

# **DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AND NEOLIBERALISM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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**Abstract:** Development education (DE) has been working to challenge unfair practices that result in discrimination, oppression and inequality among communities and citizens all over the world. It has been working with other educational initiatives to help empower people towards greater freedom and autonomy. This article argues that most educational service provision that shares those laudable aims is placed in an invidious position by the context of working within the global neoliberal order, which has the resources and ideological strength to vitiate much development educational praxis. Indeed, DE may seek to empower communities but its very location within a wider educational offering that is itself exploitative and creative of inequalities nullifies much of its potential for good. A number of implications for further action, emphasis and methodology are suggested to help the sector escape such contradictions and to offer alternative pathways to achieving our goals.

**Key words:** Development Education; Ideology; Neoliberal; Classical Liberalism; Modern Liberalism; Phronesis; Re-learning.

## **Introduction**

Neoliberalism is the current global economic and political paradigm and one that many development education (DE) specialists consider to be inimical to the interests of peoples and communities across the globe. This article will seek to examine how an educational sector seeking to empower ordinary citizens to challenge oppression and to build their own freedoms can be successful when the general climate of education is massively influenced by neoliberalism – by advertising, by commercialism, by privatisations of important social services, and by social media, businesses and governments emphasising the importance of the individual and the relative unimportance of the social realm.

In the seventeenth century, liberalism began to assert the values of the individual as a response to the appalling authoritarianism of successive English monarchs. People such as Adam Smith argued for the idea of freedom from government in all business dealings (Smith, 2010). That early so-called classical liberalism emphasised the freedoms that businesses should have from government laws, taxes and regulations and it was only in the early and mid-twentieth century that modern liberalism developed, with its much more important emphases on freedoms for individuals, for human rights, for equality of persons and for restraint on both governments and businesses in order for human flourishing to be developed (Heywood, 2021).

*Neoliberalism*, or new liberalism heralds a return to the early, classical liberalism where businesses demanded of governments the freedom to conduct their pursuit of profits as best they could, and with minimal hindrances in the form of rules and regulations, taxation, labour and environmental standards. The term neoliberalism has become the standard shorthand for this minimalist system of allowing businesses almost unlimited freedom in deciding on their strategies and tactics solely in the interests of shareholders, company executives and capital. The term came to be applied to the economic model established following the United States (US)-supported 1973 coup d'état in Chile, when General Pinochet violently overthrew socialist president, Salvador Allende, and embarked on a 17-year dictatorship that imprisoned as many as 80,000, tortured several tens of thousands, and killed between 1,200 and 3,200 Chileans (Kornbluh, 2003: 216). The ensuing autocratic governance in Chile imposed a novel but hugely damaging system of deregulation in economic affairs, free market capitalism and minimal state intervention in production and services across the economy, although with maximum intervention in politics, culture and social organisation. Pinochet was guided by the ‘Chicago Boys’, University of Chicago economists who had long argued for capitalism to be set free from regulation to produce wealth and prosperity, with minimal government direction in economic affairs. This extreme vision of a free, untrammelled capitalism became the main ideological theme of neoliberalism over the following four decades. The article will consider the challenges presented to DE by neoliberalism and the opportunities

that are available to the sector to mobilise for a more just and equitable economic model.

## **DE practice and theory in the neoliberal paradigm**

DE has wrestled with issues of economic freedom versus constraint for many years and found it sometimes difficult to decide just how radical the sector should be in challenging and combatting the systemic economic forces underpinning extreme inequality (Oxfam, 2022). Development education believes that education can be a source of empowerment for peoples and communities that have, for various reasons, been oppressed, marginalised or otherwise disadvantaged (Freire, 1972). Indeed, the underlying assumption of DE is that by merely helping people to understand the symptoms and causes of their different oppressions, DE can contribute to their eventual liberation and emancipation from those negative forces. As early as volume one of this journal, contributors were arguing for a more focussed, more impactful and more professional approach to DE in order to serve the cause of people's emancipation. Bourn (2005), for example quoted from his then organisation's claims for DE that it can help participants:

- “understand their own situation in a wider context
- make connections between local and global events
- develop skills and knowledge to interpret events affecting their lives
- understand causes of global inequality, justice and solidarity
- learn from experiences elsewhere in the world
- identify common interests and develop solidarity with diverse communities
- combat racism and xenophobia
- widen horizons and personal development
- make a difference to their world by participating in society” (DEA, 2001 cited in Bourn, 2005: 56).

The interesting implication of that nine-point summary is that each point focusses on *inputs* to the educational process but says little about the *outputs*, or impact, or outcomes. How individuals and communities are to react and make full use of this improved understanding, these connections, skills,

learning and widening of horizons is not explicated, except in the rather gentle phrasing of ‘combat racism and xenophobia’ and ‘make a difference to their world’ – but only ‘by participating in society’, which they had presumably been doing even before their baptism of DE (*Ibid*).

DE has made many strenuous and worthwhile efforts to improve its professionalism, its engagement with the formal education sector, and its use of recognised educational methodologies to help reach audiences and communities better than before. However, the capacity of the sector to point to specific social changes and other significant outcomes that have ensued as a result of DE activity is not obvious, at least to this writer. Education, including development education – in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and in countries such as Ireland and the UK – has undoubtedly become a means of acquiring some skill sets helpful in personal advancement in a capitalist economy, but its role in effecting progressive social change, in challenging the neoliberal hegemony of capitalism and its inequalities and injustices, is far from clear. Has education, perhaps, somehow lost its liberating potential and become a merely supine element in the reproduction of capitalist structures and divisions? Indeed, is the question not so much one of the inadequate resources of the DE sector to combat neoliberalism’s exploitative and oppressive mechanisms, but rather the much more serious one of whether or not the DE sector has sufficiently grasped the seriousness of neoliberal ideology. Just as traditional Marxists are often confronted by their critics with the accusation that Marx’s nineteenth century ideas on social class do not reflect the socio-economic realities of workers in the twenty-first century, so too must we recognise that the DE sector hasn’t emphasised enough the *economic* dimensions of education? Piketty’s *Capital and Ideology* (Piketty, 2020) covers 1,043 pages, and has over 1,300 footnotes: it is not the ideal starting point for an understanding of the economics of neoliberalism, but *Policy and Practice* perhaps goes too far in the opposite direction – there has perhaps been an inadequate examination of the economics of exploitation under neoliberalism.

We have ‘enjoyed’ the debates about DE’s contribution to a better understanding of sustainability, of human rights, or of social transformations, but the mechanics of economic exploitation doesn’t figure highly in our discussions. Back in 2010, there was the fairly comfortable conclusion drawn that:

“Having played a critical role in building Ireland’s globalised ‘knowledge economy’, the challenge is now for higher education and development education institutions, agencies and specialists alike to address the other side of the coin, working together to build a globalised ‘knowledge society’ in equal measure” (Gaynor, 2010: 124).

But, contemporaneously with our pleasing discussions was the growing awareness of just how quickly and exponentially inequalities were being generated by neoliberal economics: the wealth of the world’s 10 richest men increased by more than 120 per cent over the last year [2021], whereas 99 per cent of the world’s population saw their incomes fall during the same period, because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Oxfam, 2022; and Hickel, 2017: *passim*). Indeed, that Oxfam report argues that ‘economic violence’ is perpetrated when ‘structural policy choices are made for the richest and most powerful people’ (Oxfam, 2022). The degree of urgency that infuses the Oxfam report – and that infuses the declarations of myriad other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activists, communities in protest, trade unions and faith groups across the world – doesn’t seem to be replicated in the pages of *Policy and Practice* or the wider activities of the development education sector.

## **DE and possible ways forward**

DE has an excellent track record in trying to improve people’s understanding of important global issues, and of ways to tackle those structural impediments. Nonetheless, as a sector, we are perhaps guilty of being somewhat classroom-bound: we seek to educate in more or less formal settings, and we are educationalists first and foremost and social change activists only much later and with much less fervour. If we advocate social change but are not activists to achieve it, then we are not ‘being the change that you wish to see in the world’ (Gandhi cited in Goodreads, 2021). Andreotti’s critical writings (e.g.,

Andreotti, 2006; 2014) is helpful in imagining a DE sector that can rise to the challenges of ‘miseducation’. She suggests we need to learn to *unlearn* - to deconstruct the false ideas and social myths that we have been encouraged by our socialisation to believe in. ‘Education’, she argues, ‘is about the creation of a critical mass of people, who could see and imagine beyond the limitations and oppression of the current system in order to bring a different reality into being’ (Andreotti, 2014: 57). She has long argued for bringing into our discourse concepts dear to indigenous peoples, and she was the first writer in *Policy and Practice* to bring the concept of *Pachamama* – living sustainably and respectfully within planetary limits – to our attention. Selby and Kagawa argue, too, for more radical perspectives that embrace sustainable ways of living on this fragile planet, and they argue that ‘Development education... [appears to be] accepting of the neoliberal growth and globalisation model and seems primarily concerned with workforce preparation for technocratic competitive efficacy’ (2011: 24). They also highlight the need to address issues of power – a concept not often discussed or debated in *Policy and Practice*. Hilary also argues for more action-oriented programmes of DE and the need to ally ourselves with more diverse and more activist partners, communities and coalitions (2013: 17).

Development education is only a small actor in the wider interplay of educational service providers and we cannot be expected to exert powerful change throughout that broader segment. Nonetheless, we can perhaps offer a number of initiatives by way of establishing norms for a more human-centred educational provision and of offering pedagogical exemplars for educational services to adapt and adopt. The first and perhaps most obvious conclusion to be drawn is that DE is too small a sector to effect significant change on its own and must therefore seek *collaborations and alliances* with like-minded organisations, communities and social forces. Rather than relying overly on the comfortable partnerships that have been provided by schools, colleges and some universities, the sector needs to be more actively and strategically involved with groups that share the same or similar ethical concerns. Trade unions, actors in the environmental movement, faith groups, youth groups and organisations seeking political reform would seem to be useful and necessary

partners in the struggle for a more self-critical and activist educational experience.

Secondly, these early years of the twenty-first century appear to have presented many people with a more pessimistic view of the world, which can – and must – be combatted. A major Marxist text from the 1960s (Baran and Sweezy, 1967: 336ff) mapped out the contradictions generated by capitalism and the negative impact that those contradictions had on the mental health of ordinary citizens. Today, mental health issues have not disappeared from people living under the neoliberal order, but the DE sector could help to counter this phenomenon by emphasising *agency*, and the ability of ordinary people to effect profound social change. Gandhi espoused non-violent social change; Greta Thunberg effected a school strike for the climate and energised millions of people worldwide to demand political action from governments; and individual men and women (and boys and girls), from Wangari Maathai to Rosa Parks to Maria Ressa, have been able to show that ‘nobody is too small to make a difference’ (Thunberg, 2019). This is not meant to be some idealistic effort at ‘mindfulness’ so much as a grounding of DE philosophy and strategy in a deep understanding of the plasticity of social constructs – be they governments, corporations, religions or learning systems. They have been created by people, and if those constructs are oppressive or stilted of human fulfilment, they can be deconstructed and re-created by us.

Thirdly, the DE sector needs to pioneer work on the *re-learning* implied by Andreotti’s earlier-cited need for us to unlearn. Voices from the majority world are urgently needed – and a magazine such as *New Internationalist*, for example, claims to offer just that. If our educators and activists, and their partners in learning and engagement, take a daily diet of news and comment from government-funded or -influenced media, or from commercial news organisations, or even from large parts of the booming social media, where commercial considerations appear to be growing inordinately, then we only learn the values, myths and social constructs of the prevailing paradigm, which is that of neoliberalism. Surely, we need to diversify our range of resources and learning materials. No one person can offer the

definitive list of ‘good’ and ‘valid’ sources of news, analysis and activism, but I would offer the following few suggestions as possible contenders for our time in a busy world already saturated with information and misinformation: publishing houses such as Monthly Review Press, Pluto Press or L&W (formerly Lawrence and Wishart); UK-focussed organisations such as the *New Economics Foundation* or *Compass*; European initiatives such as *Democracy Without Borders* or the *Manifesto for the Democratisation of Europe*; and more global perspectives such as the InterPress Service (IPS) and many of the United Nations (UN) agencies’ offerings.

Fourthly, it may be that many of us in the sector are perhaps a little long in the tooth and we may be in danger of offering younger generations ideals and role models from a bygone era which may no longer strike a chord. Paulo Freire was and is a hero for people such as me, but my students have never heard of him and his ideas: am I right and they are all wrong? Hardly. But is it unhelpful that I should seek to acquaint them with the figures that have inspired me rather than attempt to find out about their role models who might have similar values to my own? Che Guevara and Fidel Castro; Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda; Nehru and Sukarno – there are many figures who have struggled heroically for a collectivist, humane and egalitarian form of development for their peoples, but maybe the DE sector needs to identify and mobilise behind more *contemporary* figures – the Malala Yousafzais, the Greta Thunbergs, and the Vanessa Nakates of this world and of this age.

Finally, we may perhaps need to recalibrate our pedagogy of development education. DE has often been seen as sitting comfortably in or near the teaching of geography. However, Piketty offers some encouragement to us taking economics far more seriously than we have done so far. And Sandel urges us to consider the moral implications of all educational effort. ‘Governing well requires practical wisdom and civic virtue – an ability to deliberate about common good and to pursue it effectively. But neither of these capacities is developed very well in most universities today’ (Sandel, 2020: 99). He even brings Aristotle into the contemporary debate, arguing that ‘For him the merit relevant to governing was not wealth or noble birth, but

excellence in civic virtue and *phronesis*, the practical wisdom to reason well about the common good' (Ibid: 28). If philosophy and economics have a more central role in development education in the coming years, that would perhaps be progress. But it would be better still if we could not only help people learn from our teaching but also ourselves learn that the best teaching is that which is transformative – of the teachers, the learners and the wider community. In 1970, it could be written that 'Education is once again a subversive force' (Freire, 1972: 9). Would that our educational efforts could again become truly subversive and that we achieve Freire's initial ideal: 'I work, and working I transform the world' (Ibid: 13).

## Conclusion

All systems of education claim that they help individuals attain personal development, goals and some measure of freedom. But all educational systems also work within socially defined parameters. Schools, colleges and universities instil discipline and social norms, and offer information, skills and knowledge. Our society is no exception: and since neoliberalism is everywhere in the ascendant, it behoves the DE sector to recognise that there are constraints and compromises involved in working within that paradigm. Buying a few Fairtrade items each week is a morally necessary but systemically insufficient response to global economic inequality. Increasing the readership of *Policy and Practice* and the participants in global learning programmes are worthwhile and important goals but they are not the metrics of social transformation.

Since Marx (1845: 5) wrote that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas', and Gramsci introduced us to the 'hegemonic ideas' of elite groups (Gramsci, 2006: 3), we may readily recognise the prevailing norms that influence, socialise and mould our fellow citizens whom we may perceive to be unfree to varying degrees. Their lives and social spaces - and ours too - are defined and mapped out by the language, concepts, practices and values of the dominant elites: those who have benefitted from credentials provided by educational institutions that have themselves become an important element in the increasing inequalities we can all observe. DE

should eschew a bookish, classroom pedagogy and embrace a more radical, activist stance, based on strong moral principles, and backed by the urgent needs of unfree communities and citizens at home and abroad – as these are truly the victims of neoliberalism.

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