Same story, different tales: Looking for the whole story

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Aims of the article

My aim is to focus on some Southern and Black perspectives in what is now referred to as ‘Global Education’ (GE) but does not appear to differ greatly from what used to be described as development education (DE). I want to consider how slightly different perspectives affect the understanding of global/development issues. Other perspectives need to be present in GE but these cannot be examined within the scope of this article. I will not adopt an academic mode with references and readings. I do not intend to develop theory, or a framework for the involvement of Southern people’s views, experience and analysis. However, the thinking and the issues have been worked through over several years with many people from the South. These are perspectives from people who live the dynamic whether it is in the South or as a Southern or/and Black person in Europe.

In the course of this I may appear to be drawing crude we /they scenarios but I am considering the systemic impact of Northern policies and even good intentions on the South and perceptions of the South. I am not reflecting on personal commitment to social justice or to understanding between peoples. I am aware that elites as well as governments in Southern countries are locked into an alliance with elites and governments in the North. However, overall power, for the time being, is still held by governments of the North and institutions controlled by them. This is written from my experience in the UK but I believe that there are generalities in experience across Europe from which we can draw lessons.

A word about terminology

In the past, ‘Black’ and ‘Southern’ have sometimes been used as if they are interchangeable. This is not necessarily the case and can lead to confusion or incorrect assumptions. I use ‘Southern’ to define people from the ‘developing’ countries who may be temporary or long-term residents in the UK and still linked closely to their countries of origin. I use ‘Black’ to define long term or generational settlers in the UK. Their perspectives are defined by being a ‘minority’ in Europe. There is an overlap in these categories in
different situations. I never use the term, ‘migrant’. This has implications for people who are trying to establish rights of residence and belonging in Europe.

Themes

Interdependence, environment ‘poverty’ and diversity are some of these. I also want to look at some recent major campaigns.

In a paper I wrote in 2002 for the Curriculum Journal (Open University, 2002) entitled ‘Developing a Global Dimension in the Curriculum’, I argued for a holistic approach to a subject in order to avoid drawing inaccurate conclusions. I took the example of environment as presented in the document, ‘Developing a Global Dimension in the School Curriculum’ (the article was a critique of this), in which it was suggested that ‘environmental damage is exacerbated by poverty’, and does not stop at national boundaries. In presenting the poor or poverty as agents of environmental degradation it is necessary to consider, in parallel, the impact of high consuming countries, on the environment. Failing to do this poses the danger of presenting an inaccurate view of the ‘poor’ (1) and recommending inappropriate remedies. Industrialisation and wealth creation was at the heart of environmental destruction. Imperial England was a major actor in this (huge areas in India, for example were completely denuded of trees to build the vaunted railways).

This is not lost on the people of the South. Politicians have said this over decades. High profile environmentalists like Anil Aggarwal and Vandhana Shiva from India have campaigned for action on this alongside huge environmental movements. Slogans like ‘let the polluter pay’, made little headway. The Polluter pays little. In the South low laying Southern countries like Bangladesh and the islands are incredibly vulnerable. Least able to invest in the protection needed they are prey to havoc created by changing weather patterns, floods and earthquakes. (Recently, President Morales of Bolivia laid the blame squarely in the court of the industrialised North for weather changes that created the storms that that killed 60 people in his country. This impact is now apparent in the Western world as Hurricane Katrina and floods in the UK have indicated).

In that article I concluded that “a comprehensive understanding required perspectives from different sectors to avoid simplistic conclusions”. Both rich and poor can damage the environment but one is the more irresponsible. However, making people ‘rich’ will not solve the problems associated with environmental problems.

In recent years, the continuing emphasis on ‘poverty’ and ‘aid’ has
increased the accompanying notion that the poor need to be ‘saved’. The
tendency to promote celebrities along with politicians encourages a hero
syndrome where people from the North must take up their burden again.
People of the South are seldom presented as agents of their own change.
Materials produced by charities and churches focus on information from
their projects. Their ‘partners’ present the Southern dimension. This means
‘witness’, case studies and inspiring stories. These voices are necessary, as
is Southern analysis and research but agency material and DE material
seldom draw on this. Overview and analysis rests with the North. Editorial
control rests with the North. Presentation belongs to Northern people. These
controlling processes usually exclude Southern people. This is as true in the
UK as it appears to be in Ireland, even though the Black and Southern
presence has been established in the UK for much longer than elsewhere in
Europe.

Interdependence is a term lovingly used by much ‘global’ thinking
whether within government, trans-national or international corporations or
GE. People have links and connections all over the world, even if it only
appears in their shopping baskets. Few countries are entirely mono-cultural.
We are beginning to realise that the action of one country does indeed have
an impact on another. So at a very facile level it can be argued that we are
interdependent. Without examination, however, the term implies a cosy co-
dependence in which we are all equally dependent on each other. The
Kenyan farmer who supplies cheap flowers to the North for Mother’s Day
and Valentine’s day and destroys her/his land in the process, or the daffodil
pickers in the UK from Bulgaria who earn 5-8p per 10 stalk bunch are not
co-dependent. They do not wield power. This is a dependent relationship.
The term sweeps complex issues of power and its manipulation under the
carpet. Not all countries make free choices. They are pressured by powerful
ones or even powerful companies into adopting unsuitable policies or
processes.

Some popular campaigns

In 2000 Southern Voices (SV) was invited to work with Jubilee 2000. SV
members spoke at meetings, church and charity events. We ran workshops.
Along the way we had many disagreements but agreed on a question: ‘Who
was in ‘debt’ to whom?’ The financial ‘debt’ has been paid several times
over. However, let us go back four hundred years; to the first interaction
between Europeans and the South. Let us look at slavery, colonialism, the
wanton destruction of industries to suit the needs of the coloniser (copper,
small arms and cotton in Africa and Asia, for example) and the deliberate
impoveryment of the South. This is a different prism through which to view ‘debt’. Jubilee 2000 used the term ‘debt forgiveness’. Whatever the ecumenical underpinning to this usage, in the popular imagination, it compounded the notion that the South needed ‘forgiveness’. Participants agreed that some good had happened but the campaign had succeeded in embedding the notion of the South’s indebtedness.

Make Poverty History (MPH) built on ‘Drop the Debt’ and caught the imagination of people in 2004. Others asked whether poverty could become history if the question of wealth was not addressed. If the slogan was changed to ‘Make wealth history’, a very different scenario could emerge. The North would have to turn the spotlight on itself. We might have to look at our own consumerism, lifestyle choices, and redistribution - all much more threatening to the current international system and the status quo than a slogan that suggests that an additional lump of aid or ‘debt’ cancellation will solve the problem. There is a greater flow of money from South to North for ‘debt’ repayment. Southern people transfer more money to the South than the UK Aid budget. More important than all this is that ‘poor’ people are the agents of their own ‘development’ and need to be thus acknowledged and presented. The DATA Report 2006 reported on the progress made on Debt, Aid and Trade. This observed that the least progress had been made on Trade. This is hardly surprising. In a letter that only my local paper printed I commented, “Any real change in trade terms and practice would mean not just a paradigm in concepts and thinking, but a seismic shift in power relations”. Unjust trade practices are a major deterrent to Southern ‘development’.

In this scenario, the Fair Trade movement and ethical trading’s monitoring activities of injustices within the production process, workers rights and condition, its search for new markets demanding that producers get a price for their produce, are essential but their stance in relation to international trading systems and institutions that wield power over the lives of people needs to be much more incisive. Another challenge to the movement is to encourage its supporters to be consistent in their buying and consequent in consumption patterns all the time and not just when it is convenient. By this I mean that supporters need to be encouraged to make ‘fair trade’ buying a habit and not just when it is convenient and makes appropriate demands on their outlets. Viewing consumption as a means to development needs critical examination.

I have examined only some of the aspects of some themes. Whenever I speak with people involved in these issues I am struck by other aspects. Talking to people actually involved in debt negotiations presented a challenge of incredible detail. Thinking about the fact that many fair trade
goods were based on plantation farm products – coffee, tea, cotton – run by slaves or indentured labour offers the possibilities of learning new and old histories as for example with cocoa-beans and cotton.

This last point ties in with a current theme in the UK. We are in the throes of a year long commemoration of the ‘abolition’ of the slave trade. Different sectors are developing their own activities. The Church has apologised for its involvement in the slave trade. Politicians have called it a ‘regrettable’ event in British History. At least one party leader has said that they need to concentrate on the fact that England ‘led the way’ in the ‘abolition’ of slavery thereby blurring England’s involvement in this vicious trade that helped create the wealth and privilege on which the country’s present position rests. The press has run features about Wilberforce and Clarkson but not Equiano, L’Ouverture, Douglas Finglass or the Black abolitionists. Meetings and lectures focus on individuals rather the mass effort of people here or the slave rebellions. Will all this enable us to understand a fraction of a story that straddles three continents and many islands?

**Conclusion**

The above are some of the elements involved in the North/South dynamic and are the substance of development education. It only touches the surfaces of the complexities involved but provides more context and texture. There are some examples where Southern or Black perspectives are a focus of work, for example, in youth work and specific projects and material. However, in general, the movement seems to have been unable or unwilling to prioritise ways of embedding different perspectives as a cross-cutting theme into their material. I refer to the UK situation but I believe this is also true in Ireland.

The UK has been even less successful in engaging with Black or ‘immigrant’ organisations (though there are contacts with individuals), than with ‘Southern’, whether in the South or the North. This means that the intercultural/local dimension is missing. The changing faces in Europe and the diversity of views are invisible in the movement. Yet my understanding of GE suggests that the diversity in our midst as well as the diversity of our world is an intrinsic aspect of it. Is not this kind of interaction also part of preparing young people (and ourselves) to live in a globalising world? The given reasons are often the same in the UK as in Ireland – ‘They are not interested in GE/DE, their concerns are about basic needs, they have no resources’. These statements have always surprised me and I think they could be re-examined.
The question that comes to my mind is “how is GE/DE presented to these groups?” What themes? How do we engage with the needs and concerns of Black and Minority Ethnic groups? Recent arrivals may have experiences that are the stuff of DE – the experience of living in the South, experience of conflict, hardship, the very difference of their lives. People make school links and expensive journeys to access some of this. It may be that there is unwillingness, among recent arrivals, to share these hard and traumatic experiences immediately but there are possibilities that should not be missed and responsibilities that cannot be ignored. We cannot care about justice and equity only when they are a continent away. Other thematic strands in GE/DE like ‘inclusion/exclusion,’ movement of peoples and diversity are the material of our local context. The challenge is to ourselves – to withhold, for a moment, the notion of ourselves as ‘enabler’, ‘empowerer’, ‘provider’ and consider what we have to learn and how we can link seemingly different concerns. This is not to suggest that GE/DE become a different kind of organisation, some kind of ‘welfare’ or ‘community’ group but to examine how it can increase its own understanding of the forces shaping our society and respond to them in a manner that is not just appropriate but essential to today’s needs. The question is not only ‘how can we make them take on the GE/DE agenda’, but also ‘how can we create an overlapping space to work on shared areas of concern?’ (At SV we find that the impact of international or national events has an almost immediate impact on the local context. We often make this our stimulus).

Why are Black and Southern perspectives necessary anyway? As a Black and a Southern person I have a vested interest that these perspectives are heard (an Irish friend recently remarked that one of the things hardest to bear when she lived in England was that people and groups who campaigned on troop withdrawal ignored how Irish people in the UK were treated). I have also tried to indicate how Southern and Black people’s thinking can expand the understanding of Northern people if they want. It can be argued that there is no reason why one set of perspectives should replace another. I am not arguing for this but the South is in your midst and will not go away. Contested histories have always existed (this must be well understood in Ireland). Now they are meeting head on. Europe is multi-ethnic, multifaceted and intercultural. Policies, processes and thinking have to engage with this. How much better to do this with creative energy, relishing the challenges, risking the fear; the nodes of tension, to create new understanding, a shared value base and a continent that revels in rich and creative citizens.
References and Bibliography

For 11 years **Jaya Graves** worked for Southern Voices, an organisation committed to bringing the views and perspectives of Southern people to different contexts where issues specific to, and impacting on, people of the Global South were discussed and decided upon but where we have been conspicuous by our absence. She has also worked with youth and community groups, universities, Black/multicultural and ‘cultural’ organisations. She has also been closely involved with community and schools work with museums and has contributed to journals and publications on the theme of global/development education which needs these perspectives to be complete.