Black and minority ethnic diaspora communities and development education

Vipin Chauhan

Introduction

In this article I want to examine how more meaningful, equitable and sustainable partnerships can be nurtured between Development Education Organisations (DEOs) and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) diaspora communities. I will look at the degree to which DEOs have embraced the reality of a BME presence in their backyards and in turn, the degree to which BME communities have faced up to their global responsibilities, be it to their countries of origin or elsewhere.

There seems to be growing pressure on the development education sector to become more inclusive, tackle racism and engage with BME communities. This has arisen partly because of a genuine desire by many development educators to engage with BME communities and involve them in development education activities. This seems to be so especially in areas where there is a visible BME presence. Partly also, there is pressure on development educators who work in multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-faith contexts, rural or urban, to demonstrate how they are addressing inclusion and anti-discriminatory practices in all their work. For DEOs, it would be ironic if they continued to champion the cause of the poor and oppressed of the world and yet failed to help tackle many of the inequalities that face BME communities here and/or to tackle their own discriminatory practices.

Many mainstream schools, charities, voluntary and community organisations, private sector companies are involved in development education and through this many BME children and families are exposed to development education. Yet, we do not have much evidence of how BME communities are involved in shaping and informing mainstream development education agenda. Many emerging as well as established BME organisations in Britain, despite their ancestral roots, do little or nothing to tackle poverty either in their countries of origin or elsewhere. The scale of BME involvement in development education is limited despite a presumption that the natural affiliation between a settler’s country of origin and their new place in the North would provide a natural source of and passion for engagement in development education and action.
DEOs and BME organisations have been unable to capitalise on the opportunities that have presented themselves, often because of the constraints under which both sets of organisations operate. For BME communities and organisations these limitations include:

1. The ‘migrant syndrome’ of here and now and the need to save money and time rather than freely giving them away
2. Internalised oppression and little desire to be identified with ‘back home’ or with other poorer nations
3. Political fragmentation of BME communities and the lack of confidence or willingness to engage with civic structures in their new countries of settlement
4. A culture of cynicism that questions whether anything effective can be done to alleviate global poverty and inequality, having themselves escaped from these circumstances
5. Structural inequality and poverty faced by many sections of the BME community in their new countries of settlement
6. Social, religious and cultural rather than political origins and reasons for being of many BME organisations.

On the other hand, many DEOs are limited by:

1. A lack of internal capacity in terms of skills, size, scope of the work undertaken and the makeup of the volunteer and paid workforce
2. Low levels of funding and a marginalised place on the voluntary and community sector landscape
3. Poor or underdeveloped relations with local BME communities and possibly the wider community
4. Low priority attached to community development approaches to development education and often working to a demand/funder led regime
5. ‘Conservative’ Governance structures and a culture of low risk-taking leading to a reluctance to work differently
6. An ideological tension between being seen to be radical to appease the public and being paternalistic to meet funders’/clients’ expectations.

Despite these limitations, the mere presence of BME communities offers DEOs exciting opportunities to create spaces for dialogue, greater partnership working and increased mutuality. Through this, a wider and more significant contribution can be made to the evolution of a more just
society, positively embracing diversity and at the same time, tackling global poverty. More specifically, the presence of BME communities offers DEOs an opportunity to:

1. Improve their approaches to and increase their capacity for outreach work by developing greater community links with BME organisations, communities, individuals and families
2. Build their internal capacities (potential staff, volunteers and/or management committee members) by harnessing the wider range of skills, abilities and interests that arise out of a BME presence
3. Extend their work by working with a range of BME community organisations including faith, cultural, linguistic and national groups
4. Revisit the language of development education and identify other ways of getting across the message about engaging in local-global education and action
5. Create goodwill and mutuality by supporting BME organisations to access infrastructure services, support and resources.

For BME organisations and individuals, engagement with the development education sector offers them an opportunity to:

1. End ‘abusive’ relationships with those DEOs that just wish to use them for their expertise and not reciprocate with acknowledgements, support and resources
2. Build their internal capacities by asserting themselves as external ‘experts’ and getting this recognised through more sustained investment and resourcing by mainstream providers and funders
3. Act as community resources and pools of expertise with lived experiences of the South and ongoing connections there
4. Act as battery leads for ‘jump-starting’ BME engagement in development education and action where this does not exist already
5. Help redefine our conceptual understandings about development education and anti-racism
6. Create a better pragmatic fusion between development education, BME inclusion and tackling racism.

One of the most admirable strengths of many development educators is their energy and passion especially those who have sacrificed their own lives to travel the world and use these experiences to champion the cause of the world’s poor. The journey of these champions from the ‘belly of the beast’ in the North to the South and then back again to engage in development education...
education and action is something that needs to be celebrated. However, despite the efforts and commitment of such global champions, historical and contemporary ties between the North and the South have shaped and continue to taint perceptions about development education and what its true role is – to empower and bring beneficial change for the people of the South or to promote and protect the interests of the people of the North?

The BME presence now demands that well intentioned though individual development educators might be, DEOs and the development education movement as a whole need to embrace diversity, address institutionalised racism and become more inclusive in terms of their governance structures, delivery methods, composition of their staff and volunteers, community development strategies and so on. Most of all, there is the need to tackle urgently the perception within BME communities that development education is about patronising the South and that the development education movement is really speaking, only for white people. Development educators pride themselves in being involved in a worthy cause and tackling inequality on a mammoth, global scale. Yet in their own backyards many have often struggled to embrace the notion of meaningful action against domestic racism and the challenges of living and working within a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-faith environment.

The window of opportunity for making the most of the BME asset is there for only one generation. If past settlement patterns are anything to go by, fewer and fewer BME people, especially young people born in this country will take an interest in affairs back home. In the rush to become acclimatised, the priority is attached often to settling down and getting on with the business here and now rather than that of a far off place remote from their daily lives. There is every danger that if the skills, experiences and resources of BME communities are not capitalised upon by development educators and BME organisations, these are going to be lost forever.

There is every chance that these assets will be channelled even more into narrowly defined cultural and social organisations rather than development education initiatives. It might seem like an unfair burden on DEOs but they have to take extra measures to prove their credentials and not just make hollow statements of intent, empty of any substantial engagement with the issues involved and without a true desire to change their own institutional make-up and how they function. Similarly, BME organisations involved in development education need to pin their colours to the mast and demonstrate how they make a difference to world poverty and structural inequality.
A contract between development education and BME organisations

We will:

1. Acknowledge the diversity, depth and complexity of BME communities and the development education sector
2. Acknowledge the development education capacity building needs of BME organisations
3. Acknowledge the vulnerable place of DEOs on the voluntary and community sector landscape
4. Be committed to collaborative working
5. Be a partnership of equals
6. Strive for sustainable solutions and partnerships and not just opportunism.

An imaginary conversation between a development educator (DE) and BME activist (BA)

BA: So remind me again, what is that you do?

DE: Our work involves enabling people to understand the links between people living in the North with those of the South.

BA: You mean you want you find ways of understanding us but not actually wishing to change your lives and lifestyles?

DE: No, but we have to find ways of increasing our understandings about the different political and economic forces which influence our lives.

BA: You mean you want us to change and limit our growth and potential and for you not to do anything about yours?

DE: To the contrary, what we are trying to do is to find ways in which people can take joint action, bring about change and take greater control over their lives.

BA: You mean you want to instruct us on Western democratic structures and expect us to adopt your versions of democracy?
**DE:** What we are trying to do is to work towards achieving a more equal and sustainable world in which power and resources are shared more equally.

**BA:** You mean that you want to find other ways of getting access to the few resources that we still have left!

*(Please note that any similarities to persons living or dead are purely coincidental)*

**Vipin Chauhan** is an independent consultant, trainer and researcher and is the Principal Partner of Lotus Management Consultancy Ltd., a practice that specialises in working with voluntary, community and public sector organisations. His areas of professional interest include capacity building, mapping and scoping studies, project evaluations, youth and community development, the Black voluntary sector, global education, regeneration, equality and diversity, social exclusion and management and organisational development. Vipin is an Associate of the Co-operative College; an Associate Lecturer in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, De Montfort University; an Associate Lecturer at the Institute of Lifelong Learning, Leicester University and an external examiner for the Dip HE in Community Work at Turning Point, Goldsmiths College, University of London.


Lotus Management Consultancy Ltd.
35 Garland Crescent
Leicester LE3 9BN
Tel/Fax: 0116 251 9611
**E-mail:** lotus@vipin.freeserve.co.uk