

# CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR EMBEDDING AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE IN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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In this article, **Caroline Murphy** presents some of the findings from a research project commissioned by the Africa Centre, Dublin in 2010. In commissioning the research, the Africa Centre sought to explore an African perspective within development education (DE) with the aim of promoting a more fair and balanced representation of Africa in DE discourse. The research explored how development educators on the island of Ireland define and incorporate an African perspective within their work. It found that participants feel constrained by funding bodies, development non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the media and the formal education sector which limit the capacity for an overtly political and ‘radical development education’. The research therefore has significant implications regarding the extent to which an African perspective is embedded within DE practice in Ireland.

## Introduction

‘Freirean liberation theory underpins Development Education, promoting problem-based learning, dialogue and participation within a co-operative learning environment’ (Hogan & Tormey, 2008, quoted in Chaib, 2010: 42). ‘Central to the philosophy of Development Education is a student centred pedagogy, which places the student at the heart of the educational experience and ultimately DE should be about teaching differently rather than teaching more’ (Haran & Tormey, 2002, quoted in McCormack and O’Flaherty, 2010: 1333). DE shares Freire’s anti-didactic approach to education that enables learners to take an active role against oppression in order to bring about socio-political transformation. DE, then, located within this framework, might be considered an overtly political and radical movement that works to expose systems of oppression.

This paper highlights some of the findings that emerged in relation to the extent that DE can bring about political and radical change, and expose systems of oppression due to factors that include; the formal education system, funding bodies, development NGOs, and media and charitable representations of the poor. It is based on research carried out by the author on behalf of the Africa Centre in Dublin and presents a summary of the findings.

## Defining 'Oppression'

Garvin (1987) defines oppression as 'the destructive effects of social institutions on people, when such institutions damage their identities, denigrate their lifestyles, and deny them access to opportunities' (quoted in Proctor *et al*, 2008: 44). Such a definition suggests extreme authoritarian institutional and social control over agency. Indeed, such control was evident during colonial exploitation, and is arguably continuing today through 'globalisation (the integration, to varying degrees, of all countries into a single world system) which shows remarkable continuity with colonialism...the attempt of the great powers to take over the wealth and raw materials of the world' (Seabrook, 2009: 63), or, as Asante puts it, 'the globalizing ethos of White corporate capital that leads ultimately, it seems to me, to another form of enslavement and domination' (Asante, 2006: 654).

However, in relation to conducting research in Ireland, it cannot be said that there exists such a level of oppression over the people with whom development educators work, for instance, teachers, students, youth groups etc. It might be argued, though, that there exists a level of, what Harvey (1999) terms civilised oppression, which is oppression 'embedded in unquestioned norms, habits and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutions and rules, and the collective consequences of following those rules' (quoted in Deutsch, 2006: 10). From a postcolonial perspective, it could even be argued that civilised oppression, here in the global North, is linked to the reproduction of more extreme oppression in the global South. 'Broadly speaking, postcolonialism is a theoretical framework which makes visible the history and legacy of European colonialism, including the ways in which the wealth of the global North has been acquired and maintained through a history of exploitation, and examines how it continues to shape contemporary discourses and institutions (Rizvi, Lingard & Lavia, 2006, quoted in Bryan, 2008: 16). It critically addresses the ongoing effects of colonial past which may be evident in systems of neo-colonialism that continue to prevail.

In short, from a postcolonial perspective, the term civilised oppression refers to everyday norms, habits and symbols, systems and practices which may act as a prerequisite to maintain the more extreme oppression of the developing world. For example, media representations of the poor, NGO charity campaigns, formal education and funding bodies may fail to foster a critical perspective on the structural causes of poverty (see Murphy, 2011), but rather view the developing world in terms of *charity*, which is negatively related to

concern for the developing world constructed around *servicing out help*, in pursuit of self-interest' (see Heerde and Hudson, 2010: 397). Thus, by ignoring the structural causes of poverty, a genuine sense of shared community and solidarity between the global North and South is 'unlikely to evolve' (see Gil 1998; Gorski 2007; Kivel 2000), and postcolonial oppression and notions of white supremacy are likely to prevail.

### **Research Design and Procedure**

The research study for the Africa Centre was small in scale and exploratory in nature, a qualitative approach was therefore considered appropriate. The research design consisted of small group interview discussions based on Kreuger's (1998) focus group format although the research discussion groups were much smaller in size. In total a series of five tape-recorded discussions were conducted ranging from two to four participants per group. Having small group numbers was considered to be important to encourage participants to fully engage in the discussion. Each interview group was given a separate overall pseudonym including Coffee, Tea, Sugar, Cocoa and Banana. Participants in each respective group were also given a specific pseudonym, for example, Coffee 2 or Sugar 1.

Participants were recruited from both the north and south of Ireland to ensure a range of perspectives on development education practice on the island. However, this research was not intended as a comparative study. In Northern Ireland, participants were recruited from the Centre for Global Education (CGE) who provided a list of 22 development educators who are members of the Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies (CADA) Global Education sub group. In southern Ireland, the Africa Centre provided a list of 17 development educators who work for various development NGOs and ethnic led minority organisations. Emails were sent to all potential participants, providing a synopsis of the research with an information sheet and consent form. Seven participants responded from Northern Ireland and eight from southern Ireland.

In total, the study comprised of fifteen participants, five of whom were male and ten female. Four of these participants were based in ethnic minority led organizations with the remaining participants based in various NGOs. Given the small number of participants, the researcher does not claim that the findings can be considered representative of the overall population of development educators based in Ireland. It was nevertheless an adequate

sample to facilitate discussion on a full range of factors that were addressed in the research report.

In approaching the interview data, the researcher employed qualitative content analysis, or what David Altheide (1987) terms ethnographic content analysis (ECA). ECA uses pre-defined categories in order to identify themes within the data. All of the categories were constantly revised and reduced (see Murphy, 2011) and finally collapsed into three major themes. The themes addressed in this paper are ‘Safe Development Education’ and ‘Radical Development Education’.

## Findings

### *Safe Development Education*

One system of, perhaps, civilised oppression that development educators aim to expose is the stereotypical emotional imaging and messaging that the media sometimes use to represent the developing world. Furthermore, many development educators are based in development organisations that are fundamentally concerned with tapping into the media *branding* of the developing world to encourage the general public to offer financial support for their various projects based in the global South. As Tea 3 explains:

“I think with the charity model, I think it has an emotional factor, and it is also simple and it is uncomplicated. Then some development organisations pedal that philosophy very strongly, and it does reinforce stereotypes, and then when you begin to raise uncomfortable questions that we (global north) are part of the problem, that, um, is a more difficult message to get across.”

It was found that participants are challenged by the charity model of development that underpins their respective NGOs operations, and ‘the hardest thing is to challenge the NGO you’re working in’ (Banana 2). As Cocoa 1 stated:

“Sometimes before you even get to the general public, it is difficult within the NGO organisation which I think is set up in such a way that it is more beneficial to keep that perception [charity perception] because the NGO is linked heavily to fundraising, and in order to raise more money you need to have that sympathy or charity model. I think even before you get to the public there is a lot of challenges in

terms of challenging it within the NGO...I do think people [within a development NGO] would prefer you [Development Educators] to go down the charity route looking at poverty as the focus, and that would be the easier thing to do and we would have more support from other departments [within the NGO].”

Banana 1 claimed:

“If you challenge your NGO, it’s like we need the money. How dare you challenge the money we need that going to help these children? I mean, you can’t go back at that.”

Overall, participants reported that development NGOs ‘view their Development Education as a lot lower down in their priorities and not their direct work’ (Banana 2), and view the fundraising and charitable aspects of the organisation with greater value. Furthermore, participants reported that their respective NGOs view DE as an awareness raising activity that should focus on educating the public about their international projects. As Banana 2 put it, ‘I don’t think half of them (other NGO departments) even know what it (DE) is...they think it is just about raising awareness’. In this respect, the researcher recommends that research is conducted with NGO fundraising departments and board members to investigate if their knowledge of DE is solely limited to a charity model of development as indicated by the participants of this study. This would provide greater clarity on the challenges of conducting DE whilst affiliated with a development NGO, as well as providing first hand evidence as to how other NGO departments view and value DE.

With regards to funding, and particularly government funding, participants reported that: ‘there is a pressure to do safe Development Education that I would consider to be more about fundraising or multicultural or whatever’ (Tea 2). Participants referred to the fact that ‘there is a very deliberate attempt by funders to censor your action, especially if it was to highlight issues that would be embarrassing for the government here’ (Tea 3). ‘Funders curtail Development Education, on the whole area of the action element’, states Tea 4, ‘yes so it is all right for people to go and buy fair trade but not to lobby the government’. For the participants, this brings many challenges, and limits their capacity to be overtly political and radical in their practice since they are affiliated with funders who might have a self-interest in the reproduction of white cultural supremacy, or as Seabrook might argue, when DE funding is reliant on ‘the agencies which have impoverished them (the global South) the

consequences are predictable' (Seabrook, 2009: 80-81). Its consequences, perhaps, are to relegate DE to terms and action that promotes aid, Fairtrade and the MDGs, and to wrench, from development educators, the possibility of being overtly political and radical through 'a critical analysis of government policy' (Tea 2), and subsequent radical action. Thus, from a postcolonial perspective, it could be said that such funding terms serve the interests of the rich, and perhaps merely pays *lip service* to global justice, and subsequently 'decreases capacity to engage in dialogue with the developing world to create a genuine sense of shared solidarity with the global South (see Blaney, 2002: 268), or, in relation to this research, decrease capacity of embedding an African perspective in development education through civilised oppression (see Murphy, 2011).

It should be noted that the researcher is not proposing that DE should or should not be associated with such funding bodies. It is considered beyond the confines of this research to draw such conclusions due to the small scale nature of this study, and limited investigation into the affiliation of DE with specific funding bodies. What might be recommended, however, is that DE research should provide a content analysis of funding proposals and evaluations, from a postcolonial perspective, to investigate the extent to which DE projects can be considered overtly political and radical, and to make explicit if the practice should be defined as 'Safe', due to the affiliation with specific funders.

In relation to the formal education, sector participants reported that they face challenges in relation to a lack of critical thinking. For example, citizenship teaching has become a subject matter with a disconnection between thinking and emotion, and an impulse for student actions to be situated within the charity model of fundraising. Subsequently, as Tea 3 stated:

"the danger with Development Education as it becomes incorporated into curricula and so forth is that it just becomes part of the mainstream and part of an education system that is a major part of the problem. Therefore, we are contributing to the problem."

A study carried out by Andreotti (2009) pointed out how education is 'a major part of the problem' (Tea 3). Using a postcolonial framework for analysis, she examined notions of poverty and development in one of England's key curricular documents. Andreotti found that the document, *Developing a Global Dimension in the School Curriculum* (GDGSC), has assumptions of white cultural supremacy where it emphasises 'poverty or helplessness of the other,

resulting from a lack of development, education, resources, skills, knowledge, culture or technology' (Andreotti, 2009: 59). Indeed, such an emphasis ignores the legacy of structural inequality and exploitation caused by imperialism. Therefore, 'from a postcolonial perspective, a logical implication is the reinforcement of stereotypes and, potentially, racism in, ironically, precisely the policy issues that aim to address these issues' (Andreotti, 2009: 62). Moreover, it might be added, that ironically, from a postcolonial perspective, development educators, in their affiliation with the formal education sector, are located in a system that is potentially contributing to the reinforcement of cultural supremacy, which runs counter to the whole notion of being overtly political and radical. In this respect, development educators need to make it explicit as to how they pose to be overtly political and radical within an education system that perhaps reproduces assumptions of white cultural supremacy.

Overall, participants identified development NGOs' charity campaigning approaches, media representations of the poor, funding bodies, the government, and formal education, as contributing to development education becoming a 'sector that has been made very safe in recent years in particular, so it's, I think, it's a very deliberate policy by funders and the government to do this to Development Education so that it is a very harmless activity you carry out, and it has no real impact on the structures' (Tea 3). Throughout the research report (see Murphy, 2011) there is significant data from the participants that evidences the challenges they face in relation to conducting a more radical development education within these confines, since 'people would prefer you to go down the charity route looking at poverty as the focus, and that would be the easier thing to do' (Cocoa 1).

The question then is how can 'Safe Development Education' be defined within the context of the research findings, and to what extent does such a definition allege an African perspective? Firstly, this research has found that 'Safe Development Education' is education that is conducted in order to meet funder demands. It operates under the auspices of raising awareness and encouraging actions around aid, Fairtrade and the MDGs, but does not directly involve a 'critical analysis of government policy' (Tea 2), and does 'not embarrass the government in some way' (Tea 3) through subsequent actions.

It has also been found that 'Safe Development Education' is education aligned with the formal education sector that might manage to 'take them (students) to a critical thinking level but the actual actions from the schools is fund raising and fair trade, so they go through the critical thinking learning

process but the actual actions they take are a short term action' (Sugar 1). It has further been found that 'Safe Development Education' is education linked closely with development NGOs where 'people would prefer you to go down the charity route looking at poverty as the focus' (Cocoa 1). Thus, 'if you are fund raising, it is hard to get away from the charity model...it is still from a charitable perspective rather than a justice perspective' (Tea 2).

In considering all of the participant data in relation to 'Safe Development Education', the researcher proposes that education conducted within this context can be located within functionalism. Broadly speaking, functionalism, as a school of thought, presents society as a whole that is dependent on the functioning of separate parts to maintain the overall system. So, in relation to these research findings, if white cultural supremacy is considered to be the whole, it is dependent on the continued functioning of an NGO charity model of development, stereotypical media representations of the poor, funders who curtail actions to the MDGs, aid, Fairtrade, and an education system that could be argued to have assumptions of White cultural supremacy. Furthermore, as Banana 1 puts it in relation to the curriculum, 'I suppose it is a very neoliberal curriculum which is about economic focus'.

Indeed, the researcher is not proposing that actions around the MDGs, aid and Fairtrade should be abandoned by development educators. Nor is she proposing that development education should not be aligned with NGOs and the formal education sector. Furthermore, the researcher is not stating that development educators should not 'chase the money' (Tea 2) from particular funding bodies. What is stated, however, is that development educators should be clear that conducting their work within this context will limit the extent to which they can evoke active citizenship. Citizenship, in this respect, for example, might involve writing letters to politicians about their promises to implement the MDGs, raising money for development NGOs whilst understanding responsibilities to buy Fairtrade, and showcasing such citizenship as school action projects for funders. As Pretty (1995) and Cornwell (2008) argue, 'whilst oppositional, this type of active citizenship operates within the existing structures and it does not challenge unequal power relations, for oppositional activity does not necessarily mean contesting the existing distribution of power' (quoted in Kenny, 2010: 10).

So, how is an African perspective within this context considered? Significant findings emerged from this research that an African perspective involved engaging with African voices beyond 'fitting into our agenda', (Cocoa



1) and moving beyond tokenism. In fact, the Centre for Global Educations' 'Making Connections' project was evidenced as a model of good practice for engaging with minority voices beyond such tokenism and indeed this might be the case. However, is an African perspective in this context merely reifying minority voices into a functional or 'Safe Development Education' sector that does not directly challenge the prevailing power structures? Are these voices merely participating in an active citizenship located in a functional framework that maintains white cultural supremacy, despite effectively bringing African or minority perspectives to the field? Indeed, the researcher is not proposing that minority voices should not be engaged in the field of DE. What is being proposed, though, is that development educators should make clear the extent to which their overall work, including engaging with minority voices, results in overtly political and radical actions that challenge the prevailing white power structures.

In summary, then, the findings of this research indicate that, 'Safe Development Education' can be defined as a functional education that evokes oppositional citizenship without necessarily contesting the existing distribution of power through radical action. 'Safe Development Education', in this respect, is considered to be necessary to maintain white cultural supremacy by functioning within the confines of the NGO charity model of development, funders who curtail actions to the MDGs, aid and Fairtrade, and an education system that could be argued to perpetuate charitable perceptions of development, thus creating a two-worlds concept that focuses on difference between 'us' and 'them' (see Andreotti, 2009; Young, 2010). In short, 'Safe Development Education' is 'a very harmless activity you carry out, and it has no real impact on the structures' (Tea 3).

### *Radical Development Education*

In contrast to 'Safe Development Education', 'Radical Development Education' emerged from participant data as a collapsed theme. The data within this collapsed theme complements a definition of 'Radical Development Education' that lies in postcolonialism (see Murphy, 2011). From such a perspective, 'if people actually found out that banks are the problem and it is not focused on these countries (developing countries) then people might choose to act differently, and it would be interesting to see what that would look like' (Cocoa 1). However, although evidence emerged as to where a 'Radical Development Education' can be situated theoretically, no evidence emerged from the participants as to how a 'Radical Development Education' might look in

practice. Participants confidently stated what it should not look like, but provided no indication as to how it might be implemented.

It is suggested in the research that it is the business of DE 'to see what that would look like' (Cocoa 1). Development educators should collectively, perhaps through Dochas (the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations), make explicit to development NGOs the difference between 'Safe' and 'Radical Development Education', as highlighted within the findings of this project, and invite the NGOs to discuss the overall implications of practicing a 'Safe Development Education' in relation to its impact on the developing world. The concept of a 'Radical Development Education' should also be explored within this context, with the aim of creating a model of practice that is realistic in its claims for affecting structural change.

Nevertheless, although, the researcher, at this point, cannot offer any definite suggestions as to what a 'Radical Development Education' might look like in practice, the findings of this study clearly indicate what it does not look like. In short, it does not look like the functional and 'Safe Development Education' as presented above. Rather, it should perhaps unsettle all of the functional parts that maintain the overall power structures, such as the NGO charity model of development, funders who curtail actions to the MDGs, aid and Fairtrade, and an education system that 'I suppose is a very neoliberal curriculum' (Banana 1). Furthermore, 'if it is not embarrassing the government in some way, then maybe it is not right', or in this case, not radical (Tea 3). A 'Radical Development Education' works to 'rewrite what NGO charities have been doing for so many years, questions how development is done, and encourages the public to look at the real hard issues' (Cocoa 1). It is 'more noisy, and slightly aggressive' (Banana 1) in moving active citizenship from the framework of helping the less fortunate through aid, Fairtrade, the MDGs, and the like, to a framework of, what Kenny (2010) describes as a 'visionary active citizenship' which 'is proactive rather than reactive. It involves scoping alternative futures and finding better ways of doing things, and challenges the existing structures, values and power relations underpinning the existing society' (Kenny, 2010: 10).

## **Conclusion**

So how is African perspective in DE considered in this context? Tea 3 sums this up as,

“I suppose it is a recognition, as well, that the locus of the problem is largely in the northern hemisphere where we live, and the major change needs to occur here, and the structures that create poverty are largely in the rich northern hemisphere. So maybe in a strange kind of way our focus needs to be on, to contribute to an African perspective, our focus needs to be on the north. So it is tackling the root of the problem which lies mostly in the north.”

However, this project does not have any evidence that the participants are contributing to an African perspective by conducting DE that is subversive or radical in challenging the powerful structure of white cultural supremacy. All that this project can evidence is that the participants have produced data that indicates their understandings of the difference between ‘Safe’ and ‘Radical Development Education’, and their considerations of an African perspective within these contexts. Nevertheless, this project has very clear evidence of the challenges the participants face in their attempts to address the general view of development based around charitable perceptions, since ‘any other view than the mainstream is seen as radical, and I feel that is what we are battling with’ (Banana 1).

Overall, the project has also found that participants claim to be constrained by civilised oppression inherent in funding bodies, development NGOs, media and charitable representations of the poor, and the formal education sector, which support the practice of ‘Safe Development Education’, and relegate development education to terms and action that promote aid, Fairtrade and the MDGs. Thus, the participants evidenced that this approach limits the possibility of being overtly political and radical through action that addresses structural inequalities, and also limits the capacity of embedding a ‘Radical’ African perspective in development education. Furthermore, if an African perspective is to be located within a ‘Radical Development Education’ where all voices, whether black or white, work together to unsettle the functional system, it might be argued that the findings of this research indicate that there is a lot of unsettling to be done.

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