

# Editorial

## RETHINKING CRITICAL APPROACHES TO GLOBAL AND DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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For decades, critical approaches to global and development education have pushed back against mainstream liberal – and more recently, neo-liberal – approaches. Many of these more critical approaches are rooted in the Freirean tradition of critical pedagogy, including several contributions to this Issue 27 of *Policy & Practice*. Critical perspectives on education remain more important than ever, and critical pedagogy in particular has fostered fruitful strategies for denaturalising the presumed inevitability of capitalism as an economic system, and resisting its influence on educational systems. It has also been the subject of feminist, post-colonial, and post-structural engagements that consider its potential limitations and circularities alongside its potentially transformative gifts (e.g. Andreotti, 2016; Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1998). There is much value in reframing and reclaiming critical traditions in order to consider their implications for our own time, as both Cotter and Dillon do in their distinct but complementary contributions to this issue on the history of development education in Ireland, and as McCloskey does in his contribution on the renewed relevance of Marx’s critique of capitalism.

However, rather than debate or advocate the relative merits and limitations of a particular tradition of critique, in my brief editorial introduction to this issue, my intention is to take a step back and consider whether any single arsenal of educational tools – including liberal and critical approaches – can adequately equip us to respond generatively, strategically, and ethically to the complex local and global challenges that we currently face. Rather than defend a particular perspective or approach to global and

development education, I suggest it is crucial that we prepare students with the self-reflexivity, intellectual curiosity, historical memory, and deep sense of responsibility they will need in order to collectively navigate an uncertain future for which there are no clear roadmaps. This in turn requires that we prepare educators to engage confidently with a range of conflicting perspectives so that they can make critically-informed, socially-accountable pedagogical choices that are responsive to the complex shifting conditions and challenges of their own contexts.

Scott (1995) has suggested that ‘since at least the end of the eighteenth century’, both liberalism and many critical traditions that emerged in response to liberalism have been ‘anchored in the restructuring project of the Enlightenment’, that is, a modernising project that seeks universal ‘Truths (about reason, about History, about Progress)’ (3). However, Scott also suggests that these inherited organising frames and conceptual oppositions, which emerged in a different era in response to a specific context, might not be sufficient for responding to our own ‘current ethical-political conjuncture’ (ibid. 5). Scott offered these reflections nearly 25 years ago, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and other revolutionary alternatives, which was accompanied by declarations about the so-called ‘end of history’ and the triumph of the liberal capitalist West. By then, financialised, shareholder capitalism had taken hold, as had just-in-time global commodity chains that mapped onto colonial divisions of labour, both of which have turned out to be largely unsuccessful efforts to restore economic growth levels to their post-World War II highs (Clover, 2016). However, despite a slow shift toward privatisation of social services, flattened wages, and increased household debt, many in the global North would not confront the full effects of these shifts until the financial crisis of 2007-8.

Ten years later, capitalism continues to limp along, but the promise of perpetual economic growth appears increasingly dim; meanwhile, if we want to have any chance at forestalling further climate catastrophe, we likely cannot afford such growth in any case (Klein, 2015). This has not stopped some from declaring that overall the world has never been happier, healthier,

or wealthier – consider, for instance, Stephen Pinker’s (2018) *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*. Indeed, increasingly polarised interpretations of the present make the task of the global and development educator an exceedingly challenging one, and the pursuit of universal truths appears more arrogant than ever. For Scott (1995), if the categories and concepts of analysis and critique that we have inherited from the Enlightenment no longer offer strategic impact for making sense of and making change in the present, it is nonetheless by no means obvious what should come in their place. He suggests:

“What the concepts are that will have to be produced – that will have to be reappropriated or worked over – in order to give us a critical purchase on alternative futures are perhaps not self-evident. But these concepts, whatever they are to be, can only emerge out of an interrogation, from within, of our common and uncommon present” (1995: 23).

Further, it is not only concepts that might need to be rethought, but also our modes of critical engagement, knowledge production, and theories of change. In the remainder of this editorial, I gesture toward this work by considering three particular challenges that characterise ‘our common and uncommon present’, and that might prompt us to rethink how we frame critical approaches to global and development education.

### **Three educational challenges of the present**

The first challenge is the *cacophony of perspectives* that circulate in educational contexts and elsewhere. One of the most well-known critiques coming from the critical pedagogy tradition is Freire’s (2000) characterisation of modern schooling as ‘banking education’. According to this critique, banking education transfers predetermined, universally relevant knowledge and information from teachers to passive students. There is little active engagement in this process of ‘filling’ the student, presumed to be a blank slate, with knowledge. As Bauman (2001) notes, since the Enlightenment, education has been understood as ‘a tightly structured setting

with its supervisors firmly in the saddle and having all the initiative' (126). For Freire and others working in this tradition, problem solving education is offered as a counter-proposal to banking education and is much more dialogic, as knowledge is actively constructed in the relationship between teacher and student, and theory is merged with action in praxis toward making social change.

Beyond banking education, other critical traditions challenge the monopoly on knowledge production and dissemination that is claimed by mainstream institutions, including not only schools and universities, but also government agencies like the Department for International Development (DfID) in the United Kingdom (UK) or the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in the United States (US), which produce specific ideas about what development is, and how it should be achieved. The concern is not only that this sanctioned knowledge tends to be Eurocentric, and thus tends to naturalise European supremacy and hegemony, but also that it normalises existing inequalities by unquestioningly socialising people into unequal societies. In response, many critical educators propose that there is a need to pluralise the knowledge that is considered valid, provincialise European knowledge, and value knowledge that is produced 'from the ground up', especially by marginalised communities. For instance, in this issue Saúde, Zarcos, and Raposo note the imperative 'of giving a voice to minorities and the excluded, so that they can show their sociocultural identities and have a say on their future', while Rooney emphasises the value of a grassroots toolkit for context-specific community conversations within post-conflict societies, and Mallon identifies an 'urgent need to ensure the inclusion of young people from a minority ethnic background within the planning and practice of peacebuilding education'.

Even as mainstream schooling comes under critical review by many global and development education scholars, others argue for the potential benefits of embedding these perspectives into formal curricula. For instance, in this issue Quirke-Bolt and Jeffers note, 'DE should not be marginal to school practice or an optional extra; it needs to be an essential and cross-

curricular part of the curriculum and life of any school'. While the assumption may be that formally including this content will grant it more social legitimacy, today the epistemic authority of mainstream institutions has also come under significant challenge not only from critical perspectives that question its universality and neutrality, but also from the increasing cacophony of ideas and conversations from all directions, aided by information technologies that make it easy to access and share information, shattering previous limits imposed by time and space. Within this crowded field of competing authorities, traditional institutions still maintain a fragile hegemony, but they no longer hold a monopoly. While the break-up of this monopoly can be considered a welcome shift toward potential democratisation, in fact we find another set of challenges: competing for the attention and interest of young people, and preparing them to navigate the complicated contemporary landscape of competing knowledge claims. As Bauman (2001) notes, the kind of learning that is necessary for today's world is 'a kind of learning which our inherited educational institutions, born and matured within the modern ordering bustle, are ill-prepared to handle' (127). If we fail to make our education responsive to shifting contexts and thus, fail to adequately prepare young people for the complex, unequal world they will inherit, they might simply take what is most convenient, useful, and gratifying from different, often-conflicting knowledge traditions and authorities, with little consideration of the context from which that knowledge has emerged, its implications, and the incommensurabilities between them.

The second challenge we face is the *conditionality of inclusion* within mainstream institutions. While marginalised populations have resisted their oppression since the emergence of the modern philosophies of both education and development that have excluded and often denigrated them, only fairly recently have mainstream institutions started to offer more space for 'difference'. At the same time, the space that is granted still tends to be narrowly circumscribed, and difference itself remains defined in relation to a supposedly neutral white, global North, middle class, male normativity. Generally, only forms or expressions of difference that are not perceived as

threatening to the status quo are given room; anything or anyone that exceeds this limit tends to be excluded or even punished or demonised. Further, the newly included are often expected to express gratitude for their inclusion, as if it were a benevolent gift from the dominant population, rather than a step toward the correction of structural injustice (Ahmed, 2012). Thus, what at first glance might appear to be substantive institutional shifts often turn out to be efforts to neutralise critique by offering the appearance of change without changing much of anything, and by only permitting forms of difference that make no difference (Povinelli, 2002). As Biccum (2016) notes with regard to recent shifts in mainstream development discourse:

“despite a change in rhetoric and acknowledgement of some of the discursive arrangements of power pointed out by some of the twentieth century activists...the [World] Bank continues to marshal its instrumental approach to knowledge and human behaviour for economic developmental outcomes” (4).

There is a double-bind here (Spivak, 2012), in which historically-excluded communities that recognise the conditionality of their inclusion in mainstream institutions and do not wish to be incorporated into Euro- and capital-centric normativity are faced with a difficult choice: either refuse inclusion and build or regenerate other forms of social organisation (which is rarely an option, given how these institutions have taken on such a central role in the organisation of modern social life); or continue to struggle within and against these institutions toward the possibility of transforming them, knowing that these efforts will likely always be co-opted, and that there are many unforeseen effects of bringing different knowledges, practices, and peoples into spaces that have been historically constructed on their exclusion (Ahenakew, 2016). These two choices, of course, are not mutually exclusive, as many indeed live in and with this double-bind, struggling within the institutions of empire while also fighting to keep non-Western knowledge traditions and practices alive (Ahenakew et al., 2014).

The underlying fragility of modern institutions has increasingly come to the surface, as nation-states fight for political legitimacy and capital fights to resist the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. It may be that this instability is precisely what is needed for truly new and different horizons of possibility to emerge, rather than merely tinkering with existing institutions. Perhaps it is only in this context, as the available mainstream and counter-narratives falter, that the different concepts and narratives of change that Scott (1995) called for can emerge, and marginalised ways of knowing and being can begin to truly thrive again. Bauman (2012) suggests we are in the midst of an interregnum, that is, a liminal, transitional moment in which:

“the extant legal frame of social order loses its grip and can hold no longer, whereas a new frame, made to the measure of newly emerged conditions responsible for making the old frame useless, is still at the designing stage, has not yet been fully assembled, or is not strong enough to be put in its place” (50).

We are therefore in a space of deep ambivalence, in which the future appears increasingly uncertain, provoking anxiety but also creating opportunity. However, there is no guarantee that the new system(s) that will ultimately emerge will be more equitable or just – which leads me to the third challenge for global and development education in the present.

The third challenge is what we might call the *'backlash' or reaction to critical perspectives*, which have gained increased traction in mainstream outlets. These responses should make us all the more conscious of how our uncertain, volatile times can shift in many possible directions. As the certainties and securities that had previously characterised mainstream modern institutions – for better and for worse – start to appear increasingly unstable, this can activate or intensify discourses that scapegoat already marginalised populations (Stein et al., 2017). Indeed, some have suggested that the true culprits of our current instability are those communities that have offered those most strident critiques of those institutions, rather than

considering that those institutions were in fact built on inherently unsustainable premises and systems of re/production.

We can see this in the rise of the xenophobic nationalisms that accompanied the election of Donald Trump in the US, drove many to support the UK's Brexit referendum, keep a conservative and highly nationalistic party in power in Hungary, and feed the growing popularity of right-wing parties in Germany, Sweden, Austria, and more. Undoubtedly, few scholars within the global and development education field are likely to defend these movements. However, it is not only at white nationalist rallies where these sentiments emerge, but also in more mainstream defences of the virtues of liberal democracy. Consider, for example, Goldberg's (2018), tellingly titled, *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Nationalism, Populism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*. Our field is not immune from these kinds of arguments.

Take the recent blog published by the well-respected Smart CSOs Lab, in which Narberhaus (2018) claims:

“conversations in social justice and environmental activist spaces have changed considerably. These conversations have increasingly been captured by an ideological agenda where all problems are seen through the lens of patriarchy, racism and colonialism”.

In response, he calls for ‘the honest willingness and ability to explore ideas beyond a dogmatic post-modern ideology that is inherently anti-intellectual’. This critique is not offered as an outright dismissal that oppression exists, but rather as a narrative of concern that its impact is being harmfully exaggerated through an ‘anti-intellectual’, ‘ideological agenda’ that distracts us from making the necessary social and ecological changes. Meanwhile, the author presents himself – and the authors he cites from evolutionary biology and psychology – as neutral, objective, and implicitly, non-ideological, which is of course the most ideological position one can take. This then enables him to make statements like, ‘Of course the hierarchies of the future should be



free from oppression and domination, and they should be democratic and transparent’.

We see here an attempt to reclaim the narrative of universal Truth and Progress from its perceived threats – critiques of patriarchy, racism and colonialism. As long as we remain within this interregnum, these kinds of responses are unlikely to disappear, and indeed might only continue to proliferate if things become even more unstable. Those of us working in global and development education therefore need to remain aware of how these discourses circulate, be attentive to their impact (which often means looking beyond their stated intent), and be prepared to respond when these perspectives emerge in our classrooms or in our conversations with colleagues. If the only response in our educational repertoire is to dig our heels in defensively, we might only reaffirm the claim that we are advocating critical dogmatism, even if that claim is made in bad faith. We will need to consider how our approaches to global and development education can facilitate agonistic, self-reflexive engagements between conflicting perspectives while remaining attentive to the power inequities that also permeate these very engagements.

### **Concluding thoughts: rethinking our role as (critical) educators**

By every indication, the foreseeable future will only become more volatile, and many have looked to global and development education for guidance about how to prepare young people to face this future. While there is much to be celebrated in the legacy of these fields, it may be that, as both Scott (1995) and Bauman (2001; 2012) suggest, the critical strategies that have served us thus far were more fitting for another era, and are no longer adequate for responding to the deep challenges of the present. Conversations about the role of development and global education in social change often unfold through the narrative patterns of the modern episteme in which the intent is to ultimately arrive at universal ‘Truths (about reason, about History, about Progress)’ – that is, the underlying purpose of engagement is a competition for epistemic authority. These patterns of engagement tend to be at best circular and at worst enable the continued triumph of those ‘Truths’

that already hold more social power, but under the guise of ‘open debate’. This is not to say that our cherished critical traditions no longer have value and need to be replaced with alternative traditions, but rather that perhaps we need to develop alternative approaches to critique itself. How might we imagine forms of global education and engagement that are premised neither on competition for universal truths, nor an absolute, anything-goes relativism?

Perhaps our role as educators is not to transfer any particular set of skills or values, but rather to prepare young people to face the storms that characterise these complex, uncertain times with an internal groundedness in the face of unpredictable weather, an ability to adapt to and strategically respond to rapidly shifting conditions, a sensibility that enables them to recognise the contextual relevance of different knowledges and perspectives and then make informed decisions about how they will navigate them, and the humility to learn from their inevitable mistakes. In doing so, we might follow Bauman (2001) in thinking of the role of education today as ‘preparation for life’, that is:

“cultivating the ability to live daily and at peace with uncertainty and ambivalence, with a variety of standpoints and the absence of unerring and trustworthy authorities...instilling tolerance of difference and the will to respect the right to be different...fortifying critical and self-critical faculties and the courage needed to assume responsibility for one’s choices and their consequences...training the capacity for ‘changing the frames’...with the anxiety of indecision it brings alongside the joys of the new and the unexplored” (138).

In order to do this work, as Hibberd suggests in her contribution to this issue, we will also need to prepare teachers and other educators working in informal educational contexts to ‘interact with complex and potentially controversial and difficult topics’. However, rather than require one standard set of materials and curricula, or government standards, which are unlikely to be relevant across different contexts, we can instead support educators to

develop the confidence they need to address difficult issues and chose the most relevant materials for where they are. For instance, Payne in this issue considers the possibilities (and challenges) for incorporating global education into Catholic secondary schools in Ireland, which will surely look different than global education at a public postsecondary school in Canada, or a private primary school in China. However, if we want educators to develop a degree of comfort with uncertainty, plurality, and conflict, and to respect and encourage the emergent and collaborative dimensions of learning with their students, then we will also need to work to ensure that parents, schools, and relevant government and other funding bodies respect their professional authority and support them in the difficult task of preparing young people to inherit an uncertain, interconnected world.

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