 2022: 226). And, yet, Desmond calculates that less than one per cent of GDP or $177 billion would be enough to eliminate poverty in the US (Desmond, 2023: 124). The folly and tragedy of the US is that a rigid adherence to neoliberalism and the tyranny of GDP-driven economics will always elevate the needs of the market above the social needs of citizens apart from an aggrandising elite grown fat from the hoarding of wealth and property. In Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a bank representative tells a tenant farmer that he must vacate his land:

'We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man'.
'Yes, but the bank is only made of men'.
'No, you're wrong there – quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it' (Steinbeck, 1992 [1939]: 35-36).

Desmond wants the rich to pay their taxes and appeals to a higher-minded civic responsibility rather than address the rigged political and economic system that breeds inequality. What we really need to do is slay the monster.

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