Editorial

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS: INFORMING RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

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In his 2017 address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York, United States (US) President Donald Trump asserted the dominance of national sovereignty over international collaboration, national self-interest over global solidarity and threats of aggression over diplomacy. While international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) are undoubtedly flawed, they are also underpinned by core values of solidarity, justice and hope for a shared future. The irony of an American president undermining global institutions in the country in which they were first conceptualised and nurtured, therefore, is matched by dismay at the betrayal of values. Deeply symptomatic of the extent to which we are currently witnessing a worldwide retreat into nationalism, a resurgence of racist discourses and the enactment of policies rooted in xenophobia, the address serves as a reminder that the limited progress in terms of global accountability and solidarity achieved since the foundation of the United Nations and the values of respect for human dignity and universal rights that found expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) cannot be taken for granted. That this is occurring at a time when we are facing the existential threat of climate change, with associated conflict, forced migration and exacerbated global poverty and inequality, gives critical urgency to the ideas and actions addressed in this issue of Policy & Practice.

Focusing on the interplay between human rights and development education, Issue 25 of Policy & Practice explores ideologies and worldviews, examines relationships and identifies connections and disconnections. Crucially, it does so with a critical eye on theory and on the real-life implications of those ideas, with reference to actions, both potential and
achieved. Issue 25 addresses the following key themes: the relationship between human rights and development education in formal education, from primary to third level; the critical role of preconceptions on children’s and teachers’ conceptualisations of global issues; the intersection of sustainable development education and gender-based rights; the role of research in developing participatory, rights-based strategies and resources to promote development education and the importance of criticality in transformative practice. These themes are evident across the issue and are given extended discussion in the Focus section, where a range of contexts, theoretical perspectives and evidence-based arguments are presented.

In the first Focus article in this issue, “They should be grateful to God”: Challenging children’s preconceptions of the Global South through human rights education’, Rowan Oberman and Fionnuala Waldron draw on a qualitative research study, which focused on the capacities of children aged 7-9 years to engage critically with issues of global justice, to argue for rights-based approaches to global citizenship education which challenge children’s preconceptions about poverty, development and identity. Informed by media campaigns to raise funds for humanitarian crises, the children in the study drew on discourses of gratitude and charity rather than solidarity, equality and rights to interpret the images and situations they encountered. In response to these findings, Oberman and Waldron suggest that embedding human rights concepts, such as the universal entitlement to civil, political, cultural, social and economic rights, in global citizenship education would prompt children to move beyond characterisations of the global South which are premised on the expectation of extreme poverty, combined with a charity-driven model of North/South relations. The degree to which the idea of charity pervades educational discourse around development education in primary and second level schools in Ireland and elsewhere has been noted in a number of studies (Bryan and Bracken, 2011; Waldron et al., 2011) and remains one of the key challenges in the field. Providing children with the language to think about and explore issues of fairness and equality from a rights-based rather than a charity perspective is at the heart of Oberman and Waldron’s argument. One key strength of this article is the way in which the
writers systematically describe the role research plays in informing the development and formation of resource materials throughout the process. Too often research is only used at the pilot or evaluation stages of resource production.

The dominance of the charity paradigm and the extent to which it is embedded in teachers’ own conceptualisations of development is the subject of a Perspectives article in this issue by Jen Simpson, ““Learning to Unlearn”: The Charity Mentality within Schools”. Noting the key role which educators play in promoting a more just world, Simpson identifies the dominance of charity-led models of development education as a real issue for many schools and describes an intervention that sought to shift teachers from this ‘charity mentality’ towards a ‘social justice mentality’, which promotes critical thinking and a commitment to global equality. The pilot intervention, which took the form of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) delivered as part of the Department for International Development (DfID)-funded Global Learning Programme implemented in schools across the United Kingdom, unearthed and challenged teachers’ assumptions about the global South, prompting critical engagement with those ideas and, ultimately, a shift in perspective. Rejecting the idea that issues of global justice are too complex for children to explore, Simpson focuses on teachers’ confidence levels and worldviews as constraints on practice. While neither article states so explicitly, both raise questions regarding the impact of fundraising campaigns on how development and developing countries are viewed. Given the critical role played by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in development education, it is pertinent to ask whether adequate attention is given to issues of representation by organisations at the intersection between development, human rights and education. While Simpson’s intervention was brief, her research highlights the potential of her approaches to change teachers’ world views. Further research into the impact of more long-term interventions would be most useful.

In her article, ‘Engaging Development and Human Rights Curriculum in Higher Education, in the Neoliberal Twilight Zone’, Su-ming
Khoo locates her practice teaching about human rights and development in higher education as working ‘in the ruins’ at the interface between neoliberal hegemony and a ‘crisis of meaning’ within human rights and development. Challenged from within and without, human rights and development have both been subject to co-option by the neoliberal agenda, charged with promoting western-centric views of the world and threatened by austerity politics and a growing militarisation in international relations. In the context of education, Khoo identifies the failure to decolonise curriculum as the critical issue. Currently manifested by the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ campaign, the relationship between knowledge, power and status has remained relatively unaddressed across educational curricula at all levels of education despite decades of critical engagement at the level of theory as evidenced by Khoo’s article and, more broadly, through the writing of theorists such as Paulo Freire, Michael Apple and, latterly, Vanessa Andreotti. Khoo acknowledges the right of ‘the least advantaged groups’ to have access to the powerful knowledge embodied in traditional curricula as well as representations of the knowledge of minoritised communities. The idea of reading dominant texts ‘against the grain’, systematically including southern and minoritised voices in academic discourse and the space offered by sociology to engage with difficult knowledge are offered as potential ways forward. Drawing on Romer’s (2011) concept of education as a ‘thing’ in itself, Khoo argues for both human rights education and development studies to be seen as an educational ‘thing’, offering a productive site of tension and struggle.

Finally, in the third Focus article in this issue, ‘Gender Rights and Sustainable Development Education: The Case of Domestic Violence with Particular Reference to Africa’, the role which education for sustainable development could play in tackling domestic violence and, specifically, violence against women is cogently argued by Rachel Naylor. Subscribing to Elson’s view of women as the ‘shock absorbers’ of globalisation (1995: 249), Naylor outlines the, at times, counterintuitive link between neoliberal development and a rise in gender-based inequality and violence. The author provides a comprehensive and wide-ranging definition of what constitutes domestic violence which draws on historical and contemporary analysis to
discuss what she identifies as ‘a contested term’. Set within a broader analysis of multiple perspectives on violence against women, Naylor outlines in some detail the strengths and weaknesses of human rights as a framework for addressing domestic violence, suggesting that the African human rights framework overcomes the tensions within the international framework where women’s rights are seen to cross the boundary between public and private spheres and fall foul of the lack of priority accorded to economic and social rights. Similarly, Naylor is critical of approaches to development which are premised on a neoliberal Women In Development (WID) economic model without addressing issues of power and equality. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) offer, in Naylor’s view, an important opportunity to focus on these issues. In particular, SDG 5, which targets violence against women and girls, provides critical support for educational interventions which seek to address the norms and practices that underpin such violence. It is important to remember, however, that the SDGs are not legally binding, depending on a kind of moral suasion to encourage states to establish a framework for their implementation (United Nations, 2016). Nonetheless, as Naylor illustrates, when combined with economic interventions, gender education offers a promising way forward. This article seeks to highlight gender based violence as both a development and human rights issue which needs to be prioritised in most domains.

Collectively, the articles raise a number of questions which are worth considering. The importance of building a research-informed understanding of how children and teachers think about and engage with questions relating to the global South is underlined by Oberman and Waldron and Simpson. Without such research there is a real danger that development education can serve to reinforce existing beliefs rather than challenge them. Both articles illustrate the potential synergies between human rights education and development education and illustrate the extent to which the language of rights can provide a robust and effective framework for development education. One could argue that human rights educators in the past neglected issues of social justice and economic inequality which are the bedrock of development education. Equally, development educators, while
upholding many of the values of human rights, neglected to use human rights instruments and the language of human rights, resulting in many cases in a discourse of need and dependency rather than entitlement.

Issue 25 in general highlights the extent to which human rights and development are both works in progress and that, despite the chaos and uncertainty evident in current contexts, there are grounds for cautious optimism. While Naylor is correct in identifying the traditional emphasis within international human rights discourse on states’ responsibility for human rights abuses in the public sphere, and the under-emphasis on social and economic rights, as barriers to addressing issues such as domestic violence under human rights law, there are some signs that this situation is changing. In addition to those outlined by Naylor, for example, and as Khoo highlights, NGOs such as Amnesty International, are giving increased attention to social and economic rights, and to violence against women in particular. In addition, transnational bodies and international agencies such as the Council of Europe, and the United Nations have increasingly focused their military and police training programmes on rights-based approaches to crimes such as domestic violence which must be addressed as human rights abuses. As Naylor makes clear, the challenge of converting human rights based training to human rights based practice is perhaps most acute in relation to gender based violence.

As Khoo also asserts, the challenges of both human rights and development discourses are the contestability and the impact of changing contexts. Yet, changing contexts can also open up new opportunities and interpretations. In this regard the syndicated weekly newspaper column of Eleanor Roosevelt, in which she frequently outlined the debates and the dilemmas facing the international committee which drafted the UDHR, are fascinating. What is most striking, despite the changing context between then and now, is that there remains considerable human consensus on the underlying principles identified at the time, and the capacity to apply them in new ways. Roosevelt (2001), for example, made the case for the right to marry (Article 16) on the basis of equality with reference to interracial
marriages, highlighting, in particular, difficulties in the southern states of the US. In more recent times we have seen the same article being used by the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community to argue for marriage equality, something that Roosevelt and her colleagues arguably never envisaged.

There is a strong argument also that, despite its inconsistencies, contradictions and constraints, development education, particularly where it is informed by human rights principles, still has the potential to transform how young people, in particular, see the world. This issue of Policy & Practice provides us with several examples where research, policy and practice come together to promote global justice and solidarity, exemplifying the optimism inherent in the potential and possibility of education, a pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1994) to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

References


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