CULTIVATING COLLECTIVE HOPE AGAINST A CULTURE OF INDIVIDUALISM

ELIZABETH MEADE

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Abstract: Dominant education systems in the global North have long fed into a culture of individualism. Since the enlightenment, educational theory has been dominated by the idea of education as the production of autonomous subjects, and has contributed to the development of an instrumentalist and individualistic view of education (Biesta, 2007). This legacy has become further magnified under neoliberalism. The influence of a culture of individualism is also evident in various ways in global citizenship education (GCE). Specifically, for this article, I suggest that one example of this cultural climate is the prevalent phenomenon of reducing social movements to a focus on notable individual actors alone, often removed from the wider context from which they were immersed. I propose that such narratives can inadvertently feed a sense of hopelessness in learners who cannot see themselves in such lone figures (Woodson, 2016).

This tendency also overlooks the fact that no person is an island, and that surrounding each of these remarkable people was often a committed and organised community, as well as connected legacies of nameless others stretching back through history. One way that a critical approach to GCE can support informed collective action and in turn aid the cultivation of critical hope, is by foregrounding collective grassroots struggles. I briefly point to some examples that highlight the hopeful possibilities that can emerge when ordinary people come together in communities to resist oppression and struggle for justice. In the final section of the article I will turn to the concept of 'collective hope' (Stockdale, 2021; Fife, 2024) to show that in addition to challenging the culture of

individualism, foregrounding and supporting collective action has the added benefit of enabling the growth of collective hope.

Key words: Collective Hope; Critical GCE; Collective Activism; Social Justice Education.

Introduction

The conceptualisation of the subject as a separate, sovereign, autonomous agent is a legacy of a modern/colonial understanding of the human person that has long influenced education and continues to permeate unexpected places in education today, such as global citizenship education (GCE) (Machado de Oliveira Andreotti, 2021). In this article I suggest that one way in which we can see traces of this legacy that shapes a dominant understanding of what it means to be a human person is in a common approach to learning about the history of social justice movements. Specifically, the foregrounding of notable individual actors who engaged in admirable actions for social justice, often removed from the wider context from which they were immersed. Although the motivation can be to offer role models for action, in emphasising the heroic deeds of the exceptional few frequently only part of the story is told, and the reality of the collective organising that gave rise to and supported such actions is suppressed. In doing so, such an approach can inadvertently contribute to a culture of individualism. It may also feed a sense of hopelessness and impotence to act as learners may find it difficult to easily see themselves in such examples.

GCE has a lot to offer by way of critiquing this culture of individualism and encouraging the growth of alternative imaginaries that germinate belief in, and actions to instantiate, more just ways of being together with others. One small way that GCE can contribute towards cultivating collective hope is through a sustained engagement with examples of grassroots collective action. In this article I argue that a serious focus on collective struggles in social justice education, and not individual actors in isolation, not only paints a more realistic picture of what sustained engagement in social activism involves, but it also shows that everyone can potentially participate in actions for social change in a meaningful way, even if those actions may be small in scale. In the final section of the article I will turn to the concept of 'collective hope' (Stockdale, 2021; Fife, 2024) to show

that in addition to challenging the culture of individualism, foregrounding and supporting collective action has the added benefit of enabling the growth of collective hope.

The modern story of the subject

Prevailing education systems in the global North have long fed into a culture of individualism. The dominant view of the subject presented in Western modern philosophy was that of an ahistoric, sovereign, free agent who was the 'source of truth, rationality and of its own identity', capable of knowing and acting in isolation (Biesta, 2006: 33). Since the enlightenment, educational theory was shaped by the idea of education as the production of independent subjects. In explaining the intimate connection between the education 'project' and the Enlightenment, Biesta (Ibid.: 34) quotes Usher and Edwards (1994) who argued that the very rationale of the educational process 'is founded on the humanistic idea of a certain kind of subject who has the inherent potential to become self-motivated and self-directing, a rational subject capable of exercising individual agency' (Ibid.: 24). On such an account, education was primarily concerned with the development of a subject with particular qualities, most notably the quality of rational autonomy. Although the liberal humanist view of the subject was generally presented as universal and transhistoric, the work of important postcolonial thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter and Walter Mignolo have shown how the development of such conceptualisations of Man were crucially shaped by historic, political and economic processes deeply rooted in the colonial project and the continuing legacies of slavery, racism and capitalism (Wynter, 2003; Mignolo, 2011). As Wynter argued, the Western bourgeois conception of Man, far from being universal, privileged an implicit whiteness, eurocentrism and masculinity (Wynter, 2003). This tradition has influenced educational practices up to the present day and, in addition to many positive inheritances, has contributed to an instrumentalist and individualistic understanding of education (Biesta, 2006; 2007).

The Western modern conception of the subject as an ahistoric foundation of knowledge, independent of any social structures, and removed from all connections to others, has been critiqued by post-structuralist, post-modernist, feminist, decoloniality, and more recently posthumanist scholars. Certainly in

academic research the modern conception of the subject has long been left behind (Peters and Tesar, 2015). However, as Machado de Oliveira Andreotti rightly reminds us, its lasting legacies continue to shape our world in countless inescapable ways, including shaping educational discourses, policies and practices (Machado de Oliveira Andreotti, 2021). Continuing in that tradition, in more recent times, neoliberalism has had a pervasive influence in amplifying an individualistic rendering of education, with an overtly economic reconfiguration. As Wendy Brown explains, neoliberalism is a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms and under such logics education is viewed as a key means of ensuring people become more competitive, entrepreneurial and individualistic (Brown, 2015). The spirit of strong individualism that pervades neoliberalism is perhaps best epitomised in Margaret Thatcher's famous declaration that there is no such thing as society (Thatcher, 1987).

The ongoing impact of neoliberalism on education is complex and impacts all aspects of education from policy, to curriculum, to pedagogy and assessment, remaking what it means to be an educational subject (Jones and Ball, 2023). Under neoliberalism education is framed as a personal investment for personal gain. Costa and Pais (2020) made the important point that there is fatalism inherent in how education under neoliberalism engages with the world, 'underlying the neoliberal agenda is the idea that education should prepare people for an already given world' (Ibid.: 6). The world is to be accepted for what it is and learners need only to find their place in a fixed order, and attempt to maximise their own personal gain in a competitive system. Misiaszek (2021) connects this type of fatalism to Freire's description of the banking model of education. Freire argued that through the banking approach the teacher falsely presents reality as motionless, static, fixed and unchanging, rather than dynamic (Freire, 2017). Learners are similarly reduced to objects, receiving information, and slotting into a pregiven world; not critically conscious people capable of interpreting and changing the world (Ibid.). This objectification consequently stunts learners' capacity to rightly see themselves as part of the evolving human story, and as worthy co-authors of that story.

GCE as part of the problem and the solution

This is where GCE has much to offer. Coming from the radical tradition of development education (DE), with a focus and commitment to explore 'the root causes of local and global injustices and inequalities in our interdependent world' (IDEA, 2020: 13), GCE can help learners to understand that things do not have to be how they are. Learners can be assisted to see that through working together ordinary people have pushed for change and that they too can be part of that change with others. However, GCE in a global North context has not escaped the influence of a culture of strong individualism.

Critics of non-critical GCE from a postcolonial perspective have criticised GCE for its often liberal humanistic discursive tendencies that point to a deep Eurocentrism, with a problematic undercurrent of white supremacy and a saviour mentality (Stein, 2015). The tendency to focus on individual actions rather than structural causes (da Costa et al., 2024; Stein, 2015) also speaks to a modernity/coloniality Eurocentric conceptualisation of the human person as separate and isolated (Stein et al., 2020). A focus on apolitical individual action can also curtail the emerging activist imagination of learners, limiting their potential to imagine collective resistance and detract from a crucial systemic and structural analysis of injustice and oppression. As Donnelly and Golden note 'with its emphasis on individualism, neoliberalism favours feel-good narratives about the impact that "just one person" can have on issues as complex as poverty or climate change' (2024: 192).

Bryan (2020) has shown that in the context of GCE in Ireland the alignment of citizenship education with well-being, in the post-primary education junior cycle reform, illustrates the apolitical reconfiguration of GCE and the displacement of responsibility for social and global problems away from the state, international agencies and corporations and towards the individual. Adding to this critique, Bryan (2024) argued that an increasing focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) foregrounds the cultivation of specific personal qualities, skills and dispositions, majorly depoliticising GCE and undermining the practice of solidarity. Bryan rightly stresses that such a reconfiguration removes a focus on collective political action which is a pivotal element of the radical emancipatory

roots of DE, which sought to understand and address the structural causes of global poverty and injustice (Bryan, 2024).

One small yet prominent way in which we can see the influence of a culture of individualism in an education context is the tendency to spotlight lone actors and inadvertently mark them out as the sole person responsible for an idea, a discovery, an invention, or an important historic action. This tendency is spread across subject areas with examples from scientists, mathematicians, musicians or notable historical figures removed from the wider context of their scientific communities, or the countless invisible others and historical legacies that shaped their actions, thinking and ideas. The history of social justice movements does not escape this trend.

Spotlighting the lone hero in social justice education

Stories of social justice movements can often focus on particular individuals alone, celebrating their extraordinariness, removing them from the wider context of communities of others who aided, inspired, and supported the struggle. Aside from such a narrative being a misrepresentation of a more complex account that ought to speak to multiple interconnections that generally epitomise social struggles, involving collective action and solidarity with others, the narrative of the lone individual who takes action can also reinforce neoliberal discourses that prioritise individual agency and self-reliance over collectivism. Although the motivation for spotlighting exceptional individuals can be to provide inspirational examples, it may be difficult for many people to imagine themselves as such a heroic figure. I suggest that perhaps when it comes to hope it might be more helpful to present a more realistic picture that shows the multiple ways, and degrees, that people can contribute to a movement.

A useful example to illustrate my point is from the American civil rights movement, as it a well-known and important movement in the history of social justice. The majority of people recognise the names of prominent civil rights activists, such as Rosa Parks, but far fewer have heard of the Highlander Folk School. The Highlander Folk School played a crucial role in both the labour and civil rights movements, serving as an incubator for ground breaking ideas and strategies (Slate, 2022). By the time Rosa Parks took her courageous and

honourable decision to refuse to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, she already had over ten years' activist experience fighting racism (Ibid.). Just four months before her activism on that bus Parks attended a two-week workshop at the Highlander Folk School. Of course the workshop was just one small part of her activist formation, and does not account for her singular decision that day in 1955, but it is important to show that Parks was not an isolated individual who decided one day to stand up to oppression alone. There is a longer story behind her bold and heroic action, one that an often shallow and unsubstantial 'heroes and holidays' depiction overlooks (Lee, Menkart and Okazawa-Ray, 2006; Menkart, Murray and View, 2004).

Prominent figures such as Parks are rightly spotlighted when learning about the American civil rights movement, but also of importance is the wider context that generally receives much less attention. The reality behind successful social movements is sustained work and long term commitment. Highlander is an example of an important element that was part of a wider movement that provided 'a place where activists grappled with ideas, strategies, and tactics' (Slate, 2022: 192-3). Paying attention to the history of the Highlander Folk School is also useful in illustrating participatory and community centred approaches, that highlight the important connection between grassroots community education and social change, challenging the notion that knowledge and solutions need to come from specialists outside communities (Ibid.).

In her research with Black youths Woodson (2016) shows how so called 'master narratives' (Alridge, 2006), which focus on one-dimensional heroic figures and large-scale events, can create unrealistic expectations and discourage participation in more ordinary civic engagement. Woodson's research supports the claim that such approaches can lead learners to believe that significant action is only possible for a special few, and rather than offering a role model it can diminish a student's belief in their own capacity (Woodson, 2016). Picower similarly argued that social justice education ought to focus on examples of movements of people standing together and highlight how such movements provided the base upon which notable figures stood. Picower believes that such an approach provides realistic models that learners can relate more easily to:

> "by exposing learners to people they can relate to within social movements, teachers provide not only a sense of hope but also tangible models of what it looks like to stand up on the side of justice" (2012: 9).

Focusing on collective action taken by communities, centring the wider context surrounding notable figures, and supporting learners to take collective action may in turn offer more hope than inadvertently reinforcing 'master narratives' (Alridge, 2006).

Foregrounding examples

There are many other contemporary and closer to home examples that illustrate grassroots community organising and can be easily connected to current struggles and the lived experiences of learners. For example, the successful rent strikes of the 1970s in Ireland coordinated by the National Association of Tenants Organisations (NATO) and involved over 350,000 tenants across the island withholding rent to protest against rent increases, poor housing conditions, and a lack of facilities (Tubridy, 2023). It serves as a powerful example of working-class collective struggle and community organising that is sorely needed in the current housing crisis and was the subject of an important 2024 documentary (O'Connor, Tubridy, and Mallon, 2024).

The Dunnes Stores women's workers anti-apartheid strike in the mid to late 1980's (Durnin, 2024) is another example that is extremely timely given the ongoing genocide in Gaza (Amnesty International, 2024) at the hands of the state of Israel and the fact that human rights organisations including B'tselem and Amnesty International have formed the view that Israel is an apartheid state (Amnesty International, 2022; B'tselem, 2021). The 'Shell to Sea' campaign in County Mayo (Cox and Darcy, 2019) is a powerful example to point to when looking at the ecological crisis. Outside of an Irish context, the Chipko movement (Guha, 1990; Rangan, 2000) is an important example of a grassroots struggle that withstands the dominant cultural drive to represent such movements through a single story focusing on one prominent figure. An example that illustrates further how complex histories of social movements are often reduced to singular events, or notable actors, is the leading portrayal of the Stonewall Inn raid and the

subsequent uprising as a spontaneous lone event that single-handedly started the international LGBTQ+ rights movement. Although it was a crucial event in the gay rights movement, in popular culture it stands alone and overshadows other important pre- and post-Stonewall collective activism (Hobbes and Marshall, 2019).

Work for a better world can be long, often tedious, and multifaceted, but this also means that there is space for diverse levels and varying degrees of contribution, even if that contribution may be seemingly mundane. There is a spectrum of participation in social justice, and not everyone needs to be a leading figure. I am not suggesting that educators should discourage people from believing that they could devout themselves entirely to a just cause, but in reality very few who did started off with that mind set. They more commonly began by joining a community of people who worked together and supported one another over a prolonged period of time, and their commitment and resolve deepened over time. A more realistic depiction may in fact be more inspirational as it shows that even exceptional people came from a wider community of grassroots activism. Social justice movements are also more likely to be sustained when communities come together to work for a shared purpose over long periods of time and benefit from traditional long-term strategy, decision-making, and building a sense of collective identity and purpose beyond singular events (Tufekci, 2017).

An overly positive presentation of heroic single actors removed from the wider historical context can also support an unhelpful toxic positivity and unfounded optimism that ought to be avoided. Sustained action for social change is difficult. The hope that educators ought to seek to cultivate is a critical hope. Critical hope avoids any naïve understanding of hope as a panacea that is removed from harsh reality. It sees hope as a struggle, involving complex tensions and possibilities, whilst challenging the fatalistic acceptance of current social conditions (Giroux, 1997). Freire was right in his acknowledgement that hope is not enough. But he also said that it is an important catalyst that can fuel necessary action, struggle, and sustained commitment, even in the face of apparent relentless defeat. It involves a commitment to the belief that things can be better. But transformation must be struggled for (Freire, 2017). Continuing in this tradition, Giroux reminds us, 'it is not enough to connect education with the defence of

reason, informed judgment, and critical consciousness; it must also be aligned with the power and potential of collective resistance' (Giroux, 2025: 146).

My intention is not to diminish the importance of singular action. There are times when we are called to stand apart and to act alone. Nor am I saying that we ought not to spotlight exceptional people or crucial moments. However, even then, a person's values have often been foraged with others and their motivations for action are fuelled by a sense of responsibility or love for others. A dominant approach to learning about important examples from the history of social justice movements tend to ignore the important networks, environments, and communities from which such actors emerged from and were sustained by. In educational settings less attention is generally given to collective grassroots struggles, and perhaps when it comes to hope there are multiple benefits in doing so. Collective resistance may have something unique to offer the cultivation of hope. It is to the concept of collective hope that I will briefly turn to next.

Cultivating collective hope

In her important work, 'Hope, Solidarity and Justice', Stockdale (2021: 1) presents an account of collective hope as something that emerges alongside the collective intention of a solidarity group who take action together in the pursuit of social justice. Stockdale explains that collective hope can sustain a motivation for solidarity action and that the collective action can, in turn, contribute to an emotional atmosphere of hope extending across the group. Collective action is an important component of Stockdale's description of the concept. Extending on Stockdale's work, noting how structural problems need to be met with 'varied, persistent, and sustained collective action', Fife (2024: 4) argues that 'collective hope', as opposed to individual hope, is particularly valuable for activist movements.

An important point to note, Fife (2024) argued, is that an individual can be a member of a movement that possesses collective hope even if they themselves might not possess individual hope. Given the stark reality of social injustice and the seemingly unsurmountable task of eliminating any of the many forms of structural and systematic injustice in the world, it is understandable and indeed

sensible for individuals to experience hopelessness. Fife (Ibid.) introduces the concept of *holding hope*, describing how some members of an activist group can facilitate the emergence of, and sustain, collective hope within the collective by cultivating their own individual hope and holding hope for others. When we work together with others through collective solidarity actions we can also share the sometimes burdensome load of daring to hope. At different moments in time some members of the group can hold the hope for the collective. As Fife says 'we may rely on one another within an activist movement to hope when we cannot' (Ibid.: 17). Perhaps in the context of GCE one role of the facilitator could be to 'hold hope' for others, by sharing their own critical hope and nurturing the development of collective hope across the group who work together to take action for justice.

Fife's analysis is supported by the work of Nairn and colleagues (2024) whose empirical research on youth activist movements in New Zealand demonstrated the empowering and sustaining nature of collective critical hope. Many of the research participants reported that they had a greater belief in the achievability of their vision for change precisely because it was a vision shared within their collective and inspired their collective struggle. This is captured in the words of one of their research participants quoted in the article, Te Raukura, 'Some of the most hopeful people that I know are the people that are most active … I get hope through action' (Nairn et al., 2024: 432). Hope may not be necessary for one to become motivated to get involved in action for change. For some, anger, a sense of justice or the desire for change may be enough. However, a shared vision for a better future helps to inform the decisions that are made today, and collective hope stimulates the 'activity of shared imagination' that goes beyond the epistemic limits of an individual (Fife, 2024). I think that focusing on examples of grassroots collective struggle can assist people in imagining themselves as being some small part of collective resistance and show hopeful possibilities that can come from working together with others for a better world.

Concluding thoughts

How can we as educators and practitioners help to support collective hope in an educational context? GCE is in an important sense ahead of the game, as a core feature of GCE is that it is action orientated and taking action together with others

strengthens a sense of hope. Stemming from DE's radical roots in Freire's critical pedagogy, collective action is a vital component that is already well established, even if through the mainstreaming of GCE an explicitly political focus has slipped from view (Gillborn, 2006). In this sense GCE has become a victim of its own success. But there are many ways for educators to bring in a much needed radical political focus, and many critical GCE practitioners do just that already.

In this article I have suggested that one small way to support that is by celebrating and learning about the many times that very ordinary people stood together, and by connecting those struggles with learners own lived experience today. It is important to show that such movements were not isolated singular events, but that they are part of an ongoing and unfinished story that learners can also be part of, motivated by similar values and struggling to realise a comparable vision. Perhaps they may be able to more easily see themselves in such stories, and see that social justice action is not reducible to a false binary of all or nothing. It takes many hands and every little helps.

It matters what stories we tell, whose stories we recount, and what we focus on and spotlight in the retelling of those stories. The dominant neoliberal story of what it means to be a human person ought not to go unchallenged. It is important to avoid the 'heroes and holidays' approach to the history of social justice movements as this can inadvertently support individualistic narratives by covering over and concealing the collective efforts that sustained and often built the bedrock upon which notable actors found the courage to take a stand. Not only is the story of the lone hero who took on the world more often than not a gross oversimplification of the complex reality behind the story, but such a skewed focus on individual actors and actions can also place an undue burden on individuals who may rightly think they cannot do this alone. Thankfully, they do not have to. One important way that activist communities support one another, as argued by Fife (2024), is to hold hope for one another at times when belief in a better world just seems too impossible to maintain. We need not all be hopeful all of the time.

Hope can be better sustained, and is more sustaining, when we hope together with others. When the stark reality of the gross scale of the intentional

pain and violence in this world becomes just too much to bear alone, we ought to remember that we journey together. Being part of a community that has collective hope allows us at times to hold that hope for others, and, at other times, to rely on others to carry that hope for us (Fife, 2024). By focusing on grassroots collective struggles, and supporting groups to take informed reflective action together, social justice education and educators can help to cultivate and hold collective hope within a pervasive culture of individualism.

I will leave the final word to the more hopeful Howard Zinn (2004):

> "We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world. Even when we don't 'win', there is fun and fulfilment in the fact that we have been involved, with other good people, in something worthwhile. We need hope".

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Elizabeth Meade lectures in Global Citizenship Education, Social Justice and Philosophy of Education in the Department of Education in Maynooth University. She is also a member of the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy in Maynooth University. Her main research interests are in critical GCE, democracy and education, and the community of philosophical inquiry as public pedagogy.