

# The underdevelopment of development education?

*Writing in the context of his work in Ireland, Colm Regan argues that with the passing of certain key phrases we are also losing key perspectives in development and development education.*

For many years now I have become increasingly troubled by a lack of adequate debate and discussion around a number of key issues in development education. In particular, I am disturbed by the loss, in development education and related discourses, of key words (and, therefore, key concepts and, by implication, key political challenges) such as ‘imperialism’, ‘underdevelopment’, ‘Third World’ etc. and their replacement with ever more sanitised and analytically vacuous categories and phrases. The process by which we name and define events, places, people and processes is crucial to how we understand and conceptualise them. Admittedly, no terms, concepts or categories are immutable and they should be open to challenge and scrutiny, modification or rejection but this should be on the basis of rigorous discussion and debate – a process I feel we have failed in.

As a long-serving practitioner of development education, I am constantly surprised at the recent tendency to dismiss our work as having ‘failed’ (in Ireland, the criteria for this assertion are never explained) and the claim that it will ‘succeed’ more readily if re-labeled variously as human rights education or global education, to name but two examples. It is as if there is no specificity to our work, no key concepts, no particular perspectives, no definite content etc.; that all these political educations are, in effect, the same, dealing with the same content, the same approach and the same perspective. Lest anyone misunderstand my view, I value greatly the contributions of areas allied to development education, but I do not see them all as being the same or addressing the same issues and challenges. Once stated, this position seems obvious but then why, I ask, do so many of us want to collapse our categories into one all encompassing equation?

At one level, I am aware of some of the reasons: strategic advantage in the ‘market place’ (a regrettable but now, apparently unavoidable, phrase in development work) for various agencies competing with each other. Equally there are power games afoot concerning egos and economics. Yet why do we as development educators so readily agree to abandon ship without adequately debating the issues? The lack of debate around two key concepts illustrates some of the issues and, for me, the consequences of this trend. The two phrases are ‘Third World’ and ‘global education’.

## The term ‘Third World’

In my work, I am regularly astounded that younger colleagues and those with whom they work have little appreciation of the history and evolution of the term ‘Third World’. We have all become accustomed to phrases such as the ‘South’, the ‘Majority World’ and the ‘Developing World’ (one is still challenged by the simple question – developing towards what

or from what?). In certain contexts it is now considered unacceptable to use ‘Third World’, as if the mere mention of the category ‘third’ implies third class. Whatever happened to our understanding of the phrase in its original meaning: a political category drawing parallels with the Tiers Etat of the French Revolution; a political category expressing a relationship to power and, more importantly, powerlessness. Another particular strength of the phrase is the fact that it highlights the relational character of geo-politics: third is only third in relation to first and second.

Some have argued that the phrase should not be used because it lumps together countries as economically diverse as Argentina and Mozambique. This argument misses the point completely. The phrase was never intended to describe economic relations; its core premise is about politics and power. Others have argued that the phrase ‘Third World’ is an insult to black people here in Europe. How? I fail to understand. Ignoring the reality of unequal power relations internationally and masking them in a category such as ‘the South’ is, in my view, a bigger insult. And how do we account for the fact that very many of my Third World colleagues continue to use the phrase ‘Third World’?

Despite hype about globalisation, I am constantly reminded of how ‘unreal’ this ‘reality’ is for so many of the world’s people. Viewed from the perspective of underdevelopment, nothing has changed over recent decades. Real power, real wealth and the realisation of human potentialities have become even more illusory for my colleagues in, for example, the Movement for the Defence of Favela Dwellers in Sao Paulo or the women of the Zimbabwean Women’s Resource Centre. Power blocs remain the order of the day, whether they be economic or political or cultural. Large corporations, European States, the USA and its allies all continue to operate as power blocs. In this context, the Third World remains a bloc – albeit an excluded bloc – and the term has as much relevance to debates about current geo-political realities today as it had in the past. I am also struck by the irony that for many years the USA has attempted to deny any common cause between Third World countries and has sought to negotiate on a bi-lateral basis and that development educators are in danger of mirroring that position.

Observing the geo-political scene since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the associated events (especially the disproportionate scale of responses to events in Eastern Europe when compared with those in Africa) convinces me even more that there are still three worlds even if we would wish for just one. In the context of my work, I do not find phrases such as ‘the South’ or the ‘Majority World’ analytically helpful or illuminating.

I am not arguing that everyone in development education should revert to using 'Third World'; many have grown with other concepts and categories and I am aware of the sensitivities of some and of how categories can be misused. However, what I am arguing for is an appreciation that those of us who continue to use the phrase 'Third World' do so for good reason: it has content, meaning and history as well as relevance. It is not used to gratuitously insult others or to imply inferiority. By all means let us debate the issues but let us at least do it in the knowledge of the history and epistemology of our discipline.

### Globalisation and Global Education

*Globalisation is in danger of becoming, if it has not already become, the cliché of our times: the big idea which encompasses everything from global financial markets to the Internet but which delivers little insight into the contemporary condition.* (Held et al 1999)

So warn the authors of *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*. They then go on to conceptualise and periodise globalisation in a manner reminiscent of the grand theories of the giants of historical development studies such as Samir Amin, André Gunder Frank and Ferdinand Braudel and many others. What I find interesting in this excellent work is the fact that key words such as 'development' (or 'underdevelopment') do not feature, the 'Third World' is mentioned only once (the 'Developing World' many more times) and that some of the largest entries in the index are reserved for the USA and the UK. As a development educator, these emphases (or lack of them) concern me.

In the brief space available, I do not wish to argue the pros and cons of adopting the 'globalisation thesis'; it has much to offer and ignoring its reality would be true folly. What I am concerned to argue is that the uncritical adoption of 'globalisation' as an over-arching framework for our work is fraught with many difficulties and challenges for those concerned with development or, more accurately, underdevelopment. These challenges also relate to the adoption of the concept of Global Education. Briefly noted, my concerns are as follows:

- in adopting a globalisation perspective, we run the risk of replacing specificities with generalities, e.g. concern with global finance replaces a focus on poverty;
- more importantly, our specific focus on development and underdevelopment may be weakened;
- we seriously run the risk of reducing our emphasis on the poorest regions and countries, especially Africa, as we grapple with the cycles and trends of markets and global investment patterns;
- we are losing our emphasis on Third World perspectives;
- we risk colluding in giving primacy to economics over people and of separating economies and societies;
- the emphasis may end up on global categories and not on people (the latter is, for me, the very stuff of development education);
- our 'option for the poor' (to use a phrase from Catholic

Social Teaching) with its related focus on power and powerlessness will be submerged or ignored.

This is but a very brief listing of some of the issues we would do well to debate further before adopting new categories and perspectives. In addition we also need to fully debate the argument that globalisation is an ideological device designed and promoted to advance the cause of particular Western financial, corporate and state interests or that globalisation is simply a huge exercise in privatisation.

### The role of development education

Finally, I would like to argue about the relationship between development education as it has historically emerged and other forms of social and political education around contemporary issues. Clearly there is a pressing strategic need to build alliances with areas such as human rights education, gender education, multi-cultural education, social and political education etc. By combining our perspectives and particular histories we will increase the possibility of greater understanding, impact and resourcing. But this needs to be done in tandem with recognising the differences as well as the similarities between these forms of education. No one education (including development education) should seek primacy over the others, each has a distinct and valuable contribution to make. The challenge surely lies in identifying a core curriculum (in the broadest sense), acknowledging and endorsing that core and building it up further from our own individual perspectives and practices. This is an argument that will be developed more fully in the forthcoming publication of the Development Education Commission's *Essential Learning for Everyone* (to be published in October).

Development education has proved its value. Its history and impact are there to be seen and engaged with. So, too, is its content and its considerable contribution to educational methodology. Development (and more significantly, underdevelopment) remains one of the great challenges of the new millennium. Yet, I have a sense that we continue to approach our work tentatively and defensively rather than in a spirit of engagement and debate with some of the great issues of our time. Long live development education!

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### References

Held, D. et al (1999) *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, Polity Press