THE MYTH OF NORMAL: TRAUMA, ILLNESS AND HEALING IN A TOXIC CULTURE

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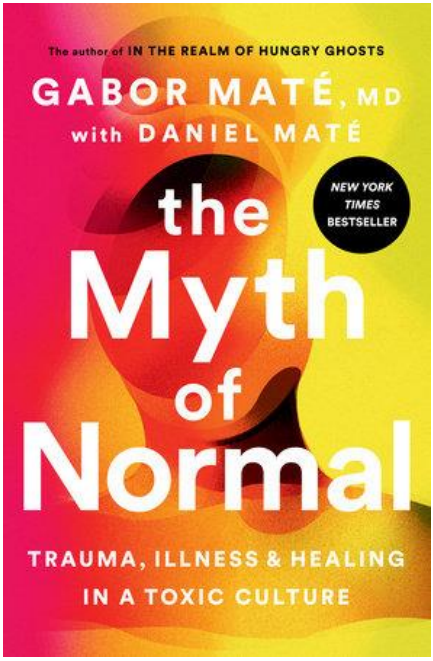

Neoliberalism has conditioned us culturally, politically, and even biologically to accept endless economic growth as not only desirable but as the sole viable solution to social challenges. Yet this growth-centric ideology does not merely obscure the structural roots of inequality, it actively generates harm (Schrecker and Bambra, 2015; Hickel, 2020). Built on colonial logics of domination, settler colonialism, and extractivism, the global economy sacrifices ecosystems, cultures, and lives in pursuit of profit (Gómez-Barris, 2017). The mantra that 'more is better' has normalised planetary degradation and human disposability. Today, we witness not just inequality, but the systemic destruction of life, through ecocide, genocide, and mass displacement (Knittel, 2023). These are broadcast in real time, absorbed as routine. Hence, we have entered a dangerous threshold of

crisis: one where the commodification of life is so deeply embedded, that we are being conditioned to accept widespread violence as normal. From genocide to ecocide, the destruction of human and planetary life no longer shocks (Slovic, et al., 2013). Rather, it flickers across screens, quietly eroding our capacity to feel. In this numbing cultural landscape, the sacredness of life is at risk of being forgotten.

It is precisely in this context that Gabor Maté and Daniel Maté 's (2022) *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness and Healing in a Toxic Culture*, becomes an essential read. The authors invite us to pause, to feel again, and to question what we have come to accept as 'normal'. Their work refuses to treat illness, whether mental or physical, as a private defect, instead framing it as a mirror reflecting broader societal dysfunctions. In a culture where competition replaces care and growth displaces meaning, the authors reveal how systems rooted in trauma, disconnection, and domination don't just shape our politics and economies, but quite literally, inscribe themselves into our bodies and minds.

Growth as harm: neoliberalism, illness, and development education

Maté and Maté expose how patterns of illness mirror systemic dysfunctions. Drawing on psychoneuroimmunology and trauma studies, they argue that chronic stress, manifested through precarity, inequality, and alienation, is biologically toxic. As they write:

> "in our times, the context of all contexts is hypermaterialist, consumerist capitalism and its globalised expressions worldwide. Its fundamental - and, it turns out, quite distorted - assumptions about who and what we are show up in the bodies and minds of those living them out" (Mate and Mate, 2022: 198-199).

In other words, the cultural values embedded in neoliberal capitalism are not just external forces. Rather, these inscribe themselves into our biology, making visible the profound ways social environments and ideologies shape both physical and mental health. Health is thus reframed not as personal responsibility but as a reflection of social pathology. This resonates with public health scholars like Schrecker and Bambra (2015), who argue that neoliberal restructuring has made

life more insecure, competitive, and stress-inducing. Such conditions, they argue, are known to weaken immune function and exacerbate disease.

For development educators grappling with a world in crisis, Maté and Maté's insights challenge us to rethink the boundaries between health, justice, and education. These are not discrete domains, but deeply interconnected struggles rooted in the same systemic conditions. Chronic illness, inequality, and disconnection are not merely medical or psychological problems; they are symptoms of a culture that prioritises profit over people, individualism over community, and productivity over care. From this perspective, development education must be more than the transmission of knowledge, skills, and values. Rather, it must also be a practice of healing and reconnection. It must help learners understand themselves as embedded in social, ecological, and historical relationships.

This calls for pedagogies grounded in empathy, critical consciousness, and structural awareness: approaches that do not simply resist neoliberal norms but actively unlearn their logic. Indigenous worldviews offer powerful alternatives, emphasising interdependence, relationality, and the wellbeing of both people and planet. Development education, in this light, is not about consuming more effectively, but about participating in a communal process of becoming more fully human. Development should not be measured in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or personal advancement, but in the cultivation of collective flourishing. Education must be reclaimed as a healing and transformative practice, one that reconnects us to one another, to land, and to more just, caring, and sustainable ways of living.

Toxic culture: disconnection from ourselves and each other

In their critique of the toxic culture underpinning neoliberal capitalism, Maté and Maté argue that chronic stress and trauma – driven by social inequality, economic insecurity, and cultural disconnection – manifest in both physical and mental health issues that mainstream medicine often overlooks or treats superficially. They show how persistent uncertainty, lack of control, and social exclusion quite literally 'get under the skin', weakening the immune system and increasing vulnerability to chronic illness and psychological distress.

Drawing on thinkers like Harari (2014), Maté and Maté observe how capitalism has shifted from fulfilling basic human needs to manufacturing desires, driving alienation not only from others but from our authentic selves. They highlight Kristeva (2004) who states, 'desires are manufactured as surely as are the commodities meant to fulfil them. We consume our needs, unaware that what we take to be a "need" has been artificially produced' (cited in Maté and Maté, 2022: 173). At the heart of their argument is the claim that Western culture promotes hyper-individualism, disconnection, and unhealthy competition, producing a society in which stress and self-alienation become normalised.

This critique is particularly relevant to development education, which aims to promote collective well-being, critical awareness, and social responsibility. Maté and Maté's insights affirm the need for cooperative learning, community-building, and pedagogical approaches that interrogate the structural roots of suffering, namely neoliberalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. In this context, development educators might turn to pedagogies and epistemologies grounded in reciprocity and relationality: knowledge systems that refuse to separate health from land, the body from community, or learning from ethics. These perspectives centre wholeness, interdependence, and sustainability, recognising relationships with people, place, and planet as foundational to meaningful education and development.

Disconnection from nature as a root of illness

Maté and Maté further emphasise that modern Western society not only alienates us from ourselves and each other, but also profoundly disconnects us from the natural world. As they write: 'in the Western world, at great cost to ourselves, we have long lost touch with this unity that Indigenous cultures recognise and honor' (Maté and Maté, 2022: 473). The authors contrast this disconnection with the deep sense of kinship found in many Indigenous traditions, where humans are understood as fundamentally interwoven with land, animals, plants, and all living systems. When they speak of having 'long lost touch with this unity', they are identifying a cultural rupture: one that erodes not only spiritual and communal bonds but also has tangible consequences for our mental, physical, and ecological health. In essence, disconnection from nature is not merely philosophical or

emotional. Rather, it has profound physiological implications. Living in opposition to our natural state – where we are trapped in systems marked by constant uncertainty, job insecurity, and relentless competitiveness – delivers biological disturbances driving widespread stress and chronic illness.

Moreover, the same growth-at-all-costs model that undermines individual wellbeing simultaneously fuels environmental degradation. The pursuit of endless economic expansion accelerates resource depletion, biodiversity loss, and climate collapse, destroying the very ecosystems upon which human and planetary health depend. In this respect, development education must recognise the physiological toll of our alienation from nature: a disconnection that contributes to stress, illness, and social fragmentation. This underscores the urgent need to centre nature as a teacher, reintegrating land-based learning, ecological ethics, and relationality into the curriculum. This aligns with Maté and Maté's broader cultural critique, which exposes a toxic culture that values consumption and disconnection over belonging and care. Reconnecting with nature, therefore, is not merely symbolic but a vital path to healing: one that involves reclaiming the relationships essential for the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and the planet.

Racism as a systemic driver of injustice

This disconnection from the natural world is intertwined with other forms of systemic alienation – most notably, racism – which Maté and Maté also identify as a profound driver of trauma and illness rooted in social and structural injustice. Maté and Maté powerfully highlight racism as a deeply entrenched system that inflicts profound trauma on individuals and communities, shaping both mental and physical health outcomes. They emphasise that racism is not only a matter of prejudice or individual acts of discrimination but a structural force that 'gets under the skin', embedding itself biologically through chronic stress and social exclusion. This systemic oppression leads to measurable disparities in conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and premature aging: health inequities rooted in social injustice rather than biology alone.

For development educators, this insight reinforces the imperative to address racism not merely as a social ill but as a critical determinant of wellbeing.

It calls for pedagogies that unpack and challenge the intersecting systems of colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and white supremacy that perpetuate trauma and marginalisation. Centring anti-racist education and critical consciousness is essential for fostering collective healing and equity. By confronting racism as a foundational cause of disconnection and illness, development education can contribute to building more just, caring, and healthy societies.

Limitations of this review: a partial lens on a multifaceted work

While this review has focused through the lens of development education and critiques of neoliberalism, it is important to acknowledge the breadth and depth of Gabor Maté and Daniel Maté's work, which spans far beyond these themes. The book is a deeply interdisciplinary exploration of trauma, touching on fields such as neuroscience, childhood development, addiction, attachment theory, public health, and intergenerational suffering. Its insights emerge not only from structural analysis, but also from compassionate case studies, personal narratives, and years of clinical experience, making it both intellectually rich and emotionally resonant.

Hence, this review offers only a partial reading: one shaped by a specific interest in the implications for development education practice. Readers from other disciplines such as psychology, public health, sociology, and medicine will each find different resonances and implications for their respective fields. This review should therefore be understood as one contribution to an ongoing conversation about the social roots of illness and disconnection, and the role development education can play in fostering more just, caring, and relational ways of learning and living.

Development education takeaways

Maté and Maté argue that trauma is not merely an individual experience but a deeply social and systemic reality, embedded within structures such as capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. This makes their work particularly powerful and relevant for development education. At this moment, development educators are called to do more than critique; the work demands a fundamental reorientation of our pedagogies, politics, and priorities toward a future where development is defined not by growth and accumulation, but by connection,

relationality, and care. Drawing on Maté and Maté's insights, development education should:

- Employ critical pedagogy to reveal how neoliberal systems inflict both internal and external harm, and to envision alternatives grounded in justice and sustainability.
- Integrate Indigenous perspectives not as token gestures but as foundational epistemologies shaping how we understand knowledge and development.
- Centre wellbeing – personal, communal, and ecological – as a primary metric for measuring development success.
- Embed trauma-informed, relational pedagogies that recognise learning itself as a process of healing.

Importantly, Maté and Maté's critique of capitalism's relentless pursuit of growth and manufactured desires invites development educators to challenge dominant development paradigms that equate progress with economic expansion. The pervasive conditioning to believe growth will 'fix everything' damages both human wellbeing and the planet's ecological balance. Therefore, development education must embrace alternatives grounded in ecological sustainability, trauma-informed practice, collective wellbeing, and Indigenous wisdom: principles of reciprocity, relationality, and critical pedagogy.

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