The educational methodology of Paulo Freire: to what extent is it reflected in development education in the UK classroom?

In this article, Helen Walkington examines the extent to which the educational philosophy and associated methods of Paulo Freire are practised in development education in formal schooling. She describes constraints common to primary and secondary schools and points towards a way forward for educators who wish to contribute to the dialogue regarding good practice in development education.

The spread of ideas has always been associated with modifications to suit conditions in particular places – adaptations that suit local needs and resources – and this is also true of the diffusion of educational ideas. In education, differing contexts exist throughout the global-local spectrum, from differences between the national curricula of particular countries to the level of the individual classroom which represents a unique context, ethos, and culture evolving over time. Accordingly, the methods appropriate to one group of learners will not necessarily represent good practice for others.

The ideas of one educator from the South have been greatly influential in the evolution of development education and its associated methodologies in the UK. This article explores the ways in which the ideas of Paulo Freire, which have provided the theoretical framework for development education, have been adapted to suit the educational context of UK classrooms. It draws upon Freire’s original texts, as well as recent research (by the author) with teachers to examine the extent to which elements of ‘emancipatory’ education are possible within the current frameworks of teaching and learning.

Education for critical consciousness

In educational thought and debate, a continuum recurrently appears pertaining to the degree to which teachers should diverge from the ‘traditional’ approach of teacher directed learning to a more facilitative role in the classroom, based around a pupil centred focus (‘progressive education’). Freire (1972) interpreted this continuum radically, terming the extremes ‘banking education’ and ‘problem posing education’. His writing clearly characterised banking education as a vehicle to maintain an oppressive status quo, whereas problem posing education was seen as emancipatory, resulting in critical consciousness (Freire 1974). Further, problem posing education provided a basis for making explicit the ideology behind banking education by focusing upon the development of learners’ critical skills, facilitated through experiential, participatory learning. Indeed such tenets have provided the conceptual underpinnings for development education methods.

Despite the wide recognition of the benefits of experiential education (see, for example, Rogers 1983; Salmon and Claire 1984; Steiner 1993), the extent to which it is practised in education has received little consideration. It was for this reason that I decided to research the balance between these two types of practice as outlined by Freire. It became clear from preliminary studies however that there was a disparity between Freire’s original conception of problem posing education and enquiry-based development education methods; and that the latter represented an interpretation which had evolved from working within a specific context. The key similarities and disparities are explored in the following section, after which research findings will be used to highlight the constraints upon education for change.

Unveiling reality

Development education is resonant with a reconstructionist educational philosophy (Slater 1992) – it hinges upon the ‘reconstruction’ of learners in light of what they have learnt. It is therefore based upon constructivist assumptions and responds to the need for increased consciousness of ideological positions. This indeed reflects the constructivist position of Freire who argued that ‘problem posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality’ (1972: 68). Opposed to the unconscious acceptance of information, a development education approach aims to raise awareness not only of Southern perspectives but also to raise the awareness of learners’ own unconscious preconceptions, images, and beliefs. Development education, therefore, is an approach which has the potential to make ideological assumptions explicit through a critical and reflective educational process and to this extent its aims reflect Freirean thinking. A further similarity relates to the use of collaborative group work based around a dialogic methodology, role play being one such common approach.

In Freirean thinking, people are encouraged to consider their own role as actors in change. This, too, is strongly reflected in the recent understanding of development education as ‘education for change’. Such an interpretation is also shared with other educational responses to global issues, such as citizenship education and sustainable development education. Indeed, each distinctive area is resonant with Freirean ideas by aiming to engage learners in action based upon critical and reflective thinking and dialogue.

Freire (1972) conceptualised problem posing and banking education as mutually exclusive; thus, any dilution of
problem posing education with the banking concept was sufficient to comprise a complete negation of transformatory education. Freire wrote that education is never neutral because ‘it is always an action either for the domestication of people or for their liberation’ (1985: 99). The negative connotations associated with the banking concept of education were so great for Freire that they represented the elements of an oppressive order.

It is at this level that development education practice departs from Freirean thinking. In formal education, where national targets, curricula, and raising achievement dominate the learning outcomes which teachers can design, prescribed content in some circumstances necessitates the use of traditional approaches. Traditional and development education approaches cannot therefore be conceived of as mutually exclusive, but instead must be considered complementary. Perhaps traditional teaching can provide the content from which children, using development education methods, can develop critical thinking skills.

The second crucial disparity in educational terms between Freirean thinking and development education is represented by the respective groups of learners involved in the educational process. In Brazil, where he developed his dialogic methodology, Freire worked on adult literacy programmes using role play as a means for stimulating discussion on the ways in which people construct everyday situations. Here, he was able to see that his own constrictions differed from those of the learners and, in turn, that dialogue could enhance mutual understanding. In the UK however, where teachers are in a position of having greater experience of the world and greater knowledge of what is to be learnt by pupils, there is a power relation which makes establishing a relationship between equals a much more difficult, if not impossible, task. Furthermore, the current drive to improve children’s literacy in the UK is increasingly occurring at the expense of a broad curriculum and cross-curricular opportunities for discussion and participatory learning (Walkington 1999b). These features should, rather, be the vehicle for literacy.

**Constraints on education for change**

The key similarities between Freire’s ideas and development education today lie in the underlying philosophical belief in transformatory education. However, development education, whilst sharing many of the same methods with Freire’s original approach, is capable of producing only limited outcomes in terms of this goal in classrooms which are highly constrained by contextual factors. It is to these constraints that the discussion now turns.

If development education is concerned with change, the role of the teacher is fundamental to its success. Robinson (1986) identified three groups of secondary school geography teachers according to their aims: those with radical aims, teachers in the ideological middle ground, and traditionalists. Despite progressive aims in the first two groups, teachers were seen to be pushed by the examination system towards more traditional, apolitical content.

Thompson (1982), in his article on world development as a challenge for teacher education, noted the reluctance of teachers to employ a development education perspective when this was taken to mean education for change because of the political-ideological stance which it requires. Denscombe and Conway (1981), describing the education of young children, also noted the reluctance of teachers to actually implement development education, preferring rather to lay the foundations for later study.

An article entitled teaching for ‘passive citizenship’ (Shermis and Barth 1982) summarised many of the potential difficulties in introducing genuine enquiry based education. Despite the valid calls for education to equip young people with the skills to make their own decisions, there is a tendency for education to maintain the status quo. In the UK primary school classroom, the practicalities of a heavy curriculum may tend to shift teachers away from the child centred approach towards single subject teaching. However it is complex thinking, not fragmentary or reductionist thought, which will help sustain holistic approaches (like development education), which are, in turn, an essential pathway for the exploration of development issues. The constraints upon problem posing or enquiry based education are neatly summarised by Freire himself: ‘No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question why’ (1972: 74).

The constraints on education for change are thus the context in which education is currently taking place, coupled with a teacher’s own willingness (or lack of willingness) to reflect critically upon their own worldview and practice. There is a way forward however which begins with critical reflection, what Freire termed ‘conscientisation’.

**The way forward: critical reflection**

Stephenson et al (1998) note that only when the ‘reflection process has occurred at a personal level is a teacher likely to be effective in actively constructing a critical approach to values education within the classroom’ (166). The process of reflection is thus a fundamental part of a teacher’s own values clarification process (since all education occurs in a value laden environment), and is essential for the development of critical skills. Values contribute to a worldview and to an educational philosophy. Reflection on values therefore is a first step towards becoming conscious of aspects of one’s ideological position. To avoid a transmission model of education (banking education), there is a need for teachers to be both critical and reflective with regard to their own practice.

A model incorporating descriptors for both traditional and development education approaches to teaching was developed in my own research to structure primary school teachers’ reflections on their practice (Walkington 1999a). It was developed to enable teachers to consider the extent to which they incorporate development education methods in aspects of their teaching and to identify specific constraints upon their use. The model revealed that all the primary
teachers who were interviewed wished to incorporate more development education methods in their teaching but were subject to the following constraints:

- Development education methods are more time consuming in terms of both planning and teaching than simply telling pupils the right answer.  
  
  *Guiding children is harder than telling them and giving them a way of thinking is harder than just giving them information.*  
  
  (Jane)
- Development education is easier if schools support a cross-curricular approach, but this is being replaced with single subject teaching to fulfil National Curriculum requirements.
- Children’s poor reading and research skills mean enquiry-based learning is not feasible.
  
  *You cannot do research with children with learning difficulties, emotional problems, behavioural problems. I have got some children who can’t read.*  
  
  (Tara)
- Teachers were afraid of dealing with sensitive issues.
  
  *I could quite easily bring that up, but you don’t actually want to open a hornets’ nest.*  
  
  (Olivia)

The research revealed that teachers with development education training had a range of methodologies available to them which allowed them to overcome many of the external or contextual constraints on their practice, whereas those without this repertoire of participatory approaches felt disempowered.

*I am doing quite a bit of description when I teach. I want to give the children the skills to carry out their own learning and researching, but I’ve got a lot of very poor readers, so that isn’t practical in my class. I would ideally be getting them thinking and using their reasoning skills.*  
  
  (Geraldine)

**Teachers as researchers**

Conceptions of development education have changed over time and, during this process, the ideas of Paulo Freire have stimulated much thought about the role of emancipatory methodologies in creating education which is transformatory. However, in a formal school context, radical transformation of the status quo is not possible, nor perhaps even desirable, and thus the aims of development education remain diluted in practice where they aim to fit into this context.

The extent to which development education can achieve its aims hinges upon individual educators and their commitment to education for change. But on another level, it is dependent upon the same teachers communicating their ideas and enthusiasm to each other. The Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) are currently promoting the concept of ‘teachers as researchers’ (of their own practice) and are providing research scholarships to support the sharing of good practice. This will only be successful if teachers can reflect critically on their practice – what Freire would have called conscientisation – and try to communicate the tacit aspects of good practice to others. Freire’s methods were all based upon dialogue and, likewise, teachers today must engage in dialogues to share and spread ideas about good practice in development education. Government support for teachers as researchers represents an opportunity for researchers to show how development education can increase self-esteem, raise standards and contribute to a broad and balanced curriculum. Without the methodologies inspired by Paulo Freire, this goal would seem unrealistic.

**References**


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