The contribution of development education to challenging gender stereotypes

Kadie Armstrong and Michila Critchley consider the impact of a predominantly female workforce on the ability of development education to challenge gender stereotypes and raise some crucial questions for the sector to reflect on, offering a springboard for future work.

Given that the challenging of stereotypes is an integral part of development education (DE), this article questions how effectively DE can challenge traditional notions of gender when its workforce is predominantly female. In addressing this issue, the article draws directly from the experiences of a small number of practitioners from DECs and development education organisations in England and Scotland, who were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Does your gender (or your awareness/understanding of gender) affect your delivery or practice of DE?

- Are DE practitioners challenging gender stereotypes or reinforcing them?

- Does DE need to change in order to have greater impact in a society where 'masculine' values are rated highly?

We begin the article with a brief analysis of gender distribution in the education and voluntary sectors and conclude with an outline framework of questions that the UK networks could consider in more depth, to enhance the contribution of DE to the challenging of dominant views and gender roles in wider society.

Gender distribution and implications

Gender distribution in both the education and the voluntary sectors follows very similar patterns. The UK Transport and General Workers Union ACTS (Admin, Clerical, Technical and Supervisory) trade group has over 25,000 members working in the voluntary sector, two thirds of whom are women (Formby, 2005). Women comprise almost 70% of the teaching profession and, according to Ross and Hutchings (2003), the proportion of women in the British teaching workforce is increasing, with secondary school teaching likely to follow the primary model and become increasingly feminised in the coming decade. Certainly this pattern is one recognised – and recognised as a problem – by a 2005 report for the Scottish Executive (Riddell *et al*, 2005).

For writers such as Greer, there are serious implications for the status given to professions as a result of the feminisation process,

> *Prestige and power have seeped out of professions as women joined them. Teaching is already rockbottom, medicine is sliding fast.* (Greer, 1999)

Gender-related issues in these sectors include inequalities in pay (especially in regard to women's pay for part-time roles), inequalities of representation in senior management, and the subsequent embedding of gender stereotypes. If the feminisation of a profession contributes to gender stereotyping, then the feminisation of teaching poses a particular problem for those wishing children and young people to question traditional roles and the gendered division of labour.

Challenging gender stereotypes in DE practice

In relation to general working practices, the UK has been identified in an international management study by Hofstede (1984, 1991) as one of a cluster of countries in which 'masculine' qualities of competitiveness and assertiveness are valued more highly than 'feminine' qualities such as nurturing and pursuing personal goals. Taken in these terms, employment in the development education sector could be perceived as offering an alternative to the norm through its more 'feminine' approaches and content: its emphasis on cooperation over competition, participatory over autocratic decision-making, and the emphasis on acceptance, inclusion and community over individualism.

As with education more generally, development education in the UK attracts more women into its work-force than men. For example, of the 45 participants at the conference for Development Education Centres (DECs) in 2006, 33 were women. In the IDEAS network in Scotland, there are six DECs staffed by nine female and two male practitioners. One DE practitioner reflected that it is the role of development education workers to provide teachers with models of facilitative approaches to learning, and to promote reflective practices in teaching and learning. This practitioner's preference for such an approach was possibly, she noted, influenced by her gender. Such a perception would appear to reflect an essentialist notion that facilitative approaches to teaching come more naturally to women than do didactic methodologies. This would explain the gender balance in DE but it is a problematic stance if left unchallenged, since it may lead to the very stereotyping that the use of DE methodologies is meant to discourage.

In contrast, male practitioners might be perceived as challenging gender stereotypes just by dint of their being in a predominantly female profession (an implicit challenge to gender orthodoxy). In addition, if male practitioners explicitly address gender issues in their practice then this

challenge may be all the more powerful ('gender issues' often being perceived as a female concern).

Practitioners talked about such deliberate attempts to challenge stereotypes and their awareness of gender roles in training settings. A male practitioner indicated his consciousness of power relations, based on gender, between participants in working groups and, although he admits to not understanding them fully, he tries to compensate by encouraging equal numbers of contributions from both genders. For example, in a recent training event, after the first six questions were asked by men, he joked at the expense of himself and the male contributors, 'and now we'll have a 'woman's round' of questions' with the aim of opening up a space for women to contribute.

In another example from a recent two-day training course run by two colleagues, the male colleague took responsibility for general housekeeping, assistance with resources and welfare of participants, whilst the female colleague took the lead in the workshops. The mainly female participants became aware of these roles and the way stereotypes were being challenged and found it amusing. The lead practitioner thought that this amusement might reflect the still-prevalent attitude in society (and within education) that the issue of gender-defined roles for women and men is not a serious one.

So male development education practitioners, at least while the DE workforce is still largely constituted by women, find themselves in a unique position to be able to challenge gender stereotypes. And it is vital that they do so, given that their gender may accord them an unfair advantage professionally: there is experience amongst female practitioners of having to work harder than their male counterparts to gain recognition and influence others. One female practitioner reflected,

> *I think the power and authority invested in men by society influences the attitudes of teachers towards male and female trainers. I have noticed that with various male colleagues, teachers (especially women) have been more disposed to listen to and respect their views and opinions. As with other female-dominated professions lower pay both reflects and perpetuates the perception of lower prestige and power accorded to development education and discourages men from working in these areas.*

> *As is the case within the teaching profession, being in a male minority seems to accord automatic status and an assumption that men are both ambitious and heading for more senior positions. For development education practitioners, this issue is complicated by the awareness within development education of the need to challenge global inequality and the Northern emphasis on material goods / high salary being equated with power and authority.*

Of course, the status and credibility that may be stereotypically accorded to men in the female-dominated education sector can be used to the advantage of DE, particularly in terms of profile-raising. One practitioner recognised that it can be an advantage to be a 'male in a suit' as in some people's minds this equates with authority, but he recognised that this is not a fair advantage and does not leave female staff feeling at all empowered. Using, and therefore reinforcing, gender stereotypes in the service of development education seems counter-productive, but it happens and it is important to examine its implications.

Conclusions

In a profession that aims, in part, to challenge gender stereotypes, and one that embodies reflective learning and related methodologies, it is surprising that there has not been more critical analysis of the implications of the gender-balance and gender identity of the workforce for the tackling of gender orthodoxies. This brief paper raises questions that such critical analysis and the concomitant debate might seek to address in more depth in the future. Are male development education practitioners, by dint of their being part of a majority-female workforce that uses 'feminine' values and approaches, in a better position that their female colleague to challenge gender-based assumptions? Can female practitioners avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes, given that they are part of a feminised profession? Can the gender balance of the DE workforce change before that of the teaching profession in general and, if so, would it be desirable? Development education cannot effectively help others to reflect on gender and gender-based prejudice until its adherents have subjected the structures and practices of the sector to that same scrutiny.

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Kadie Armstrong is Global Education Co-ordinator (Formal Sector), International Development Education Association in Scotland (IDEAS). kadie@ideas-forum.org.uk

Michila Critchley is Membership and Development Manager, Development Education Association (DEA). michila.critchley@dea.org.uk