

E PLURIBUS UNUM: UNIFYING THE DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION SECTOR

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Introduction

‘Development’ has become a major theme – even an industry – since the late 1950s, but the quest for social justice has been a major social preoccupation for far longer. This article suggests that social justice is an important yardstick for determining what we do and aims to examine some of the current failings in development education as well as to map out areas where we can move the agenda forward.

In 1957 – the year Ghana became independent from Britain – its national income was the same as South Korea’s; but 50 years later, South Korea generates 20 times the wealth of Ghana each year, and sends development aid to its West African partner. As the development process has clearly stalled for so many poor people, in rich countries as well as poor, so the social justice agenda has moved centre stage. Development NGOs recognise that a rights-based approach is essential and all development work - the ‘software’ that is development education as well as the ‘hardware’ that is a well, a school, a clinic in a rural community in Africa - has to reflect a more critical stance of current inequalities and injustices.

In the changing landscape of development education, the question of focus becomes key. ‘Development educators have merely explained the world; the point is to change it’, to paraphrase Marx. Is the role of development education the neutral one of explaining inequalities in today’s world? And if yes, is development education then in danger of legitimising strategies and processes of active *underdevelopment*?

As the sector becomes more professional and increasingly aware of the requirements of funders, so we concentrate more clearly on outcomes. Is the main outcome of the development education process a clearer understanding of what happens in poor countries? Or are we aiming for a values-based engagement with policy-makers, business people and politicians in order to effect change? Is our focus to be a clearer understanding by rich people in rich countries of international realities or, rather, an improvement in the real-life circumstances of poor people in poor countries? It is only when we address this fundamental issue of perspective

that we can assess to what extent development education is effective or not.

‘Globalisation’: do we understand what we are living through?

Development education analyses globalisation and seeks explanations as to why so many people remain poor in a rapidly enriching world. In the 1970s and 1980s, Japan’s unparalleled development model was preached as the paragon of all development strategies. Since then, Japan’s star has faded – and its stock index halved. Currently, accepted wisdom holds that China and the East Asian dragons are successful models of development as they have traded their way out of poverty. 400 million Chinese have been brought into the labour market since 1990 and lifted above the extreme poverty threshold of \$1 per person per day income.

But the ‘miracle’ is perhaps partly mirage: in the decade 1995 to 2005, a staggering 59 million jobs were lost from state enterprises (42.5% of their total payroll), to be compensated by only 16 million new jobs in private companies – a net loss of more than 40 million jobs. Between 1996 and 2001, formal employment in Chinese towns and cities fell from 149 million to 108 million – a 28% reduction, involving 41 million personal tragedies. (See ICFTU (2005)). Botswana grew its economy by 9% per year for 30 years, whilst respecting human rights, but why do we choose to fall for some development myths whilst ignoring important truths?

Development education has to explain the *economics* of poverty – but there is a startling dearth of intellectually coherent theories of development and underdevelopment. In the 1960s and 1970s, Latin America produced some impressive thinkers on the causes and conditions of poverty, inequality and development, including Frank, Cardoso, Prebish, Furtado, Andrade, Freire and Camara. Africa, which was just as cruelly exploited and subject to inhuman trading relationships, produced many intellectuals (including the Caribbean-born Fanon, or Julius Nyerere, or Ali Mazrui), but only managed to produce robust and coherent theory from the work of Samir Amin. We should examine what conditions produce useful and helpful theory, and seek explanations as to why development education practice currently offers no convincing theoretical framework or model that explains either persistent poverty or continuing immiseration in so much of the world. We would also do well to ask ourselves why such a theoretical paucity is not widely seen as a major problem for the sector.

Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Income are economic terms used as shabby shorthand for development – but perhaps we do not pursue alternatives with sufficient energy and rigour: what of Bhutan’s ‘Gross National Happiness’ or, more rigorously, ‘Green Net National

Product (NNP)', or even the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI)? The accepted view of development as a concept essentially rooted in economics limits our understanding of poverty and its impact on the poor. We need a much more rigorous understanding of 'development' as encompassing notions of empowerment and disempowerment that can address the needs of marginalised communities, ethnic groups, social classes, castes, sexes and occupations.

The current perspective on globalisation gives the impression that economics is key. But the *politics* of globalisation needs to be assessed, too. The voting rights in such fora as the International Monetary Fund have favoured the United States of America for 60 years: its 17.1% of the voting power ensures that the 85% ratification threshold will never be met without USA approval. Even in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), where everything proceeds on the basis of one country, one vote, we have the unedifying sight of – for example – the sixth Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong in December 2005 having 832 European Union accredited delegates, and the Central African Republic none at all.

Just as democracy in these institutions appears flawed, so are the voting systems of major nation states. In the USA, elections are decided by which candidate and supporting party can wield the most amount of money for advertising, lobbying, influencing and generally promoting that candidate's prospects. Cash for honours in the United Kingdom and cash for planning decisions in Ireland are equally problematic. In the words of sceptic Greg Palast, they offer 'the best democracy money can buy'.

Legally, too, we have difficulties with a rapidly globalising world: the selling off of Russia's huge state assets and natural resources, after the fall of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was 'legal' in the sense that it was carried out with the support of the Duma, the Russian legislature. It is legal to exploit an area's natural resources and then walk away without paying any of the clean-up costs involved, as Diamond (2006) demonstrates so convincingly. It is legal for foreign oil companies to export \$250 billion worth of oil from Nigeria over the last 30 years, knowing that the Nigerian people will scarcely benefit from those sales but that people in the rich world will have the use of the resource as well as the profits of the traded commodity.

Development education should not take at face value many of the widely accepted notions of the politics, economics and legality of globalisation but should seek to be more actively critical – more intellectually suspicious – of definitions put forward by people and organisations with perhaps a vested interest in the outcomes.

The personal *is* the political

Many development educators will have returned to Europe from their work experiences in Africa, Asia or Latin America, aware that value judgements about development need to be made explicit. When good Christian explorers ‘opened up’ Africa, they took with them the European languages, with their notions of black as signifying sins and evil, and white as implying purity and angels. Two centuries on, interactions with black people may have helped recent returnees to learn that a self-reflective critical stance is a necessary tool of the contemporary citizen keen not to be hoodwinked by simplistic media reports, advertising or the communications of self-serving interest groups.

Back home, too, that self-reflective approach is necessary. The average trade unionist or citizen in Ireland reads *The Sun* or the *Daily Mail*, and gets her television news from Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE) or the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). But what about alternative media voices? How many development education practitioners read on a daily basis *Terraviva* or *Pambazuka News* or *Panos* or many of the other alternative media outlets? How can we offer a critical perspective on development issues if we choose to source all our information from the same narrow band of Western media outlets?

It is not just the language and the perspective that strongly influence the delivery of development education. The value set that forms the ethical context of development education is also important. As development education becomes an increasingly mainstream professional sector, and busies itself with continuing professional development and other worthy considerations of internal structure and legitimisation, so the question of ethics becomes more pertinent. We should be clearer about the moral and ethical issues that surround and define our subject matter, and the personal choices which compel us to address them in any particular manner.

Ethics and the professional development of the sector

Development education is faced with moral judgements. We can dispassionately – and ‘objectively’ – detail the statistics of hunger, poverty, disease and hopelessness; or we can click our fingers every three seconds to remind ourselves of the death of yet another child from purely preventable causes. We can adopt an ethical framework and practice development education because we feel anger at the immorality of policies and actions that lead to poverty and injustice; or we can choose a career that appears comfortable whilst ‘doing something good’.

Urging a moral commitment and an ethical orientation in development education may well seem perilous. None of us wish to see Irish Aid or the Department for International Development (DfID) frown at our avowedly ‘political’ stance on a given issue and perhaps it is not prudent to bite the hand that feeds us all. Maybe we should limit our criticisms to the corrupt dictators of Africa, or the arrogant multinational corporations, or even the policies of the latest USA administration, rather than critique particular aspects of Irish or UK government policy.

This is not to argue for a raucous anti-capitalist rant. Instead, development education should surely seek to present a picture of the wider world in all its dimensions, capturing the colour, vibrancy and hope that so much of humanity shares, but not flinching from describing the pitiless mechanisms that drive billions of people to an early grave without ever achieving their potential as people.

We should quickly establish a consensus on our vocabulary – when will we ditch the outdated term of ‘Third World’ when the Cold War is over, or even ‘developing world’ when we know that many countries are not making progress but actually deteriorating? Do we not recognise that the term ‘developed countries’ implies a stasis, a fulfilment, which is surely nonsense? When will we agree among ourselves that underdevelopment is an active process, created by definite mechanisms and structures and driven by responsible individuals at all levels? When will we begin to teach, in our modules on globalisation, that each resident of Ireland contributes to the injustices of the world every time she makes an unthinking purchase, every time he pays money into his high street bank account, every time she sets money aside for her decidedly unethical pension, every time he drives to work in his car with its four other empty seats?

Realigning theory and practice

Development education needs to forge an adequate theoretical framework to explain globalisation as the latest phase of the evolution of capitalism. We need to learn far more from colleagues in the global South of its causes as well as of its effects, and we need to source our information from a much broader range of outlets. We need to clarify the concepts and terms with which we shape our development education practice to avoid ambiguity and to hone intellectual rigour. And we need to anchor that sharper approach in a value context that is ethically robust and morally justifiable before *all* our peers.

That implies radical action and a radicalisation of development education as it is practiced today. But it also implies a greater personal

commitment to social justice and equality by each of us. And the greatest challenge will be, not to the sector as a professional field needing to be more effectively structured, but to our own selves and our own lifestyles, because – essentially – ‘development’ is not about ‘them’, there; it’s about ‘us’, here.

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