

Viewpoint

Development education is most effective in the formal education sector

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Put simply, development education (DE) is about people gaining a critical understanding of global issues and interdependency and being empowered to act for positive change. By focussing on DE for young people I will argue that formal education, specifically schooling, faces considerable challenges, both to promote critical understanding and to empower young people to act for change. In contrast, non-formal DE for young people, in particular global youth work, provides the principles, practices and settings which are most effective in reaching these goals.

DE promotes critical understanding

When trying to engage young people in global issues I like to use the ‘why’ method. I encourage them to be difficult, to ask questions and to keep asking the question ‘why?’ until we have reached the limits of our collective knowledge and understanding and have to explore further. This simple method exposes the links between the world that young people experience and the world beyond. It has the power to stimulate far-reaching discussions from what seem like straightforward questions and it nurtures the spirit of critical enquiry.

Exploratory learning methods such as this work very well in a non-formal setting and are particularly suited to DE. However, in the formal sector they may present problems. More often than not there are no clear-cut answers to the questions generated. Students find there are multiple and conflicting perspectives on global issues, whilst teachers must contend with a complex, interdependent world that is not reducible to bite-size, curriculum-friendly pieces of information. With a national curriculum that “makes expectations for learning and attainment explicit” (DFES, 1999, p.12), and that relies almost entirely on standardised tests to measure that attainment, educators in the formal sector are faced with a tension between imparting particular knowledge and exploring global issues.

The English National Curriculum is also challenged by development

educators for representing a limited, Euro-centric view of the world. Where global issues are addressed they are often cast in terms of their impact on the UK. Students of History at key stage 3, for example, will learn, “how trade and colonisation, industrialisation and political changes affected the United Kingdom” (DFES, 1999, p.152).

This seems to run counter to the aims of DE and its commitment to represent Black and Southern perspectives. A recent study commissioned by the DEA highlighted this deficiency in the formal education system. It concluded that, “The inclusion of Black perspectives in Global Youth Work is a valuable opportunity to promote learning that would otherwise be inaccessible” (DEA, 2002, p.21).

Furthermore, DE’s aim to promote critical understanding demands that people challenge the very context of their learning. Critical reflection that includes the context as well as the content of learning, where education institutions themselves are challenged, seems more likely in the non-formal sector. Paulo Freire, inspiration to the DE movement, wrote, “The educated person is the adapted person, because she or he is a better ‘fit’ for the world” (Freire, 1970, p.57). Similarly, the most successful students at school ‘fit’ their institution and do not challenge it in the way that may contribute to a deeper understanding of the economic, social and political forces shaping their lives.

Development education is action-oriented

DE is focused on education for action. The UK Labour government in the 1970s saw DE’s role as “encouraging widespread involvement in action for improvement”, and the principles that underpin DE today remain action-oriented. DE aims to cultivate active global citizens with the skills, attitudes and values to work together to bring about change. For young people this can be an exciting and empowering journey. Informally, young people can readily make the transition from global learning to local action on issues that matter to them. The learning can be maximised through participatory approaches in the initial stages, a youth-led model for community action and opportunities to critically reflect on that action. The parameters within which teachers operate are often entirely different and limit this kind of participatory action and reflection.

Further, global youth work is not primarily concerned with accreditation but with personal development and active participation. Although current policy developments are putting increased pressure on the youth service to generate recorded and accredited outcomes it provides a significant alternative to a formal system that steers young people into exams. David

Hargreaves has suggested that “examination passes are rarely ‘qualifications’ as such. They do not actually qualify students for anything more than further study” (cited in Bentley, 1998, p.121). DE, on the other hand, recognising that, as citizens, young people already qualify for social action, aims to give them the ability and confidence to take their learning beyond the classroom.

Developing active citizens requires active, experiential learning and this is where youth work excels. Global youth workers can readily create and exploit active learning opportunities; are freer to maximise the potential of all the resources at their disposal, and can be more creative and experimental in their use. They can involve other youth groups and voluntary and development organisations, and are able to engage young people who do not perform well in mainstream education or feel disconnected from it. Global youth work is responsive to individual and local needs and can use community-based education, peer-education and other methods to link those needs and put them in a global context. Above all, what makes DE more effective in the non-formal sector than in the formal sector in generating action is that as much emphasis is put on the learning journey as the destination.

For DE to make a significant impact, to nurture behaviours and attitudes that will contribute to a more just and sustainable world, it is clear that there must be a focus on both the quantity and quality of learning. Formal education can certainly reach more people, but it is in the non-formal sector and through informal education that the most effective DE can be delivered. One important task now for development educators in both sectors is to exploit education policy developments, for example, in England, Extended Schools and citizenship education, and work in partnership to learn from each other to improve effectiveness and to advance the shared goals of development education.

References and Bibliography

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This article is written to stimulate debate and represents the author's personal opinions. In no way does it reflect the position of the DEA or its membership.

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