

FRONTLINES OF ACTIVISM

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“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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