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# Fair-Minded Critical Thinking in Development Education

## Reflections on pedagogies for transformation

*Eleanor J. Brown*

University of York, UK

### Abstract

This article discusses research with development education practitioners in Britain and Spain, to explore their conceptions of pedagogical approaches to development education and how these relate to transformative learning theory. Development education is a process designed to generate informed action, which implies the objective of transformation through learning. By considering two key concepts of transformative learning theory – critical reflection and dialogue – the aim of this article is to analyse how practitioners understand and facilitate these through development education.

**Keywords:** fair-minded critical thinking, transformative learning theory, ideology critique, multiple perspectives

### Introduction

This article provides a discussion of development education practitioners' conceptions of critical thinking with an analysis of the extent to which this coincides with pedagogies associated with transformative learning theory. There is an overview of Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning, as well as the concepts of ideology critique (Brookfield, 2000) and fair-minded critical thinking (Paul, 1990). This is followed by a discussion of research findings from an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded doctoral study with practitioners from development education centres (DECs) in Britain and non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) in Spain in 2011. This was a qualitative study with interviews and focus groups conducted to examine how practitioners view the pedagogies associated with development education and how they enact these in their work. The way a safe space was set up for participative methodologies is

considered, providing a picture of how practitioners rationalized their engagement in ideology critique with accusations of indoctrination. A more complete account of methodologies and analysis is reported elsewhere (Brown, 2013a).

## Development education in Britain and Spain

The way development education is defined has an effect on the approach used, and in recent years there has been a gradual move towards associating such education with dialogic and experiential learning, aiming at a more critical approach, rather than didactic educational activities (Andreotti, 2006a; Shah and Brown, 2007; Bourn, 2008a; Kumar, 2008; Brown, 2011; Bourn and Kybird, 2012). The Development Education Exchange in Europe Project (DEEEP) defines development education as an active learning process, which aims to understand causes and effects of global issues leading to informed action (DEEEP, 2007, cited in Bourn, 2008a: 3–4).

In Britain a range of terms are used; traditionally called *development education*, a constant revision of the concept and the language has led to the introduction of new terms, with nuanced interpretations, including *global education* and *global citizenship education*. This range of terms in part reflects ‘the complex roots of development education, but they also reflect the lack of clarity as to its specific focus and contribution to broader educational debates’ (Bourn, 2008a: 4).

Think Global (formerly the Development Education Association), the leading educational charity in this area, which includes DECAs among its members, currently uses the term *global learning*. This is characterized by the need ‘to help people understand the wider world around them and make the global connections between issues such as poverty or climate change’ (Think Global website). This is education in a global context, which seeks to foster the following: critical and creative thinking, self-awareness and open-mindedness towards difference, understanding of global issues and power relationships, and optimism and action for a better world (Think Global website). Much of the literature on global learning and development education in Britain focuses on pedagogical issues, arguing that it should be seen as a process rather than a product (Marshall, 2005: 250). Indeed, with complex and sensitive topics ‘students should learn to accept that there are not always neat conclusions, and that learning often derives from the discussion’ (Brown and Morgan, 2008: 287).

Research on development education in Britain emphasizes the importance of dialogic learning, yet it is noted that in formal settings this is frequently difficult for teachers, who often consider themselves ‘gatekeepers of knowledge’ (Brown, 2011). Bourn and Issler (2010) looked at the role of NGOs’ development education and its contribution to promoting social justice through formal education. They suggest that by ‘opening up spaces for different ways and forms of learning, development

education has put on the agenda a potentially more transformatory approach' (Bourn and Issler, 2010: 228).

Andreotti (2006b) suggests a distinction between 'critical' and 'soft' global citizenship education, with much current practice tending towards 'soft' approaches. A critical approach requires a critique of modernization and an understanding of complexity, interdependence, and inequalities and an interrogation of 'European cultural supremacy' (Andreotti, 2010: 243). The roles of critical literacy and dialogue in development education are often cited as potential ways to prevent reinforcing stereotypes, although in an examination of development education in England, McCollum (1996) illustrated that there was 'a chasm between the lofty rhetoric and the grounded reality' (p. 3). While much current practice is still seen to be lacking in this sense, Andreotti's (2006a) work with development education practitioners in Britain, which encouraged critical global citizenship to challenge ethnocentric assumptions, may have had an influence on practice.

In Spain, development education is defined in terms of generations, evolving from a charitable approach in the first generation, to the more critical approach conceived in the fifth and current generation, which is understood as: 'An educative process that aims to promote knowledge, attitudes and abilities that are relevant to living responsibly in a complex and diverse world' (CAONGD, 2007: 11). The model of five generations was designed to be used as a tool of debate about development education with NGOs (Mesa, 2011). In her analysis of development education practice in Spain, Mesa (*ibid.*) argues that development education is a dynamic process that generates reflection, analysis, and critical thinking about development, and that it is a pedagogical process that combines cognitive skills with the acquisition of values and attitudes, orientated towards the construction of a more just world. The model has been used by NGOs across Spain and according to Mesa (*ibid.*) has contributed to reflection on the practice of development education, even though many organizations still struggle to engage in educational activities that could be described as fifth generation.

Within the definition of the fifth generation, there is a critical understanding of development and globalization and a call for networks to create new types of citizenship (MZC, 2010: 22); therefore, incorporating 'global citizenship' (Celorio and López de Munain, undated: 126). Mesa (2010) discusses the potential power of global citizenship as an instrument of social transformation and for critiquing the social, economic, and political situation that maintains inequality, recognizing the capacity of citizens to solve problems as active subjects.

The pedagogy is understood to promote conditions for people to act politically as agents of change, work in networks, and imagine alternatives (Celorio and López de Munain, undated: 132). Indeed, networks are an important part of the Spanish

definition, and are seen to increase the quality of the activities, as well as the impact of the actions that are carried out (Escudero and Mesa, 2011). Development education aims to generate a critical consciousness and facilitate tools for social transformation (Grupo de ED de la CONGDE, 2004; Mesa, 2000; Celorio, 2006, all cited in MZC, 2010: 17).<sup>1</sup>

In research on development education in Spain, Escudero and Mesa (2011) found that activities often lacked space for reflection on practice and that there was very little research aiming to reveal how educators could improve their practice (p. 5). They found that very few activities could genuinely be described as ‘fifth generation,’ with many reflecting the charity-based approach associated with the first and second generations. Moreover, the short-term nature of many activities meant that there was rarely a focus on critical pedagogies (ibid.: 52). While development education requires a participative approach, based on experiential and creative learning, these demanding pedagogies and complex issues require training, which is often not available to NGO practitioners (ibid.: 8).

To some extent, from these definitions, there is a greater focus in Spain on creating agents of change, although in Britain there are various interpretations of this work, where global learning may have less emphasis on action, but global citizenship has more of an action focus. Nevertheless, in both countries the centrality of the concepts of critical thinking and participative learning are fundamental to understanding development education. It is at this level that it is worth looking more deeply at how critical dialogue is understood and generated and to discuss the common issues that affect practitioners across contexts.

## **Pedagogies for transformative learning**

Given that in both of these definitions development education aims to generate change in learners through using participative pedagogies, this research was informed by transformative learning, which is:

*... the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference ... to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight.*

(Mezirow, 2000: 8)

*Frames of reference* are the ‘structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions’ and as such are central to ways of interpreting experience (ibid.: 16). We may or may not be aware of our frames of reference. Indeed, they

'often represent cultural paradigms ... learning that is unintentionally assimilated from the culture, or personal perspectives derived from the idiosyncrasies of primary caregivers' (ibid.: 17).

Learners need to explore and challenge assumptions, both personal and socio-cultural, a process that allows them to recognize their biases. Dialogue requires a safe space where learners feel respected and comfortable to discover their deeply held assumptions and consider the ways in which these influence their opinions. Openness to the other is essential, based on genuine respect, where one listens carefully and seeks to enter empathetically into the perspectives of others (Paul, 1990: 111). Participants need access to accurate information and there should be opportunity to 'critically reflect upon presuppositions and their consequences' (Mezirow, 1998: 12). Critical thinking requires accepting the ongoing nature of consensus building with an emphasis on the process and a toleration of ambiguity, instead of rushing to clarity and closure:

*A best judgement is always tentative until additional evidence, argument, or a different perspective is presented that may change it. That is why it is essential to seek out and encourage viewpoints that challenge prevailing norms of the dominant culture in matters of class, race, gender, technology, and environmental protection.*

(Mezirow, 2000: 12)

Development education often addresses these issues, and has a role to play in ensuring that outdated or inequality-producing norms and stereotypes are not reinforced through education. This requires a critical pedagogy that uncovers injustices in the structures on which our assumptions hang. This is a deep learning experience. The crux of the problem is how to challenge assumptions in a fair and meaningful way, by providing appropriate information as well as a space in which learners can engage with that information freely, allowing them to make their own choices about how to act. At the same time, development education has to maintain its values and meet its objective of social justice, which means recognizing inequalities and power relations where deep-seated – and often unconscious – biases govern our attitudes and behaviour.

### **Ideology critique**

Brookfield (2000) claims there are two purposes of critical reflection: the first is to identify power relations and dynamics, the second is to uncover hegemonic assumptions. The subtlety of hegemony is that over time it becomes deeply embedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. As he suggests: 'Critical reflection on hegemonic processes becomes transformative when it fosters challenges to hegemony, when it prompts counter hegemonic practices.' (ibid.: 138). Ideology

critique describes the process 'by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices' (ibid.: 128).

For a more equitable and just society, at the heart of development education's objectives, people must be able to critically reflect on the world, challenge assumptions that create oppression and reconstruct understanding based on this collaborative inquiry (Freire, 1970: 53). Freire contrasted this participation in learning with receiving information passively from the teacher, something he called 'banking education.' He argued that banking education was unlikely to empower learners, since if students do not learn to think for themselves, they are unable to participate in democratic processes:

*The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.*

(Freire, 1970: 54)

This critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, is defined as: 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions – developing a critical awareness – so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (ibid.: 19). In this way, students become empowered subjects achieving 'a deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their own capacities to recreate them' (Darder *et al.*, 2009: 14).

Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2008) claim that critical thinking must put 'neo-liberalism, or *any other* ideology, in a historical context that promotes student understanding of society as a dynamic and evolving process' (p. 310; emphasis in original). The very concept of development carries connotations that require critical reflection. Therefore, a framework is required that seeks to 'critically engage students with, and challenge, common assumptions and dominant theoretical frameworks of international development (such as modernisation theory) that are often engrained in mainstream development discourses' (Bryan, 2008: 63).

With a strong focus on ideology critique, educators often become nervous that they will be accused of indoctrination (White, 1988; Schukar, 1993). Some claim that issues are often presented with a political opposition in mind, rather than an exploration of possible alternatives, and that this is led by a particular perspective that excludes the benefits of the capitalist system, making it an invalid educational endeavour (Scruton, 1985; Standish, 2012). The response of development education against these charges is precisely the emphasis on participative pedagogies, where



discussion should be contested: 'There should be critical dialogue and debate and space for a range of voices, views and perspectives.' (Bourn, 2008b: 19). Facilitating such dialogue places incredible demands on the educator and it is an essential element of development education research that we consider how practitioners interpret and manage these demands in different contexts.

### **Fair-minded critical thinking**

When constructing knowledge through dialogue, the educator can take different roles, providing different levels of support to the students. There is a danger of 'herding' students towards a particular perspective when the teacher uses questioning, but with a specific outcome in mind. It is here that education moves close to the boundary with indoctrination. Golding (2011) suggests that teachers should guide the process, but not attempt to guide the content of the inquiry. There is a difficult balance to maintain between allowing students freedom to explore ideas for themselves, where all perspectives are valued, and not sinking into complete relativism. To move students towards the 'right' answers may be a form of indoctrination, but to suggest that one opinion is equally as good as another negates the role of rationality. Golding suggests a community of inquiry, constructing a critical and rational dialogue:

*The Community of Inquiry takes the middle ground between seeking 'opinions' where all answers are equally good and seeking 'correct' answers. It seeks reasoned or reflective judgements where ideas are judged better or worse depending on the quality of reasoning supporting them.*

(Golding, 2011: 481)

However, the question remains: if we care about a just and sustainable future for people and society, how do we hold our own convictions while honouring students' rights to theirs? For Freire (1970) it is about ensuring that dialogue is authentic and based on rational argumentation, while acknowledging that many organizational settings are biased at the outset, and that this should be taken into account in the critical thinking process (Morrow and Torres, 2002: 143).

Global issues can plausibly be approached from diverse viewpoints 'to which multiple theories, frames of reference, or competing ideologies apply' (Paul, 1990: 36). It is therefore inappropriate to treat them within one established logic, and we must develop critical thinking that can deal with that complexity fairly, rather than selecting knowledge that serves our interests. When we interpret facts, it is possible to allow them to confirm beliefs in which we have a vested interest, either personally, or as a society. This means that critical thinking must enable us to distinguish between fact and opinion and also to interpret facts fairly. This includes a large grey area, where we have to determine which facts are questionable, which are most important, and which are peripheral, and what alternative interpretations might be (ibid.: 218).



It is this process that Paul (1990) refers to as *fair-minded critical thinking*. I argue that this is essential for addressing accusations of indoctrination and interpreting the way critical thinking is understood and enacted by practitioners. We become objective only to the degree that we become open-minded, so critical thinking should mean empathetically considering the strengths of opposing perspectives, and examining underlying assumptions that we have internalized as fact. These interpretations that have not been critically examined may arise from an unconscious commitment to a personal point of view (egocentric) or a social or cultural point of view (ethnocentric). Fair-minded critical thinking implies an ability to 'reconstruct sympathetically and imaginatively the strongest versions of points of view and frameworks of thought opposed to one's own mind' and to 'reason dialectically to determine when one's own point of view is weakest and when an opposing point of view is strongest' (ibid.: 110). This is similar to what Mezirow described as 'trying on different points of view' (2000: 20).

## Research findings

This research is based on interviews and focus groups with development education practitioners in Britain and Spain. The aim of this dimension of the research was to determine practitioners' perspectives on pedagogies and their understanding of critical thinking and dialogue in a range of contexts. Rather than a comparison, this paper provides a discussion of similarities in the ways in which practitioners managed critical thinking and how they perceived an ideal situation for dialogue. It also reflects on how this played out in the reality of their educational work.

I analyse the discourse of the practitioners in relation to the work of Mezirow (2000), Brookfield (2000), and Paul (1990) and discuss the important, yet complex, role of critical thinking within development education practice. By considering some of the successes, problems, and dilemmas they encountered, I give a tentative conception of how development education practice reflects transformative learning theory, the interplay between ideology critique and fair-minded critical thinking, and how the delicate balance between them is managed.

## Challenging assumptions and managing a range of perspectives

It was clear that practitioners in Britain and Spain were well acquainted with development education theory and promoted the use of participative methodologies in their work. Inevitably, some also mentioned that the reality did not always live up to the rhetoric, particularly in their non-formal education work. Awareness raising and one-off sessions dominate the way DEC and NGOs interact with adults, and these did not allow time for a learning process to develop. However, those that engaged in youth work, for example, did find that they had more time to genuinely focus on transformative processes of learning.

The discourses of the practitioners focused on generating critical thinking and they defined this in ways that coincided with Mezirow's (2000) definitions of critical discourse:

- i. They were clear about the importance of considering a range of perspectives and the role these could play in encouraging learners to challenge their assumptions.
- ii. They worked to facilitate dialogue in a safe space where learners could reflect on their experiences.
- iii. They discussed the importance of openness and reasoned argument, without rushing for consensus.
- iv. They were clear that they let the learners guide the process wherever possible.

A fundamental element of transformative learning was sourcing information and perspectives that challenged assumptions and stimulated debate. Practitioners were clear and open about the sources they used and encouraged learners to research information themselves. They used surprising statistics or information that challenged stereotypes and prejudices, encouraging learners to interrogate all perspectives and to ask questions:

*So say for example, it might be to do with racism and they're really against Eastern European migrants coming here, but we might go away and source lots of information about the perspectives of those migrants or the history of the countries that they're coming from and the political incentives in the UK that our government has actually chosen that mean that they come here ... lots of different viewpoints of it so that they can question that.*

(Jenny, Britain)

Sessions often offered an opportunity for critical thinking through informal discussions proposed by the learners, or driven by their own interests or doubts, with content relevant to learners' needs. The focus was on the learners to set the starting point:

*I'd define it in the way Freire did, popular education is really the basis of the work: That every person knows things, and everyone is part of the learning ... and it's about everyone with their own words saying what they think, what they feel and what they want to do.*

(Fernanda, Spain)

In Britain this was sometimes framed by the methodology associated with global youth work – 'connect, challenge, change':

*That developed out of the global youth action project, and so, the principle of that is you connect with young people on issues they are already interested in, so you don't just pluck something out of the air, you actually work with them to try and find some in, or some kind of interest of theirs and then look at that, from something very personal or local to something more global.*

(Elizabeth, Britain)

Practitioners reiterated the importance of group brainstorming and discussions, and of learners contributing their own experiences to dialogue to construct meaning together and support each other:

*It's not only important what you might know, but also what you have lived, what you want to transmit from your personal experience. That could be your political ideas ... and everyone is free to respond to that and do their own analysis.*

(Carlos, Spain)

Getting to know other members of the group and making relationships through ice-breakers and building trusting relationships encouraged people to open up and therefore increased participation. This took time and could be achieved only through longer interventions and activities. Providing a space for ideas to be explored was essential to constructing knowledge together and feeling comfortable within the group to talk freely:

*... you really need the time to create a safe space and then allow people to have proper discussions. ... It's being able to create an environment where people can say things that are controversial, things that they really do believe and then being able to let them know, that's ok, that's your perspective.*

(Sally, Britain)

Managing controversial perspectives took time to allow challenges and questions that could be considered respectfully. Some practitioners noted that there was rarely enough time and it was difficult to manage this engagement with controversial points of view.

### **Uncovering power relations and agendas**

For Brookfield (2000), for learning to be 'critical' it was essential that it uncovered hegemonic assumptions and challenged power relations. These elements were also clear in the discourse of the practitioners, who focused on structural injustices and questioned who benefited from the structures in our society, asking what the agendas are behind the information to which we are exposed. Practitioners were critical of modernization theories of development and questioned the way development was framed. They took equality and justice as a starting point and reflected on oppressive

elements of society. In some cases they also used critical thinking as a basis to prompt counter-hegemonic practices.

In both Britain and Spain, questioning why things were the way they were and what agendas underpin dominant perspectives were fundamental aspects of the definition of critical thinking:

*I would define critical thinking as being able to think, when you're told information, being able to question it, question, why am I being told this, who's come up with that information, what's their agenda, why have they told me this, is that actually the truth of the situation, or are there other perspectives?*

(Sally, Britain)

Bias was also noted in the media; practitioners commented that often we are exposed to values and influences that present a partial picture, with power structures privileging some knowledge over others. Development education was a way to provide alternatives to these influences, by considering different sources of information:

*Often information in the media is biased, politically or ideologically ... we try to encourage people to look for other sources of information ... by having different sources, you can make your own vision of the topic a bit broader.*

(Pilar, Spain)

Indeed, countering media portrayals of development issues was a key factor in exposing some of the structures at play. Understanding unjust structures through a critical thinking process with adults was seen as a way to encourage political commitment to issues of equality and social justice:

*We collect signatures and there are activities where we encourage citizens to lobby politicians and demand that governments and authorities fulfil their agreements to the UN, for example.*

(Dolores, Spain)

In some cases, practitioners discussed the importance of engaging with current structures in an attempt to change them, for example by 'demanding investment in public services' (Ignacio, Spain). While in some ways these practices arguably worked within the current system, they aimed to challenge the status quo and to change, at least on some level, the structures that reproduce inequalities and injustices. Uncovering unjust structures and hegemonic assumptions was a fundamental aspect of critical thinking, and within this practitioners discussed being critically aware of oppressive elements of society, and encouraging citizenship participation:

*We try to encourage citizenship participation, understanding that as doing things from below, not pushing things from above.*

(Esperanza, Spain)

Fighting hegemonic structures was understood as something that was not about some 'problem' elsewhere, rather it involved a struggle that can affect us all:

*... it's like a shared sentiment about the nature of global struggle; if we want to kind of try and help people living in other parts of the world, then one of the most productive things we could do really, is try to focus on our own struggles on our own doorstep ... and try and liberate ourselves, I mean you can't liberate other people, it's patronising at best ... we should focus on our own struggles maybe, and identify in solidarity with other people and their struggles.*

(Peter, Britain)

Critical thinking as ideology critique meant identifying power relations and attempting to overcome inequalities in society through revealing and denouncing the ways that structures of power often unconsciously impact on social interactions at every level, from international relations to class struggles and gender bias:

*... social inequality at the economic level and at class level, I don't see that as natural, I see it as an achievement of power, which has established this social inequality.*

(Pilar, Spain)

A fundamental aspect of prompting counter-hegemonic practices was drawing attention to, and building on, the successes of social movements that are often ignored in neo-liberal portrayals of progress:

*The right to vote, the abolition of slavery, the landless people's movement ... in fact, we did an activity [in one of the sessions] about social movements and what they achieved, there was a table of how it was before the social movement and the conditions after. Lots of things came up: the peace movement of Gandhi, the anti-apartheid movement, the abolitionist movement, and so on, and in the end ... many big changes have been achieved through social movements.*

(Pablo, Spain)

Indeed, the importance of highlighting the ways that cooperation can facilitate justice and equality was reiterated as a fundamental dimension of examining issues through critical thinking and noting the importance of these stories that are often missing in dominant discourses:

*... there's more examples of cooperation and equality and societies that live without hierarchy throughout human history, than there is of societies that live with hierarchy ... Capitalism is a recent development ... there've been loads of times*

*when people have lived in really decentralised communities ... the importance of cooperation for our species, and how it's such a natural part of us succeeding ... it's not only desirable in terms of justice, it's desirable in terms of self-interest as well, that we work together, that we cooperate, that we're stronger together.*

(Peter, Britain)

Related to this idea of cooperation was the importance of relationships and networks. Dialogue and critical thinking needed to be part of a process of socialization, in which groups could work together, and this in itself created opportunities for searching for alternatives to the status quo.

*Apart from getting to know other people that share the same values, it's also the character of socialisation which the course has ... people don't take long to form strong relationships within the group ... and personal implications lead to more collective implications ... it's the multiplier effect, these people form networks and that extends it.*

(Carlos, Spain)

It was clear that learners had to guide the critical thinking process, but with often highly political subject matter that questioned dominant discourses and neo-liberal policies there was a difficult balance for practitioners to maintain between being true to their values, and also being fair, open, and willing to challenge their own assumptions.

### **Balancing political agendas with fair-minded critical thinking**

Development education has been criticized by some (for example, Scruton, 1985) for promoting a particular (Leftist) agenda. Therefore, practitioners were asked how they would respond to claims that development education is a form of indoctrination. Some recognized that, to some extent, they did have an agenda, which was to encourage positive social change towards fairness, and that learning about and exploring issues might encourage people to feel 'empowered to make positive social change' (Jenny, Britain). In this sense, education was understood as never being value-free and participants expressed a need to be open about the values on which the work was based:

*... we do have an agenda at some point as well ... we want a more just and sustainable world ... and we want young people to actually think about these things and consider how that connects with their lives.*

(Elizabeth, Britain)

Over-consumption was seen as an unsustainable model, and practitioners were clearly against discrimination, but no one claimed to have all the answers. However,

while they valued open dialogue, occasionally practitioners faced dilemmas when discussions led to conclusions that did not coincide with their own values and they recognized that they did have a predetermined idea of a positive outcome:

*It reminds me actually of a role-play thing with a group of 16–18-year-old girls about the arms trade, and they ... all decided that it was perfectly fine ... to sell arms. And ... although it might be fine for me to walk away from that and say, that was fine, we had a debate and they chose something that I thought was wrong but you know, actually I didn't feel like that at all, I felt that they hadn't properly engaged with the issues and that therefore I, in some measure, had done it the wrong way ... and so therefore I must have had ... you do have an idea of what a positive outcome is, and it wasn't that really, so ...*

(Emma, Britain)

This type of dilemma was reconciled by acknowledging that education could never be completely neutral, but that this did not mean it was indoctrination. Thus, when these dilemmas occurred, an exploration of evidence of exploitation, discrimination, or violence would define their position.

So while NGO practitioners were critical of the neo-liberal ideology, they did not present a fixed alternative but encouraged critical engagement with complexity. To different extents, practitioners talked about the importance of providing balanced views, engaging with perspectives that opposed their own, and looking for a reasoned middle ground where appropriate. Fair-minded critical thinking was one way practitioners balanced political agendas with an educational focus that valued multiple perspectives and dialogue in a safe space. Showing a range of different perspectives, where learners could form their own opinions, was seen as a key way to avoid indoctrinating learners:

*... our opinions our values and beliefs do come into it, but that doesn't prohibit us from being able to explore other ideas either and I think ... we do generally try to select different viewpoints as well, so it's not like we're just selecting one particular stance on something.*

(Sally, Britain)

Having a wide spectrum of different viewpoints provided a means to rationally analyse evidence in order to inform attitudes:

*Critical dialogue comes from a diversity of ways of thinking ... what we try to do is promote a broad spectrum of ways of seeing something ... and look for common ground within that diversity.*

(Pilar, Spain)



Providing information that made people think about things in different ways was seen as the opposite of propaganda. Participants were invited to consider other perspectives or new information, but were always free to ask questions and draw their own conclusions. Two-way learning and learner-led activities were promoted, demonstrating practitioners' openness to learning from their students:

*It's about learning from your participants, I suppose especially doing my work with adults as well; I always learn loads whenever I talk to people about anything, because they're coming at it from so many different experiences.*

(Jane, Britain)

*I see it that we all educate each other ... it's bidirectional, we find points in common, we all learn, and to some extent we all teach.*

(Carlos, Spain)

This implied that practitioners also had to be prepared to challenge their own assumptions, recognize their own cultural bias, and look for positive aspects within different perspectives:

*I do find it quite refreshing to be challenged and then to think ok, I'd never really considered that from that perspective, ok now I've learnt something ... I'm always up for learning and I think that's a good thing to go into the group and be there as somebody who's not the expert ... so some of the things that I've learnt I've really challenged my own perceptions of religion and gender and roles and also perspectives, I've learnt a lot.*

(Sally, Britain)

Practitioners highlighted activities such as debating an issue in role, taking a position that may not coincide with one's own opinion, debate carousels, and arguing from different perspectives. This openness to all voices was important and practitioners talked about the richness of working through different points of view as a group. In order to keep this space open and comfortable, respect and honesty were vital elements. This included listening to the views of others, giving them due consideration, and not imposing ideas onto learners:

*... just trying to keep that space safe ... one where people feel respected and that they can have their voice heard ... and where there is something that doesn't sit with our value base, not just letting it go, but trying to challenge it in a way that doesn't make that person feel victimised because I suppose when they're at school, and in lots of settings, if a young person says something racist, it's not allowed and they'll get shouted at, or they'll get in trouble ... and all that really teaches them is just not to talk about what they think, or to only talk about it with people who feel the same as them, which will reinforce those ideas, so, I think it's important that we try to*

*create that space so they can talk about it ... and they might learn different ways of looking at things.*

(Jenny, Britain)

Being open-minded and willing to challenge your own perspectives was essential. Ultimately, it was important that learners were able to come to their own conclusions and were given the skills they needed to critically analyse sources of information and different perspectives, without presupposing that things were 'black and white' (Elizabeth, Britain) or that there were 'right or wrong answers' (Fernanda, Spain). Development education was seen as an opportunity to engage people to think about their own place in the world and make their own decisions:

*I think there are spaces where people can sit and talk and discuss ... to see what vision of the world you have and what your priority values are. ... Our idea is to develop a critical spirit, in which everyone can make their own decisions about their place in the world, their relationship with others, with their environment, their role as a citizen, as a consumer, as a person in general.*

(Carlos, Spain)

In Britain there was some discussion about the difficulties of accommodating perspectives that clashed with the organizations' values. They were clear that it was important to respect all views and allow all voices to be heard, even those with which the workers did not agree, such as the British National Party (BNP) or attitudes perceived as racist. It was recognized that every person had different life experiences that affected their identities, and development education workers had to engage even with opinions that opposed their own. In doing so they showed signs of fair-minded critical thinking:

*Obviously all our work is about different perspectives and valuing different perspectives, and so, we might get a young person whose dad's in the BNP, and as much as we don't agree with racism, we can't just say well our value base is anti-racist so, this is what it is and you have to deal with it. I think that what underpins ... our approach though is that dialogue and that respecting perspectives, and respecting his dad's life experiences and this young person's life experiences and how that has shaped what they think and just trying to work with them to maybe broaden their perspectives, not just saying you're wrong.*

(Jenny, Britain)

The point was made that within a safe space views might arise that oppose a practitioner's views, that this could be managed through dialogue within the group to avoid imposing a particular perspective, while encouraging open-mindedness:

*We try to create a space that is safe enough that views can be heard ... some of the views have challenged me. In that there are things that I strongly disagree with and you've got to try and manage that, but as a facilitator, I mean we often do activities that are brainstorming and writing things down on flipcharts and presenting them back to the group, but it's very much about saying how do others feel about that response, do you agree, do you disagree? Is it ok to disagree?*

(Kate, Britain)

It was clear that all ideas should be explored as a group, through dialogue, never 'forcing it or telling people what they should do' (Sally, Britain). Knowledge was understood as incomplete and the aim was that learners were equipped with the skills to be able to take part in the debate, contributing their own ideas and experiences to rational argument:

*I think it's a commitment to process ... so if you cultivate critical thinking skills, through a variety of different activities or whatever, then people come to their own conclusions, and it is trying to encourage free thinking, open-minded, critically minded individuals.*

(Peter, Britain)

The intention was to acknowledge controversy and create a process where learners could explore complexity together rather than being provided with simplistic solutions to intractable problems. Step-by-step accounts of how to make the world better were criticized:

*Fairtrade is one of my bugbears ... if you look at the Fairtrade Foundation website: How to become a Fairtrade school, step 1, form a Fairtrade committee, then step 2 get the canteen to take Fairtrade up ... well no! Step 1 is let's have a discussion about Fairtrade, what is Fairtrade, is it actually a beneficial movement? Is it just salving middle-class consciences? Does it benefit only a tiny minority? Is it a sticking plaster on the backside of a much more unfair global system, you know ... and I get quite annoyed about DEC's that are sort of evangelical about Fairtrade, when actually it should be a contested ... you know like a lot of things we teach about, they're contested issues. That needs to be up front.*

(Christopher, Britain)

There was clear evidence of fair-minded critical thinking, but practitioners also made the point that this was extremely difficult to facilitate, and it also had to be managed without reinforcing stereotypes or allowing learners to engage in discriminating behaviour. In order to do this well, time was essential and the reality was that this was rarely available in non-formal education activities with adults. Where there were longer-term courses, such as volunteer training in Spain or global youth work in

Britain, there were clear examples of the ideal becoming reality. Illustrative examples of non-formal development education examined as a follow-up to this research with practitioners are reported elsewhere (Brown, 2013b).

### **Critical thinking in development education**

While ideology critique and fair-minded critical thinking are by no means opposite positions and usually both feature in an organization's work, in some respects clearly committing to a political agenda has a slightly different focus from facilitating open dialogue that encourages all perspectives to be explored safely. While elements of both of these were evident in Spain and Britain, to some extent there was more of a tendency towards ideology critique in Spain and more discussion of safe spaces in Britain. Nevertheless, this article aimed to consider the important aspects of critical thinking across both contexts and certainly there are far more similarities than differences; I have also demonstrated how practitioners' perspectives on development education practice align with the theoretical contributions of Mezirow (2000), Brookfield (2000), and Paul (1990).

These organizations valued the use of rationality to investigate and explore issues critically. They felt that while there were certain truths, these could be interpreted from rationally analysing different perspectives to work towards an understanding of complexity (Mezirow, 2000). There were clear examples of ideology critique (Brookfield, 2000), and an agenda of social change. However, this did not purport to impose another predetermined ideology; rather, they saw a need to open up questions to debate to search for solutions, alternatives, and compromises in fair and open dialogue (Paul, 1990).

Practitioners felt that critiquing over-consumption, discrimination, and violence did not mean telling people what to think or pushing a specific ideology. It was clear that values could not be imposed, but there was a view that learners often already shared values, such as fairness, and that the role of development education was to provide information and a space to critically reflect on this, helping learners analyse their own actions:

*I think probably it's looking at what your values are, and actually looking at the implications of that, so for example, I think most people would sign up to fairness ... there's a value that most people wouldn't say 'I'd love things to be unfair' ... but ... because of the way the world is interconnected they might be then doing something that causes unfairness, so it's kind of raising awareness of that, and the inconsistencies of that.*

(Emma, Britain)

Open-mindedness was an essential feature of critical thinking, but there was also a need to be clear about values, such as standing up for equality and justice. However, it was important to recognize different means and processes, and that different experiences might lead to different points of view. Therefore, the aim was to be able to broaden perspectives without victimizing people, ensuring they felt safe to reflect on their own experiences from shared values such as fairness. Ultimately it was fundamental that learners were encouraged to form their own opinions, with room for diversity and non-consensus. To some extent this implies a two-pronged approach for development education of standing by an agenda of justice and equality and at the same time facilitating tools for learners to become critical of all agendas for themselves. For this, they needed to be able to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and consider appropriate solutions, as well as propose their own ideas.

There was evidence from both countries that practitioners' interpretations of critical thinking and dialogue coincide with the pedagogies associated with transformative learning. These practitioners had a clear understanding of theory and were insightful in the ways they managed ideology critique and fair-minded critical thinking as key elements of transformative learning. However, this work is highly demanding for educators, and it is unsurprising that within the constraints under which these organizations work, there is not always time for such a process. Furthermore, managing fair-minded critical thinking requires specific training and practice, something many development education practitioners do not have, particularly in Spain, where their role extends to managing development projects as well as development education activities. Given the potential importance of development education for a more critically conscious society, a focus on training and sharing good practice for engaging adults in critical thinking could benefit practice in both of these countries. Opportunities for critical dialogue are currently scarce and this could be a missed opportunity for organizations keen to generate public debate about social justice and create a better understanding of global issues.

***Eleanor J. Brown*** is a research fellow at the University of York. She recently completed her PhD in development education at the University of Nottingham, where she worked for several years as a researcher on projects on peace education, global citizenship, effective classroom practice, and school leadership. She works closely with a number of development education centres in England and is employed as a freelance evaluator on a development education project with Global Education Derby. Eleanor spent a year conducting research based at the University of Granada, Spain, and has worked with a number of non-formal development organizations in Andalusia and Catalonia. Prior to studying for a Master's degree in international relations, Eleanor taught English as a foreign language in Barcelona, Spain, and San Jose, Costa Rica.

Contact details: [eleanorjbrown79@gmail.com](mailto:eleanorjbrown79@gmail.com)

## Note

1 My translation from the Spanish.

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