Development Education in Politically Interesting Times

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It is now almost three years since *Policy and Practice* published Issue 26 on the theme 'Development Education in Politically Interesting Times'. In his guest editorial to that issue, Gerard McCann (2018) wrote of the serious threats posed by the global retreat from the post-war consensus on global partnership, solidarity and interdependence, and the attendant rise of xenophobia, populism and micro-nationalism. Warning of the dangers posed by this combative political environment, he highlighted an essential role for the development education sector in rebuilding trust, dialogue and shared understandings.

As we finally emerge from a sharply divisive, damaging Trump era, at the time of writing (November 2020) we may begin to hope that changes to this combative political environment are imminent. However, to do so is perhaps to forget what has given rise to people's anger in the first place. While the faces of those in the upper echelons of power in countries such as the United States and elsewhere may change, the climate and conditions that give rise to the racism, xenophobia and breakdown in solidarity which McCann decried will certainly take longer. Indeed, in this respect, little appears to have changed since Issue 26 was first published. Economic and social inequalities persist and have continued to increase, both between and within countries (Oxfam, 2020). Human rights are openly flouted in almost every country of the world (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Climate disasters and emergencies are now a regular occurrence, with particularly devastating impacts in the global South (UNDRR/CRED, 2020). And discrimination and exploitation of different groups across a range of intersecting categories – gender, class, race, religion, sexuality – continue apace (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In so many ways, little appears to have changed. Yet, in a number of important respects, much has. This signals some hope for the future, despite the odds. Three developments over the intervening period between the publication of this volume and Issue 26 are noteworthy.

First, the collective (although by no means equal) 'living through Covid' experience has afforded many their first experience of what it is like to live with uncertainty, fear and a loss of freedoms previously taken for granted. While, for many around the world, such circumstances and the attendant psychological toll they exact are a daily reality, for many (although certainly not all) in the global North cosseted by the comforting certainties that come with relative affluence and privilege, this relative loss of freedom, control and security is a new phenomenon. It is indeed a truism that sometimes one needs to experience a thing for oneself (or a less acute version of it) to appreciate it. Can one positive thing to come out of this pandemic be a greater empathy, if not understanding, for lives lived in more marginal, precarious circumstances than one's own?

Second, the exponential growth and engagement with popular movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and Fridays for Future (FFF), to name just a few, show just how 'interesting' these political times we are living in are. While, with their obsession with personality politics and showmanship, the mainstream media often attend to the antics and twittering of elected leaders, it is across popular movements – 'movements of outrage and hope', as Manuel Castells has memorably termed them (Castells, 2012), where politics, in its most inclusive form, is played out. And third, and perhaps most significantly, the world's younger generation is no longer content to leave arguably the single most important political

issue of all time – climate change – to elected political leaders and policy-makers. The FFF international climate strike movement has sent an unequivocal message that nothing short of radical structural and systemic change is required.

As though we needed any more evidence, we now have it. The model is broken. It hasn't worked. Promoting division and fear of the amorphous 'other', it has relentlessly gnawed at, undermined and ultimately destroyed our relations – with each other, and with our planet. We are at a turning point. This time of crisis provides a space to reflect on where to turn next, what direction to take. And we have been told, emphatically and determinately, by our next generation, as well as by many other groups, that a return to the old model, the old 'normal', is not an option. These are indeed politically interesting times. They are challenging, but they are also hopeful. There will be conflict and there will be change. This is the essence of democratic, inclusive politics. As the eminent political theorist Iris Marion Young has argued:

> "A primary goal of democratic discussion and decision-making awareness ought to be to promote justice in solving problems… this goal requires inclusion even if it creates complexity and reveals conflicts of interest that can only be resolved by changing structural relations" (2000: 119).

Such inclusive politics pose both challenges and opportunities to development educators as we collectively reflect and act with students and friends to help move forward, and chart a path toward a more sustainable, equitable, hopeful future.

The three articles chosen for this 15th anniversary volume reflect this newly charged 'politically interesting' time. While just one is taken from the original issue (Andreotti et al, 2018), perhaps reflecting the complexity and intersectionality of the issues facing us as we move forward, they each address, in critical and constructive ways, the challenges we face and point to directions that can be taken as we move forward. A number of the key issues discussed above are brought together in the first piece. Cirefice and Sullivan's (2019) inspiring article on the activism of rural and indigenous women's movements in the Americas in the face of the relentless extractive industry, highlights the nexus between economic, climatic and gendered injustices. Chiming with the assertions of FFF activists, the authors argue that:

> "If we leave untouched the system that brought us to breaking point… our future will be premised on old distortions, carrying over social, economic and environmental injustices into new structures that allege to save the planet" (2019: 2).

Cirefice and Sullivan ably make explicit the links between extractive capitalist expansion, gender-based violence, privilege and power. As they note, because of gendered divisions of labour which leave women with a triple burden of work (in the paid productive sphere, and in the unpaid and often unrecognised domestic and community spheres):

> "…when extraction impacts the local environment, women are on the frontline of its impacts. For example, water resources can be poisoned and drained, mine blasting can create problems such as air pollution and damage to housing, and there is an associated increase in alcoholism and domestic violence" (2019: 7).

Capitalist expansion is violent and destructive. It preys on the marginalised 'other', most notably indigenous women, and relies on their continued subjugation.

Happily, and most welcomingly, Cirefice and Sullivan's account does not end there. Much of their article is given over to highlighting the agency of local women's movements resisting these extractive industries. In a problematic communications era where the agency and activism of local actors in the global South is often eclipsed by the images and messaging of Northern development agencies keen to highlight their own activities and programmes, it is refreshing, indeed essential, to empirically challenge these Northern narratives. The women depicted in Cirefice and Sullivan's examples are certainly not victims and they are far from passive. Moreover, their activism is complex and far-reaching. As the authors note, in their resistance they:

> "are demanding systematic change to the paradigms of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy and demanding respect and protection of women's bodies, land, water, mother earth, culture and community" (2019: 10).

Their actions serve to both inform and inspire development educators and activists in the global North as we reflect on both the impacts of our own economic model and its demands, and on how we frame and portray our actions and those of others more broadly.

Both second and third articles (McCloskey, 2019 and Andreotti et al, 2018 respectively) presented here also touch on a number of these interrelated issues. In particular, their focus is on critically assessing how we, in the development education sector, go about challenging these. Stephen McCloskey's 2019 article focuses on one of the key cornerstones of the development education sector's policy platform – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while Andreotti et al (2018) focus on educational approaches to global change. Both contributions, whether explicitly or implicitly, and in different ways with different levels of emphasis, acknowledge the deeply problematic and destructive nature of current political and economic structures. Rooted in transformative change, their focus is on challenging the development education sector to critically interrogate these and to explore alternative models for political engagement for social change.

McCloskey's article titled 'The Sustainable Development Goals, Neoliberalism and NGOs', argues that the SDGs:

> "cannot succeed as long as they are fatally hitched to the broken neoliberal paradigm of development which is resulting in wealth concentration in fewer hands and growing social polarisation" (2019: 1).

Drawing on a number of reports which highlight the failure of the SDGs to reach their own targets in the areas of food security, education and equality, together with inconsistencies between goals 13 (action on climate change) and 8 (sustained economic growth), he urges development NGOs to 'leave the policy comfort zone of overseas development assistance and become more politically engaged with the structural causes of poverty' (2019: 5). McCloskey's two allied points are that global development (and by extension, development education) is inherently political, and that development agencies and actors need to engage critically with the politically thorny issue of the dominant economic system if they are serious about bringing about social transformation.

This dominant system also forms the basis for Andreotti et al's (2018) thought-provoking article on educational approaches to global change. Taking issue with more conventional development education approaches, the authors argue that it is not better policies,

communication or information that are needed. Rather, they argue, the focus needs to be on our relations with each other and with our planet – what they term 'the ontological challenge of being' (2018: 2). Again, as noted earlier, this is not and cannot be a comfortable place. Unmasking the invisibilised violences of the dominant development approaches, it forces us and our students to confront 'our complicity in systemic harm, [and] face the magnitude of the problems that we have ahead of us' (2018: 3). For Andreotti et al, as for others, 'existing strategies for addressing global justice and social change are inadequate to the task of preparing us to face these uncertain times' (2018: 4). This again, is an explicitly political approach. Eschewing consensus, coherence and quick and easy solutions to the complex, political challenges we collectively face, their proposals are designed to facilitate deep learning processes which invite curiosity, reflexivity and an expansion of sensibilities in development education approaches.

Taken together, all three articles help us reflect on the depth and scope of injustice in our broken world. Exposing and critically interrogating the approaches and policies we sometimes unthinkingly adopt in our talk and practice of development education, they invite us to rethink these, and to rethink the discourses that underlie them. At no time is this more prescient than today where, in these Covid-19 addled days, talk of a 'return to normal' belies the fact that that particular 'normal' did not and does not work. If we have learned anything over the last few years, it is that there can be no 'return to normal'. We must leave behind the discriminatory, exploitative and self-destructive discourses and practices of the past and move forward. To do so will necessitate a new era, code and conduct of political engagement which facilitates and supports open, critical, reflexive and respectful analysis and debate, with our legislators and policy makers but also, ultimately, with each other. As development educators, we need to be at the forefront in building the capacities and skills to do so.

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