

DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

STEPHEN MCCLOSKEY

The theme of this issue (36) of *Policy and Practice*, ‘Development Education and Democracy’, can be viewed as part of a continuum with the previous issue (35) on the ‘economic paradigm’ and ‘Frontlines of Activism’, the topic to be explored in Issue 37 (Autumn 2023). Most of the Focus article contributions to this issue are framed in the context of neoliberalism’s erosion of democratic spaces and institutions. As Marta da Costa suggests: ‘neoliberalism has carried the logic of the market into all spheres of public life, disavowing basic human rights, and corrupting collective democratic spaces’. The contributions from: Prachy Hooda on the Farmers’ Movement in India in 2020-21; Alireza Farahani and Behnam Zoghi Roudsari on community-based learning toward democratisation in Iran; and Gareth Robinson, Fionntán Hargey and Kathryn Higgins on a marginalised community in south Belfast struggling for ‘spatial justice’, speak to the importance of activism on the frontlines of neoliberalism. The three topics – democracy, neoliberalism and activism – intersect at different levels and in varying contexts in Issue 36 from: the need to re-claim democracy from the jaws of fascism; to critically interrogate the concept of democracy as an enabler of Eurocentrism and ‘colonial/modern forms of oppression’ (da Costa); and to re-calibrate democracy as an agent of grassroots, community activism essential to resisting top-down ‘development’ perpetuating ‘the unequal and unjust distribution of resources and opportunities’ (Robinson, Hargey and Higgins).

Fifty years of neoliberalism

The prevalence of neoliberalism in many of the contributions to Issue 36 is a reminder that 2023 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the brutal overthrow of Chile’s socialist president, Salvador Allende, in a Washington-backed military coup in 1973 led by General Augusto Pinochet. Chile subsequently became the laboratory of neoliberalism schooled in the ‘holy trinity’ of laissez-faire economics – privatisation, deregulation and spending cuts – by the Chicago

Boys, United States' (US) economists trained under the tutelage of free market guru, Milton Friedman (Klein, 2007: 77). Chile's experiment in 'shock therapy' was a disaster; unemployment rocketed to thirty per cent, the economy was hit by hyperinflation and 'debt exploded' (Ibid: 85). But under its firm adherents, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and United States (US) president, Ronald Reagan, neoliberalism became a global contagion, informing the multi-lateral 'development' programmes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank and imposed on low-income countries through Structural Adjustment Programmes; a case of neoliberalism by stealth (McCloskey, 2022).

By the end of the five decades that followed the implementation of neoliberal 'reforms' across much of the world, the richest ten per cent of the global population controlled fifty-two per cent of global income and the poorest half just 8.5 per cent (The World Inequality Report, 2022). The inequality gap is even higher in terms of wealth with the richest ten per cent of the global population owning seventy-six per cent of all wealth, and the bottom half just two per cent (Ibid). By 2016, an article by IMF economists had to accept that 'The evidence of the economic damage from inequality suggests that policymakers should be more open to redistribution than they are' (Ostry, Loungani, and Furceri, 2016: 41). That evidence included between 1980 and 2014: '150 episodes of surges in capital inflows in more than 50 emerging market economies' with about twenty per cent of these 'episodes' resulting in economic crisis (Ibid: 39). In short, neoliberalism is unstable and prone to boom and bust economics often resulting in social unrest and upheaval. It is also a direct and immediate threat to democracy.

Democracy under siege

In Issue 35 of *Policy and Practice*, Henry A Giroux observed: 'Under neoliberalism, everything is for sale and the only obligation of citizenship is consumerism' (2022: 112). He added that many of the key democratic institutions 'such as the independent media, schools, the legal system, certain financial institutions and higher education are under siege' (Ibid: 111). Many of the key tenets of development education are vulnerable to what Bryan and

Mochizuki (in Issue 36) see as the growing corporate takeover of education. Their article recalls that Freire conceived of education as a means toward called critical consciousness (*conscientização*) that supported ‘learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions’ and ‘take action against the oppressive elements of reality’ (Freire, 2005: 17). By contrast, education under neoliberal capitalism ‘trades in civic illiteracy, historical amnesia, and depoliticization’ (Giroux, 2023).

If democracy and citizenship are to amount to more than consumerism or casting a vote every four or five years in elections, then learners require a liberating education that enables them to demystify the world. As Freire put it: ‘to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes’ (2005: 29). He warned of a ‘world of deceit’ presented as a fixed entity beyond interrogation or transformation (Ibid: 120). This is the world of populism, a political ideology that has coat-trailed neoliberalism and assails democracy to create sectarian divisions; we think of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Donald Trump in the United States and Britain’s Boris Johnson. The populist leader, warns Freire (Ibid: 131) is ‘an ambiguous being, an “amphibian” who lives in two elements. Shuttling back and forth between the people and the dominant oligarchies, he bears the mark of both groups’. Henry A Giroux (2023) finds such a leader in Florida Governor (and possible presidential candidate) Ron DeSantis ‘whose attack on public and higher education aims at producing modes of civic illiteracy, modeled on a flight from critical thinking, self-reflection, and meaningful forms of solidarity’.

Participative democracy is, therefore, urgently needed to facilitate the right to protest, to debate, to dissent and express opinion in a range of fora from street protests to social media. As the journalist and activist, George Monbiot (2022), argues: ‘Protest is not ... a political luxury. It is the bedrock of democracy. Without it, few of the democratic rights we enjoy would exist’. He warns of policing legislation making its way through the British parliament that Amnesty International claims will impose ‘profound and significant

restrictions on the basic right to peacefully protest and will have a severely detrimental impact on the ability of ordinary people to make their concerns heard' (Deshmukh, 2022). In India, prime minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has escalated violence against Muslims by bulldozing homes and businesses. The Indian author and activist, Arundhati Roy (2022), believes that 'a deeply flawed, fragile democracy has transitioned – openly and brazenly – into a criminal, Hindu-fascist enterprise with tremendous popular support'.

In the United States, still feeling the after-shocks of the Trump presidency, the Supreme Court's decision to expand gun rights and remove the right to abortion by overturning 'Roe versus Wade' is undermining fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms (Gresko, 2022; Demant, 2022). 'Populism, nativism, white supremacy and other forms of racism and extremism are poisoning social cohesion', argues United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres (2021), adding that 'polarization is undermining democratic institutions'. The COVID-19 pandemic, too, has added greater stresses to democracy, with Oxfam (2021: 2) finding that the virus has 'has exposed, fed off and increased existing inequalities of wealth, gender and race'. Corporate state capture is another consequence of neoliberalism as it subverts democratic institutions to assert the interests of private capital above the social needs of citizens. When powerful elites and corporations, 'exercise undue influence so as to capture public policies in their favor, this undermines the basis of every individual vote in a democracy', argues Oxfam (2022: 22). A question germane to this issue of *Policy and Practice* is to what extent democracy has been an enabler of oppression, violence and human rights abuses or a victim of the marketisation of democratic institutions and downsizing of the state by the forces of neoliberalism?

Problematising democracy

Issue 36 is characterised by engaging and distinctive contributions from authors in the global North and South who have critically situated and interrogated the concept of democracy in development education (DE) practice. In a bracing and critically reflective piece that challenges the

assumption that democracy is a ‘universally desirable answer for development education’, Marta da Costa’s starting position is that democracy is part of and enabling many of the social and economic problems we are currently facing. By applying Anker’s (2022) study of ugly freedoms as a framework from which to approach the complex issue of democracy, da Costa considers ‘democracy as *ugly*: a problem, rather than the answer’ to our problems. Far from viewing ‘the current violence and oppression we are witnessing globally’ as an attack on democracy, da Costa suggests that it has been enabled by it.

This problematising of democracy struck a chord when witnessing former and current political leaders from Europe and North America attend a three-day conference in Belfast from 17-19 April 2023 organised by Queen’s University Belfast (2023) to mark the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (BGFA). The high-ranking participants included former British prime-minister, Tony Blair, one of the architects of the BGFA, who with the US led Britain into a disastrous and illegal war against Iraq in March 2003 (Aljazeera, 2023). The war was launched against Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq, on the false premise that he was ‘stockpiling weapons of mass destruction’ and supporting ‘terrorist groups’. It resulted in an estimated 275,000 Iraqi deaths, destroyed much of the country’s infrastructure and escalated sectarian conflict from which the country has yet to recover twenty years on (Ibid). Writing about the Iraq War on its twentieth anniversary, George Monbiot (2023) observed: ‘There has been no reckoning and nor will there be. This greatest of crimes has been so thoroughly airbrushed that its perpetrators can anoint themselves the avenging angels of other people’s atrocities’. Another conference participant was Alistair Campbell, Blair’s former Director of Communications and Strategy, who drew up the discredited dossier on Iraq’s weapons programme that was used ‘to make the case for war’ (Norton-Taylor, 2011). Campbell, like Blair, has been re-habilitated in plain sight.

A week before the conference, current US president Joe Biden also visited Belfast to ‘keep the peace’ and reiterate US support for the BGFA (Glynn, McKee and McDowell, 2023). The media coverage of President

Biden's visit to Ireland largely championed his peace-keeping role and excised his administration's foreign policies that are undermining peace and causing conflict in the global South. They include: annual US military funding of \$3.3 billion to Israel that is fuelling conflict in the Middle-East (US Department of State, 2023a); the US blockade of Cuba - condemned in no fewer than thirty annual votes in the United Nations General Assembly - which President Biden has exacerbated by keeping Cuba on the US 'State Sponsors of Terrorism' list (UNGA, 2022; US Department of State, 2023b); US support of Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen which has cost the lives of 370,000 people (Widakuswara, 2022); and the US's catastrophic withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 which saw the collapse of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces' (ANDSF) allowing the Taliban to take control of the country (SIGAR, 2022).

The dissonance between Biden's perceived role as a protector of peace and enabler of democracy in the north of Ireland and his administration's role in undermining democracy elsewhere was rarely examined by the media during his visit to Ireland. In an editorial, *The Irish Times* (2023) said that Biden's visit cemented a 'special relationship'; 'it should be remembered behind the speeches and potential shamrockery surrounding the visit, is a relationship that really matters'. Liam Kennedy (2023), director of the Clinton Institute for American Studies at University College Dublin suggested that 'over the years President Biden has come to personify a liberal politics of empathy in which his Irish ancestry and Catholicism function as moral touchstones'. It was left to Michael Murphy (2023), a letter writer to *The Irish Times*, to call out the Irish media corps for its excising from their coverage of Mr Biden's visit his record in office: 'Mr Biden and his entourage waltzed around the country without a single challenge from journalists to US foreign policy or the president's record'.

Was this lack of journalistic criticism a case of studied omission to shore up US support for the Irish economy and BGFA? What then does our silence on conflicts elsewhere say about our concept and practice of democracy and citizenship? If Ireland does indeed enjoy a 'special relationship' with the US, then why not use this privileged position to speak up on behalf of those on

the receiving end of US foreign policies that impose pain and suffering on people in the global South? By failing to bring critical perspectives to such policies, we can hardly be surprised to see them repeated.

Grassroots democracy

Drawing upon Freire's concept of situationality – the temporal-spatial conditions that 'mark us' - Gareth Robinson, Fionntán Hargey and Kathryn Higgins provide an inspiring case study of an urban community in Belfast that has campaigned effectively for 'urban renewal'. Using a rights-based framework for community renewal called *We Will Dissent*, a working-class community in Belfast called The Market has used an array of education and campaigning tools to challenge planning decisions that exclude 'local problem owners from the development of solutions'. The Market Development Association (MDA) was established in 1995 'to promote the well-being of all citizens' in the community and advocate on socio-economic issues using 'a community development approach'. The tools used by the community to create awareness of these issues include 'media campaigns, street actions, resident mobilisations, and protests, based on participative research'. The MDA also established a 'unique Higher Education Partnership' with academics from Queen's Communities and Place (an initiative of Queen's University Belfast) to provide research that supported working groups on issues such as health and education. Robinson, Hargey and Higgins have written an article that will inspire debate and praxis in other communities in struggle against marginalisation and gentrification.

Another grassroots movement in dissent has been captured in Prachy Hooda's article on the farmers' movement of 2020 – 2021 established to campaign against three contentious neoliberal farm laws and the corporatisation of Indian agriculture. The farmers' movement was one of the largest in the history of post-independence India and, like the MDA in Belfast, used a range of community tools and services for self-education and campaigning activities including: a bi-weekly newspaper; establishing a library; and opening a school to educate the children of protesting farmers. Over forty Indian farmers' unions mobilised to protest against the farm laws.

They also drew upon Freire's concept of *conscientização* to educate protesting farmers on 'the structural social and economic inequalities that define their lived experiences and affect their community as a whole'.

Community-based learning is also central to the article by Alireza Farahani and Behnam Zoghi Roudsari, a very welcome contribution to *Policy and Practice* from Iran. They argue that supporting and sustaining community-based learning initiatives can contribute to a broader strategy of 'democratisation'. The authors bring a first-hand perspective of locally based community education in the context of an emerging pro-democracy movement in Iran and the brutal reaction of the state to this dissent. Farahani and Zoghi Roudsari utilise Freirean critical pedagogical approaches in their community empowerment programmes with a view to 'strengthening the foundations of democratic institutions at the local level'. They argue that nurturing 'the political participation of ever more sectors of society' can help create 'more effective, stable, and sustainable, pro-democracy forces' in Iran.

The de-radicalisation of development education

Audrey Bryan and Yoko Mochizuki provide an urgent, timely and topical warning about the use of crisis rhetoric 'to consolidate the corporate takeover of education from a democratically controlled system to one designed and run by private actors in the service of the global economy'. Using a critical discourse analysis, they show how policy problems and their solutions are manufactured in particular discursive structures through key United Nations' policy documents and events. The authors specifically focus on the 2022 United Nations' Transforming Education Summit (TES) as an example of global education governance that is designed to elevate the interests of global corporations, particularly large philanthropic foundations that influence education policy. This article recalls Naomi Klein's ground-breaking and revelatory *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) which showed how the disorientation created by disasters and emergencies are often used by governments and the private sector to implement neoliberal 'reforms'. Bryan and Mochizuki argue that the de-radicalisation of education intended by crisis transformationalism has been accelerated by the 'contradictory and fundamentally incompatible'

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda. They find evidence of this de-radicalisation in the shift from the more politicised and Freirean-based ‘development education’ to the more recent and increasingly common use in the sector of ‘global citizenship’. ‘The learner at the heart of this new transformative education agenda’, argue Bryan and Mochizuki, ‘is an (economic) *global citizen with benefits*’. This is a citizen equipped with ‘neurologically-inflected social-emotional skills’ rather ‘than an understanding of power, politics, and their role in local and global transformation’. This powerful article is a reminder that the development education sector in Ireland has almost uniformly adopted the term ‘global citizenship education’ in recent years without pause, discussion or a consideration of its implications.

Brigid Golden’s article is a reflection on a self-study action research project which aimed to strengthen critical thinking in her teaching and the practice of her students. It highlights the importance of providing opportunities for student teachers to experience Freirean pedagogical approaches in their initial teacher education to ensure that radical, participative learning is central to their classroom practice. The findings of Golden’s research suggest that it is possible for ‘students to develop critical thinking skills within the context of global education’. She also found that ‘dialogical approaches had a significant impact on their acquisition and demonstration of those skills’. The article suggests that the ‘incorporation of active, engaged opportunities to share ideas and work collaboratively supported students to develop core critical thinking skills’ which are necessary for instilling democratic values and participation.

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Stephen McCloskey is Director of the Centre for Global Education and Editor of *[Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review](#)*. His latest book is *[Global Learning and](#)*

International Development in the Age of Neoliberalism (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).