

SOCIAL ENGINEERING OR ENLIGHTENMENT? A CONTROVERSIAL VIEW OF THE PRESENCE OF THE NGO SECTOR IN SCHOOLS

Alex Standish (2012) *The False Promise of Global Learning: Why education needs boundaries*, London: Continuum.

Review by Rachel Tallon

For many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that raise funds in the North for work in the South and have a presence in schools through campaigning or resource production, it can feel like they are on the margins of formal education. Thus, Alex Standish's second book (his first, *Global perspectives in the Geography Curriculum*, was published in 2009) might come as a surprise to many, as he argues that NGOs have too much power and are in danger of negatively affecting learning about the developing world in UK and the US. On the dust jacket of this book, David Lambert notes that the book is controversial and people should avoid 'running for the barricades' and instead, engage with Standish's critique of global education.

A key audience for this book are global and development education practitioners and Standish does not see either as politically benign. He sees the NGO sector as contesting the core subject-based curriculum and, in this respect, he is also writing for teachers; indeed, the book could be regarded as a warning to teachers about the formal sector influence of the NGO sector, specifically those involved in trying to raise awareness about global and development issues with young people. Standish is challenging both teachers and NGOs about the content and methodology used to teach development issues in the classroom and why they are taught. For NGOs who struggle over the divide between campaigning and education this book underscores the fact that there is a difference between the two, but that many grey areas exist. For campaigning NGOs that enter the formal classroom setting of Northern countries in some capacity, this book will alert (and perhaps surprise) them to some of the critiques surrounding global education.

Since the cultural turn in the social sciences in the late 1970s, the curriculum in many countries has undergone significant change – some would

call it a dilution, others an expansion, to adjust to our modern times. Into natural vacuums created by change and uncertainty, Standish argues that the global education movement with its emphasis on soft skills and an agenda for societal change has elbowed in. Standish argues that the branches of global citizenship, such as sustainable education, global issues, peace studies and human rights, have staked a very important claim on the curriculum and a significant presence in many schools. While some NGOs might disagree and consider themselves on the margins, fighting to get in, Standish does not see it that way.

Over six chapters, Standish explores the nature of global education in terms of its core knowledge base, skills and ethics and makes the contentious case that global education is ‘anti-knowledge’ at its heart. Drawing examples from global education resources published by Oxfam and the Department for International Development (DfID), Standish argues that global education has replaced or devalued subject-based knowledge (such as History or Geography) with a stress on skills and attitudes concerning global issues. By citing the work of DfID, Standish is also claiming that governments too are affecting the core subjects. As an example, he argues (on p. 58) that DfID’s ‘Developing the Global Dimension in the School Curriculum’ (2005) gives as the core of learning about global issues concepts such as citizenship, sustainable development, social justice, values and perceptions, diversity, interdependence, conflict resolution and human rights. Standish argues that these skills and attitudes are not objective education – rather, they are a form of character development and social engineering. However, others might argue that good global education has a strong critical element that encourages analysis, reflection and action outcomes.

At the end of Chapter Three, Standish makes a bold claim that global education is a ‘flight from knowledge’ because there is the emphasis in global education on reflexive learning – changing, or at least acknowledging the self first, before trying to change the world. In Chapters Four and Five Standish argues that content (core subject knowledge about places and people) becomes secondary to the skills and ethics one needs to become a global citizen. Although this critique is alarming, Standish has probably seen very poorly written development education resources that widen (rather than reduce) the

distance between the North and the South and reinforce (rather than challenge) neo-colonial ideas about the giver-receiver relationship. He is voicing a similar concern to that raised by others that if we teach about them one day and fundraise for them the next, certain ideas about ‘them and us’ remain unchallenged.

In terms of knowledge, Standish is arguably one of many who are concerned that the framework of education today is largely responsive to the market – creating good workers and global citizens is the priority, not deep thinkers. Reading this book from my own context in New Zealand, this change has also taken place and traditional core subjects are increasingly seen as too difficult or not relevant to the modern student. It is easier (and deemed to be of greater value) to study ‘Computing for Apps’ than a course in English Literature. The influence of the business sector on education has resulted in a strong focus on employability and skills for the workforce. Courses that count towards New Zealand’s National Certificate in Education (NCEA) can be written by NGOs and the private sector. In many ways, the course content reflects the community and the national culture, not an elite group of educators from subject disciplines. The New Zealand curriculum sets out very broad educational outcomes which can be interpreted in many ways. A course in developing fundraising skills for an international NGO that results in a nationally recognised education achievement is one outcome of these changes and reflects the power of the NGO sector.⁴ In New Zealand at least, the NGO sector competes on the same playing field as other sectors and can provide credits towards the NCEA.

Standish would argue that the pendulum has swung too far to the left, privileging skills over content and he uses the contentious example of International Schools to illustrate this. By sticking to core curricula they retain their elitist nature while ordinary schools are obliged to begin looking and sounding like polytechnics, training young people for work, including the work

⁴ World Vision New Zealand offer an NCEA Level I course in senior Social Studies for students who help organise the 40 Hour Famine at their school. Visit: <http://email.worldvision.org.nz/mail/view/st3ltMN2UUu6bwjO3IFxgw>).

of fundraising for development. In this debate, Standish makes reference to Michael Young's concern over types of knowledge, arguing that global education is a form of content-dependent knowledge, not content *independent*. Standish asks whether classrooms are places for indoctrination or places for the development of critical thinking and a broad base of knowledge. This is indeed contentious because debates about what is knowledge and who decides what knowledge is, are at the core of this book.

In my doctoral research (Tallon, 2013) I came across this difference in the teaching of development issues. In the secondary classroom, education about global issues can become education towards a solution that often involves individual behaviour change. Instead of teaching about the ideas of development at the post-primary level including the nature and form of the NGO sector – what is known as *development studies* at tertiary level – this theoretical knowledge is often deemed too difficult, and the learning becomes about what the NGOs deem appropriate responses to issues. There have been critical evaluations of NGO resources (for example the study by Bryan and Bracken, 2011) and many NGOs have considered these concerns and are very reflective and responsive regarding their work in Northern classrooms.

Standish, in citing Heilman, argues that the ideas behind global education are created by a loose network of NGOs and political actors that are not bound by a clear democratic framework. There is no teacher, government or parent-elected board that writes the standards for global education. NGOs attempt to effect change in some aspects of children's education about the world – and this is actually a movement to change the values of society – a form of reverse social engineering to get the parents to change their habits via the children. Standish does not employ the word 'evangelical', but this is his implication: that NGOs with their good intentions are distracting teachers from teaching and turning them into disciples for their causes. Learning becomes less about knowledge and more about yourself, and how you can be a better global person. Standish is concerned that education is being replaced with 'therapy' and global education, he argues, is a strong proponent of this.

Standish claims that the values espoused by the NGO sector are often at odds with school communities and do not always reflect society, or the reality

of society. When teachers employ these values they can present a future utopian society. In the classroom they call upon young people to ‘make a difference’ in the world, a world that adults themselves have not succeeded in perfecting. A personal anecdote might be a useful illustration here. Over a cup of tea a mother complained to me of the ‘ridiculous’ teacher her nine year old son was having this year. Her charge was that the teacher had persuaded the school to ban cling film in school lunchboxes. The rationale being that it was messy, not easily biodegradable and plastic, which was ultimately bad for the environment. The mother was outraged that a ‘green environmental activist’ was educating her son. Her convenience and lifestyle was being curtailed. The anger spiralled upwards to the effect that she complained that this helped strengthen her resolve *against* climate change activists. In this situation the teacher’s good intentions – the social engineering of the families via the children – was backfiring completely. Reflecting on this, I wondered if the mother wanted an objective, dispassionate teacher with no political values at all and if such a teacher exists. Standish argues that the ‘third sector’, both NGOs and the private sector have merged with the statutory sector so that what is being taught is often market-driven (including NGOs) rather than decided by an elite statutory body.

In Chapter Six, Standish opens by saying that global education has filled a vacuum about what to teach and how and this has become a form of social engineering. Referring to the sociologist Frank Furedi, Standish stresses the difference between socialisation into a society’s norms and values and social engineering which seeks to alter and change society. For those of you seeking to change society by educating young people, Standish may be harsh reading, but don’t run for the barricades just yet. What Standish does in this book is take a comprehensive and critical look at the power of the third sector in education. NGOs may be totally convinced that they are right and that the school classroom is the ideal place to disseminate their views, but against a backdrop of wider society, how much of what they do is social engineering, without the mandate of the wider community that they seek to change? From my perspective, referring back to the anecdote of the ban on cling film, it is important to know when and how activism should take place. There is a place

for it, definitely (and Standish would agree), but in the classroom, there are hidden pitfalls and things can go well and they can go horribly wrong.

Within development education specifically there have also been concerns raised about the moral imperative of NGO campaigning work in schools and studies have shown that temporary activism is a poor substitute for a deeper knowledge about global issues. Thus, Standish's claims are not new, but in many ways they are bold. NGOs involved in formal education need to be aware that they are bringing a powerful force into a community such as a school and there will be repercussions. Reading a book like Standish's will not be easy for committed NGO workers but good reflection on one's practice involves engaging with criticisms concerning global education that come from those outside of the NGO sector. This is what education critic Michael Young would term content-independent knowledge: learning outside of one's own realm and in this I would agree with David Lambert that Standish forces us (the NGO sector) to confront our power as a moral force in society; even if we regard our power as minor, it is never insignificant.

References

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