

Editorial

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION, CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE 'IMPERIAL MODE OF LIVING': 'THINKING INSTITUTIONALLY' ABOUT THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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Recent scientific research describes the drought that occurred in Syria between 2007-2010 as having had a 'catalytic effect' on the country's civil war which has already claimed an estimated 200,000 lives and forced more than four million to flee the country – fueling a refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe. As Kelley et al. observe:

“Whether it was a primary or substantial factor is impossible to know, but drought can lead to devastating consequences when coupled with pre-existing acute vulnerability, caused by poor policies and unsustainable land use practices in Syria's case and perpetuated by the slow and ineffective response of the Assad regime” (2015: 3241-3242).

Also central to their analysis is the role that human influence on the climate system has played in fuelling the current Syrian conflict. They conclude that:

“...anthropogenic forcing has increased the probability of severe and persistent droughts in this region, and made the occurrence of a three-year drought as severe as that of 2007-2010 two to three times more likely than by natural variability alone” (ibid).

In other words, the severe drought that was implicated in the death and displacement of millions of Syrians was the result of, or at least exacerbated by, anthropogenic or human-induced climate change.

While climate change has previously been thought of as a problem primarily affecting future generations, the Syrian example clearly demonstrates that the human impacts of climate change – including forced displacement, lost livelihoods, food and water scarcity, disease and increased political instability – are *already* being felt, particularly among poorer communities who lack the resources or physical and financial infrastructure that is necessary to protect themselves from climate-related events (Stern, 2006). Other examples, such as rising sea levels which are displacing the inhabitants of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), provide ample evidence that a climate catastrophe is *already* taking place and that human beings are deeply responsible for it.

‘Individualising responsibility’ versus ‘thinking institutionally’ about climate change

Despite the severity of an existing climate crisis, as well as the establishment of a consensus on the reality of human-induced climate change (Gupta, 2012), climate change is often treated as a low policy priority, relative to other national and environmental issues, particularly in areas where the effects of climate change are not directly felt, or with sufficient frequency to cause alarm. However, the scale and urgency of the crisis – as well as the weight of scientific evidence which demonstrates that human activity is responsible for global warming – calls for radical changes in how individuals, communities, governments, corporations, the energy industry, and international agencies think and act in relation to climate change (Mochizuki and Bryan, 2015). Mainstream educational efforts to address worsening environmental conditions have been criticised for their preoccupation with individual behavioural change, to the detriment of a consideration of wider institutional concerns. As Maniates (2001: 33) observes:

“When responsibility for environmental problems is individualised, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power and influence in society – in other words, to ‘think institutionally’. Instead, the serious work of confronting the

threatening socio-environmental processes ... falls to individuals, acting alone, usually as consumers”.

The same author cautions against the ‘individualisation of responsibility’ in relation to environmental problems on the grounds that it curtails our ‘environmental imagination’ and undermines our capacity to react effectively to environmental threats. In other words, if climate change is to be meaningfully addressed, it will require forms of justice-oriented action that focus not just on individual citizens’ contribution to global warming, but also on altering the policies and practices of governments and industries that are accelerating the problem.

The importance of ‘thinking institutionally’ about climate change is underscored by the fact that nearly two thirds of all greenhouse gas emissions have been produced by just ninety multinational and state-owned companies, half of which were produced in the last twenty-five years alone, when it was *already* known how harmful the effects of greenhouse gases actually are (Heede, 2013). In other words, a relatively small number of entities – including companies such as Chevron Texaco, ExxonMobil, BP, Royal Dutch/Shell, Statoil and Saudi Aramco, as well as state-owned extractive industries in China, Poland and Russia – are responsible for producing the fossil fuels that are the primary sources of human induced greenhouse gases that are driving global climate change. Many if not all of these companies have proven recoverable energy reserves that will, if mined and emitted, further intensify climate change and greatly exacerbate the human, social, and political challenges associated with it. While these companies have strong economic incentives to access their energy reserves and oppose efforts to leave their carbon reserves in the ground, social, legal and political pressure needs to be applied to force them to meet their ethical obligation to help address climate destabilisation (Gardiner, 2011; Heede, 2013).

Even at the personal level, however, environmental educational efforts to promote more sustainable practices among individuals have met with limited success. As McKibben (2012: n.p.) puts it, human beings

appear to be ‘fundamentally ambivalent about going green’. Psychologically speaking, human beings have the capacity for disavowal, i.e., the capacity to know and deny something at the same time. As Taubman (2012: 18) remarks, ‘many of us hold that climate change is a reality, and yet, in our driving and consuming habits, we act as if we did not take it seriously’. Moreover, since many of the behaviours and practices that contribute to climate-related harm are rooted in social and cultural norms, and make life more convenient, manageable, and pleasurable for people, they are difficult to change. In fact, tackling climate change has been likened to ‘build[ing] a movement against yourself’ because of the practical, social and psychological benefits cheap fossil fuels provide – directly or indirectly – to those who live in greenhouse gas intensive economies (McKibben, 2012, n.p). In other words, complex social-psychological as well as political-economic realities make it extremely challenging to bring about the radical reduction in emissions that climate change demands.

While individuals might appreciate the importance of ecologically sustainable modes of living, the way that societies within emissions-intensive economies are currently organised makes it is very difficult for them to radically reduce their emissions (Kawall, 2011). The discrepancy between a relatively high level of awareness of the ecological crisis on the one hand, and insufficient political and social change on the other is highlighted by Brand and Wissen (2013, who argue that ‘fossilist’ patterns of production and consumption – which are deeply rooted in everyday norms and institutional practices in the global North – are at the heart of the problem. These consumption and production patterns – which imply a disproportionate claim on global resources, global sinks and labour power – form the basis of what Brand and Wissen refer to as an ‘imperial mode of living’ in the global North which is quickly being generalised to rapidly industrialising countries in the global South. These authors argue that advanced capitalism is unable to fix its own environmental contradictions and is therefore inherently incompatible with sustainable development. Educationally speaking, this implies the need to foster a very different set of social norms and practices and to engage learners with opportunities to reflect on the broader political-

economic contexts which shape their lives and their relationship to the environment, so that collectively they can explore possibilities for how human and social systems can be structured differently (Gowdy, 2008).

Development education and climate change

Collectively, the articles in this edition of *Policy and Practice* offer a robust framework for what the educational response to the climate crisis should look like. **John Sweeney's** paper highlights the essential scientific, policy and ethical underpinnings of any educational response to climate change which need to be included if the 'conjoined challenges of climate change and sustainable development' are to be meaningfully addressed. Pointing to the need for improved communication between climatologists and development educators, Sweeney equips us with a vocabulary and set of organising principles that are essential to ensuring climate justice. His paper also addresses some of the key obstacles preventing climate justice from being realised. He observes that, internationally, progress towards achieving climate stabilisation has been fraught, as national economic self-interest trumps global concerns about climate change.

Kagawa and Selby are similarly critical of what they describe as 'the blandness of the international response to climate change and climate change education', which they attribute to the failure of international summits and frameworks to engage with neoliberalism as a root driver of climate change and a corresponding failure to mainstream the holistic and transformative educational response that the climate crisis warrants. Kagawa and Selby interrogate the 'business-as-usual' approach to global governance frameworks to address sustainability and climate change. Their critique highlights important limitations of the post-2015 development agenda, such as the new Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) continued emphasis on capitalist growth (as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP)) and their concomitant failure to address dangerous levels of corporate extraction and consumption by wealthy countries. This calls for critical engagement on the part of the development education sector with international frameworks that serve a 'compensatory legitimisation' function for wealthy, capitalist countries

– frameworks that are not designed to bring about major changes to the ‘business-as-usual’ approach to international development, but rather to restore legitimacy in the face of widespread inequality and crises by ameliorating some of the oppressive conditions produced by a system that is structurally unjust (Klees and Qargha, 2013). Kagawa and Selby consider how – in the face of complacency in a time of great urgency – the development education sector might respond to the climate crisis through its education and advocacy.

Mary Clarke Boyd and Therese Hume consider the role for development education as an ‘inter-discipline’ in the tertiary education sector – an environment which they maintain is still primarily disciplinary-focused, particularly at undergraduate level. Identifying core pedagogical principles and strategies of development education, Clarke Boyd and Hume explore the potential of placing development education at the core of all curricula and suggest that it that can play an important role in cultivating the broader learning capacities that are required to address complex problems of sustainability and unsustainability. These authors also usefully engage with the complex psycho-social processes which prevent people from ‘seeing’ their responsibility for climate-related catastrophes in other parts of the world and identify concrete examples of initiatives at the higher education level that have enabled sustainability issues to be addressed in an interdisciplinary manner.

One such example is described by **Benjamin Mallon** in his Perspectives article which draws directly on his subjective experiences of teaching about climate change in an Initial Teacher Education context. Mallon argues that climate change education offers development educators the opportunity to explore a range of global development challenges in an integrated way and calls upon development educators to consider climate change as an aspect of many, if not all, major contemporary challenges.

Sarah O’Malley draws on research with educational practitioners as well as parents and their children to consider how children interpret the

natural environment through an examination of the dynamic relationships between environmental education, education for sustainable development and development education. Her research reveals the limitations of environmental concepts underpinning environmental education in empowering learners to think critically about, and respond meaningfully to, the environmental crisis. She concludes by advocating for a ‘truly reflective multidisciplinary approach’ to teaching and learning about the natural environment.

Due to their close relationship with the land, indigenous people – comprising about 6 percent of the global population – have been observing and reporting the impacts of global warming for several decades and are trying to cope with and adapt to these changes. Climate change issues are of particular interest to indigenous people, not just because they have a particular physical and spiritual relationship with land, water, and associated ecosystems and tend to be among the most vulnerable to climate change, but also because they have a specialised ecological and traditional knowledge relevant to finding the best solutions (Gerrard, 2008). **Simon Eten’s** paper makes the case for the revitalisation and inclusion of indigenous knowledge in education in Africa. Eten illuminates the ‘innumerable benefits’ that indigenous knowledge can bring to development and to climate action in particular.

Addressing the risks of climate change requires *global* as well as *local* action to reduce greenhouse gases and to reduce vulnerabilities to climate change impacts. The relationship between the local and the global – and how they shape each other in mutually interdependent ways – is one of the central organising principles of development education. When climate change is framed as a local issue, it enhances learners’ sense of connection to and understanding of climate change; allows for engagement with practical, concrete issues and initiatives; promotes the development of local and regional solutions that could be applied to the national and global arenas; and inspires future action on a global scale (Centre for Research on Environmental Decisions, 2009). **Grace Walsh’s** Perspectives article

documents an ‘immersive’ development education experience at Cloughjordan’s Ecovillage in Co. Tipperary which included practical, voluntary based activities and workshops focused on climate change, sustainable development and community resilience. Walsh offers a useful framework for experiential learning which affords participants the opportunity to witness first hand a community-based response to reducing carbon emissions.

Collectively, the articles in this issue of *Policy and Practice* offer considerable direction for the development education sector in terms of how to engage more productively with the environmental and social crises posed by climate change. The cross-cutting nature of climate change poses an unprecedented challenge to political leaders and policymakers as it requires governments to address traditionally separate issues in an interconnected manner and transform the way they approach economic and development policies. The need for effective cross-sectoral structures to ensure dialogue and ‘joined up thinking’ in relation to climate change education planning is therefore a key priority for effective climate change policy and practice.

Development education lends itself directly to social justice and critically-oriented approaches to education, namely those approaches which: emphasise the root causes of social and global problems; offer a critical assessment of social, political, and economic structures; and focus on collective strategies for change. Addressing climate change from a development education perspective enhances learners’ capacity to think about how political power operates. It also increases their capacity to hold the agencies and institutions which are most implicated in global warming to account and encourages them to imagine alternatives to existing political-economic arrangements and ideologies which promote unjust global relations and practices.

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