

# Conference Report

## Critical Thinking for Development Education: Moving from Evaluation to Research

*Sally Issler*

On 3rd and 4th October 2009, the National University of Ireland at Galway in partnership with the International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning, the Development Education Research Centre at the Institute of Education in London and the School of Maori, Social and Cultural Studies in Education, University of Canterbury, New Zealand organised a very successful conference that was attended by academics, policy makers and practitioners from a range of European countries, United States, New Zealand and South Africa.

What follows is the personal view of an independent consultant and it consists of an idiosyncratic reflection on a selection of presentations given and most of all the resulting informal discussions with delegates. These often stay in the memory when the details of formal academic papers have departed. The intention is to add to the debate on the journeys undertaken by Development Education practitioners in the past and to reflect on possible futures.

The aims of the conference were to:

- address the extent to which development education and its related themes of global learning, global education and global citizenship have been influenced by the agendas of government and non-governmental organizations priorities;
- review the extent to which evaluation has been used to legitimise policy and practice;
- discuss approaches within development education and related fields which have begun to move from an culture of evaluation to research and the impact of learning processes.

The conference had implications for Development Education and the theory and practice of education as a whole. Topics for discussion covered higher, adult and continuing education as well as secondary and primary education and the presentations reflected the perspectives of researchers, teachers and policymakers from all over the world

An important conference theme was the attempt to define Development Education. Helmuth Hartmeyer from Austrian Development Agency and chair of Global Education Network Europe gave the opening plenary address. He reflected on the influence of NGO practice on policymakers and the degree of penetration in main-

stream education and informal learning of Development Education and Global Learning particularly in connection with its concerns for environmental sustainability, intercultural learning, human rights education and ecumenical and inter-religious learning. The results, he suggested, had implications for academic research, teacher training, school policy and administration.

The conference also had plenary presentations from Maire Matthews from Irish Aid, Matthias Fielder from the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA), Catherine Odora Hoppers from South Africa, Vanessa Andreotti from New Zealand and Doug Bourn from London in the UK

There were also two sessions with a series of seminar papers looking at examples of evidence of impact of development education projects covering both work of NGOs, activities within schools, community groups and universities.

Critical analysis in relation to the internal contradictions in Development Education and Global Learning discourses prompted by this diversity of thematic origins was the concern of Greg Mannion and Hamish Ross, from the UK. In a seminar paper, with a faint tinge of Scottish Enlightenment scepticism, they raised debates around definitions of globalisation and the feasibility of using Education for Global Citizenship. The essentially political and participatory nature of civil engagement was for them locally constructed and they doubted the feasibility of moving the human rights agenda away from Western culture. This for me emphasised the need to explore the political and cultural implications of one of the chief driving forces of Development Education which is the possibility of dialogue with the Global South.

The consideration given to the articulation of the lack of voices from the South and the need to create equal partnerships in learning was addressed by Matthias Fiedler (Irish DEA) and Maire Matthews (Irish Aid). They indicated that this need has profound political and educational implications, namely the re-design of civil society to allow for spaces for transformation.

It was the exploration of the mixed success of these opportunities and the likely consequences that proved an exciting source of debate both inside and outside the formal sessions. There is only room here to make reference to a few of them, but most of the delegates at the conference would probably agree that the consideration given to Critical Thinking by Catherine A. Odora Hoppers and Vanessa Andreotti gave expression to the issues at the philosophical heart of the conference. Both are advocates of reciprocal and transformative encounters with 'the other' through questioning of Western knowledge systems and methods of knowing on the basis that the resultant cognitive reconstruction will provide a moral basis for citizenship education. This renegotiation of human agency towards social justice sustains the integrity of indigenous cultures and enables learners to cope with the uncertainties of globalisation.

Just how complex a challenge this could be was provided by two presentations on DFID sponsored school linking programmes, which could use experiential learning as a means of challenging deeply embedded notions of Southern inferiority. Both Fran Martin from University of Exeter in the UK (Global Partnerships as sites for Mutual Learning) and Alison Leonard, a doctoral student at the Institute of Education in London (A Southern Perspective on School Linking) reported a number of successes, but reference was made to the complexity of the attempt to dismantle stereotypes and not to replace them with others. The opportunity to encounter difference did not guarantee a critical reconsideration of Western consumerist values or an informed reflection on possible social enrichment arising from an alternative cultural, spiritual heritage.

A presentation 'Makutano Junction' by Liesbeth de Block from the Institute of Education *et al* provided an alternative method of communicating Southern perceptions to the North through the use of Kenyan Television drama delivered with the support of a Development Education Centre network to approximately 100 schools throughout England. The accompanying impact measurement provided evidence of the power of story-telling as an important means of exploration of encounters with diversity and the politics of identity.

Of critical importance is the need to increase the community of scholars and practitioners. In this respect Doug Bourn's review of the challenges for research in global learning and development education offered a way forward. Through the use of local, national or international research partnerships that provide intercultural ventures in the joint production of knowledge, the academic community can provide leadership in pioneering new ways of knowing, thinking and learning. An example of this was provided by Son Gyoh, a development education consultant based in Ireland, who examined the role of research and learning in mainstreaming the Southern perspective. True to the principles of Development Education he used a participatory action research model, which did not privilege the 'expert' in order to challenge Western hegemony through his analysis of how Southern Development Education concepts are constructed. His concern was to establish the existence of a universality of methodology thereby providing the basis for global civil consciousness and partnership. This kind of research combined with critiques of policy maker and pedagogic practice, including impact analysis can further Critical Thinking for Development Education by providing a platform for an examination of the mechanics, ethics and politics of social engagement, which by feeding into the citizenship debate, have important implications for the future for global civil society and education.

I look forward to seeing some of the papers presented at the conference published in this Journal.

## **NEW FROM TRENTHAM**

### **EUROPE'S ESTABLISHED AND EMERGING IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES:**

#### **assimilation, multiculturalism or integration**

*Edited by Carlton Howson and Momodou Sallah*

Europe is not what it used to be, and not yet what it will be. The assassination of Theo van Gogh in November 2004, the 2001 riots in the Northern cities of England, the riots in France in November 2005 and the incident of the Danish Cartoons in 2005 are all manifestations of mainstream Europe's struggle to reconfigure itself. The rapidly changing demographics, especially after post World War Two immigration, have led to what Ramadan (2007) calls a 'European identity crisis'.

This has raised significant social, political, economic, security and cultural questions over how 'established' and emerging immigrant communities are managed – even though some in these communities hold citizenship in European countries.

This book brings together some of the leading writers in their fields to explore a range of issues concerning Europe's established and emerging immigrant communities: religion, health, housing, refugees and asylum seekers, working in post conflict ethnic zones, community cohesion in rural areas, security, Gypsies and Travellers. The first part of the book looks at such topics across Europe whilst the second explores specific issues using the UK as a microcosm.

Readers will find a wide range of perspectives based on empirical research and grounded in critical analyses, as well as responses to the new challenges confronting Europe. The strength of the book lies in its timeliness and wide appeal: it is essential reading for social science courses including community development, sociology, politics, social policy, diversity, health, education and international development at both undergraduate and post graduate level. And policy makers and practitioners will treasure the book's historical and contemporary insights into how the geography of Europe has been shaped and how policies continue to be largely focused on the racialisation of people.

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