Dialogue

Beyond Education for All: Using ableism studies lens and the BIAS FREE framework

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ABSTRACT *Brigid Burke and Gregor Wolbring employ favouritism for abilities and ableism lens and the BIAS FREE Framework as two tools to analyse different education initiatives (Education for All, Education for Sustainable Development, Education for Human Rights, Inclusive Education and Adult Education initiatives). They conclude that whereas these initiatives are fragmented, the underlying abilities favoured by the initiatives are complementary and should be combined to increase their potency, which in turn would support the building of a holistic, equitable approach to education to which people are entitled by their human rights.*

KEYWORDS *human rights; equity; sustainable development; marginalized peoples/populations*

Introduction

Education is a right in and of itself (Nolde, 1949). It is essential for realizing other human rights and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (The United Nations, 2010). It is a building block for health, employment, gender equality, environmental conservation, economic security and democracy (Glaeser *et al.*, 2007; Mula and Tilbury, 2009; The United Nations, 2010).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes the importance of education and supports education-promoting initiatives: Education for All (EFA), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Education for Human Rights (EHR), Inclusive Educations (IE) and Adult Education (AE). Recent publications question the divided approach to education and call for more integration (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007; Wade and Parker, 2008; Gadotti, 2010).

Integration approaches, however, have been limited to EFA–ESD and EFA–EHR initiatives, excluding IE and AE. Furthermore, the primary focus has been on women and 'the poor', while people with disabilities (PWD), indigenous people, people living in conflict situations, informal settlements, refugee camps, rural areas, migrant workers, ethnic and linguistic minorities and other marginalized populations, are largely ignored. Furthermore, the initiatives do not provide road maps of how to achieve holistic education.

Ableism studies are the studies of social, cultural, legal, political and ethical influences that inform which abilities one cherishes or rejects, as well as the impact and consequences this may have (Wolbring, 2008a). The BIAS FREE Framework (Burke and Eichler, 2006) is a rights-based tool for identifying and eliminating inequities. The Framework has had various applications, including a joint Pan American Health Organization initiative with other international and national partners to transform a Costa Rican maternity hospital into a women's hospital, the development of guidelines for gender bias-free Clinical Practice Guidelines by the Ministry of Health, Basque Country, Spain and the situational analysis of disabled children in Kyrgyzstan for UNICEF Kyrgyzstan and other key stakeholders (The BIAS FREE Co-operative, 2010).

We argue that the favouritism for abilities and ableism lens and the BIAS FREE Framework could be instrumental in identifying and addressing limitations to education initiatives identified below.

Tools for achieving equitable, holistic education

The concept of ableism evolved from the civil rights movements in the United States and Britain during the 1960s and 1970s (Encyclopedia of Disability, 2006). It is used in disabilities studies (Taylor *et al.*, 2003) to question and highlight expectations towards body abilities and the prejudice and discrimination against persons whose body structures and ability functioning are labelled as 'impaired' (Carlson, 2001; Overboe, 2007; Campbell, 2008; Wolbring, 2010). Recently the concept of ableism has been expanded (Wolbring, 2010) recognizing that people can cherish many different abilities (favouritism of abilities) and that the cherishing of any ability can morph into ableism where one not only cherishes but also where one sees a given ability in oneself or others as essential. Ableism can be positive and negative (Wolbring, 2008b). One could choose to see the ability to maintain equity for ones members as essential and members of a society could see this as positive. However, one

can also use ableism to deprive others of their human rights, which would be a negative form of ableism. We highlight which abilities are valued and promoted in the five UNESCO education initiatives.

The second tool advocated, the *BIAS FREE* Framework, is a rights-based tool for identifying and eliminating inequities. It identifies 19 biases grouped under three categories: maintaining a hierarchy, failing to examine difference and using a double standard (Burke and Eichler, 2006). Its use is promoted by the International Human Rights Funders Group (2008), the Global Forum for Health Research (2009) and the Canadian Policy Research Network (Sheedy *et al.*, 2008), among others. The Framework is built on the assertion that biases maintain social hierarchies based on ability, age, caste, class, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, among others, which play out in policies, programmes, services, practices, attitudes etc., and result in inequities (Burke and Eichler, 2006).

UNESCO approaches to holistic education

The UNESCO report 'Quality Education, Equity and Sustainable Development: A holistic vision through UNESCO's four world education conferences 2008–2009' recognizes the fragmented approach to education initiatives and calls for a holistic approach. It argues that:

> [An] education system is a complex whole, composed of many interrelated, interdependent and interacting parts. They form a collective entity and what happens in one part interferes in other parts. (UNESCO, 2008)

Two further UNESCO reports advocate for an integrative approach. They explore how an integrated approach might be implemented, and identify possible tensions (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007; Wade and Parker, 2008).

The first United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)/UNESCO report: 'A Human Rights' Approach to Education for All' outlines how EFA and EHR initiatives and the responsibilities of various stakeholders in implementing EFA and

EHR education initiatives should be integrated. It argues that to focus only on universal enrolment in primary school is insufficient. It asserts that enrolment alone is useless without quality education: in many developing countries, including Bangladesh, Brazil, Ghana, Pakistan, Philippines and Zambia, quality of education is so low that national test data show only marginally better results for primary school leavers compared to children who have not completed school. The report argues that education initiatives should focus on enrolment as well as quality and EHR, as essential to successful education and fostering equity, social cohesion, empowerment and democracy (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007).

The second report: 'EFA and ESD Dialogue: Educating for a Sustainable Future' (Wade and Parker, 2008) highlights the values behind EFA and ESD and analyses synergies and tensions within the EFA and ESD discourses. According to the report, EFA is concerned mostly with education within formal settings, making it difficult to challenge set structures. ESD, on the other hand, promotes and necessitates critical reflection by all teaching and learning institutions and individuals themselves upon their behaviours, actions and commitments and calls for change throughout formal education systems and informal means of socialization, such as the media. EFA is seen as conforming to the 'development model' whereby 'education' is provided to passive 'recipients'. ESD questions this model and engages learners to become agents of change towards sustainable development by changing attitudes, values and actions. It concludes that whereas there are challenges, a holistic approach would best advance progress towards the MDGs.

Three limitations to the UNESCO approach

However, there are three main limitations. First, despite their objective, neither approach is truly holistic. Both limit integration to two discourses (EFA–ESD and EFA–EHR). A truly holistic approach would integrate all initiatives: EFA, ESD, EHR, IE and AE.

Using favouritism for abilities and ableism lens, one can identity the abilities favoured by UNESCO education initiatives: EFA speaks to the ability to complete primary education and beyond. ESD speaks to the 'what' component of education: the ability to empower and be empowered by education, embrace values of sustainable development and develop and utilize the tools for achieving it (Wade and Parker, 2008). EHR speaks to the 'how' component: the ability to learn in a nurturing, equitable environment where human rights are respected, embraced and used to empower students to promote equity and democracy (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007). Both IE and AE speak to the 'who' component of education. IE promotes the ability of disadvantaged populations, including women and girls, PWD, working children, ethnic and language minorities, those affected by HIV/AIDS and rural/remote dwellers and nomads among others, to obtain equitable, accessible education (UNESCO, 2009). AE promotes the ability of adults who did not receive education as children but as adults, and the ability to engage in life-long learning and update knowledge and skills relevant in an evolving society (UNESCO 6th International Conference on Adult Education, 2009). No coherent strategy exists to integrate the abilities identified as essential in the five education initiatives into a holistic approach that fosters equity, social cohesion, empowerment and democracy.

The second limitation is that both reports consider the various stakeholders in education initiatives, mentioning the importance of addressing the needs of marginalized populations, but place considerable emphasis on women and poverty. This we consider hinders progress towards universal education as well as democratization and the realization of human rights. The EFA–ESD report by emphasizing the importance of gender and poverty could exclude other marginalized populations. The EFA–EHR report places more attention on meeting the different needs of all populations including women, the poor, rural dwellers, aboriginal groups, PWD, ethnic/language minorities, adult learners etc. Simply mentioning the needs of marginalized populations is not enough unless those needs are met in practice.

The third limitation is that the reports provide no means of implementing holistic education approaches. The EFA–ESD report highlights the advantages of integrative approaches for rallying wider support from governments, corporations and individuals. It emphasizes the need for partnership and support from developed/developing countries, the marginalized poor and the wealthy elites. There is, however, no concrete framework from a holistic approach that proposes how to overhaul existing educational systems or what to do when no functioning system exists. The EFA–EHR report provides a detailed framework for a holistic educational system. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in upholding this system. It emphasizes the need for: political will in supporting human rights and education initiatives; fostering transparency and accountability for educational processes; participatory approaches in which all stakeholders help shape their educational systems; and taking into account and meeting the needs of all relevant populations (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007). Having an outline of what should happen still falls short of having a plan for how to achieve it.

Although holistic education approaches are ideal, financial constraints often limit governments' ability to implement them. The EFA–EHR report argues that governments should prioritize education initiatives and where scarce resources lead to trade-offs (e.g. investing in primary education at the cost of developing educational opportunities for PWD), governments must have clear strategies and timeframes for realizing EFA (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007). However, the report fails to question the values which result in so little

money being allocated to education and other human development initiatives. Instead it advocates for a priority-setting approach that could result in entire groups being prevented from realizing human rights and democratization. Applying the BIAS FREE Framework in conjunction with an ableism lens would problematize these underlying values and biases in priority setting.

Towards a truly holistic approach to education

The two UNESCO reports call for holistic education initiatives. The reports have several limitations: their 'holistic' approach is limited to two initiatives only (EFA–ESD and EFA–EHR); they overly emphasize gender and poverty and lastly, they provide no guidance on how to achieve a holistic approach to education.

We suggest that applying an ableism lens with the BIAS FREE Framework would address these limitations, identifying the essential values for holistic education and providing tangible guidance as to how to achieve it. For example, reading the EFA–EHR report through an ableism lens highlights values such as the ability of PWD to obtain equitable education. Application of the BIAS FREE Framework would help identify biases in existing policies and practices and shape the formulation of new policies, programmes and sercices.

Applying an ableism lens with the BIAS FREE Framework can ensure a holistic, equitable approach to education, contributing to democratization, sustainable development, equity and well-being.

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