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Is Schooling the best way to educate children in the developing world?
(with specific reference to the module placement)

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in the Prologue of his challenging and prophetic book, *Transformative Learning*, published in 1999, psychologist O'Sullivan called for a visionary and transformative educational framework for the 21st century which "must clearly go beyond the conventional outlooks that we have cultivated for the last several centuries," (p.3).

O'Sullivan's self-styled 'ecozoic' approach suggests a post-modernist re-think of educational purpose and practice, founded upon a vital re-connection between man and nature. He alludes to primordial intelligence and holds up indigenous knowledge transfer from one generation to the next as a wholly appropriate method of teaching and learning. Whilst his musings may seem Utopian and somewhat naïve there is truth and a deal of common sense in what he says, particularly in the light of growing concern about the effects of climate change. Add to this a debt-ridden generation and large swathes of disaffected young people, and we are faced with a powerful, toxic mix that threatens to engulf our human propensity for self-improvement as well as our collective sense of altruism.

Whilst painfully revealing our inter-connectedness with more than market forces, deepening global crises often foster an attitude of retrenchment. With pressure at home it is harder to view the bigger picture, yet we are all affected by each other's actions, fortunes and misfortunes. O' Sullivan's solution would have us not only reconnect with nature but also with each other,

acknowledging ancient wisdom and learning from past generations as well as looking beyond physical borders and philosophical boundaries for useful models to adapt and replicate, all the while keeping the need for planetary survival uppermost.

“Because of the magnitude of this responsibility for the planet, all our educational ventures must finally be judged within this order of magnitude. This is the challenge for all areas of education.” (Ibid p. 7)

The popular uprisings of recent months, particularly in the Middle East, largely provoked by decades of state-sponsored poverty, give some hope that new and equitable systems for development will grow in emerging democracies and that this will include improvements to the provision and quality of education. However, progress in post-conflict fragile states is often slow as basic infrastructures need to be rebuilt alongside the strengthening of state institutions, civil society and the encouragement of democratic processes of government. Education for All remains a worthy Millennium Development Goal but it may not be a top priority in places where food and water are scarce and basic humanitarian aid paramount. However, to concur with O’Sullivan’s transformative stance, it is only through a re-consideration of educational purpose and practice that long-lasting fundamental improvements can be made for the wider benefit of all citizens and for the planet as a whole.

This paper seeks to explore that purpose and practice in relation to peripheral populations, particularly in rural areas with specific reference to Latin America and the less-developed northern states of Brazil where some of the planet’s most important environmental assets are threatened by commercial

development at the expense of human development, and to the detriment of all of us. Evidence is presented from a range of scholarly texts, project reports and policy documents, and also from field observations.

DEVELOPMENT AND PERIPHERAL POPULATIONS

O'Sullivan accurately pinpoints the mismatch between growing urban demands and rural sustainability, a critical dilemma for Brazil in respect of its northern states where most of the country's rural poor are to be found. That the Amazon Forest is being plundered and fought over for commercial gain is not news; world leaders have been debating the global effects of deforestation for decades with slow progress on regulatory agreements.

Meanwhile, worldwide public awareness about the impact of significant loss of tree cover coupled with the increase in greenhouse gases has permeated the collective human consciousness, and certain mitigating behaviours are now commonplace such as recycling, the use of low energy light bulbs and carbon fuel tax.

However, whilst the affluent west adjusts its life-style on the home front, paying perhaps a little more money to maintain standards of living, the plight of communities who live in fragile eco-systems are given scant attention.

They are on the periphery of things, not only geographically but also socially, politically and economically. That the 1992 Earth Summit took place in the relatively sophisticated southern metropolis of Rio de Janeiro and not in one of Brazil's northern cities is indicative of the problems facing the less

developed north. Then, as now, the infrastructure necessary to support the life-style of a wealthy ruling class is largely absent in places such as Belém, a city that sits on the banks of the vast Amazon delta, or Santarém and Manaus, cities located within the heart of the Amazon Forest itself. Hosting a world conference of global importance in a city without an international airport or a luxury hotel complex was and still is inconceivable. Whilst Brazil certainly remains a focus of world concern in respect of environmental issues, its history and geography obfuscate even its own engagement with the day-to-day lives of those who live far from the centre of things.

It is however common knowledge that cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo also have their share of the poor. These places accommodate some of the largest slum dwellers in the world in the numerous 'favelas' that have grown up on the outskirts of the urban sprawl, largely as a result of a population drift away from the rural areas. It is perhaps easier to give attention (and available resources) to such visible poor and needy and to those whose proximity threatens to undermine the ruling class who live and work nearby? Addressing problems of mass poverty requires governments and donors to think big, designing macro schematic solutions that can be easily replicated and multiplied for greatest effect. The sheer maths involved makes impressive reading and so it seems to the world at large that 'something' is being done.

In the mid 1990s President Fernando Cardoso of Brazil made education his number one priority with a campaign called "Acorda Brasil! Tá na Hora da

Escola" (Wake Up, Brazil! It's Time for School). Cardoso's initiative aimed to improve the country's poor record on educational achievement, which had placed it bottom in a UNICEF survey of the 10 countries with the worst results. (www.brazzil.com 1995). However, money and resources may not have been the fundamental problem even then; according to The World Bank only one fifth of the money set aside by the Brazilian government for educational purposes actually reached the classrooms it was intended to transform. Cardoso's response was to blame "middlemen" for spending 30% to 50% of the total expenditure designated for education. (Ibid)

It is hardly surprising then that Brazil approached the new century with 30 million "declared" illiterates, 20 million of them over the of age 10. According to the National Council of Scientific and Technological Development, if these trends continued to prevail Brazil would not attain a 90% high school graduation rate until the year 3080. (Ibid) The scale of the task was thus immense, and not least in the rural areas.

Being peripheral to the centre is a trait that the rural poor share with their urban cousins, according to Cummings, writing about 'The Limits of Modern Education' (Ed. Nielsen & Cummings, 1997). Along with class, affluence, ethnicity, language and difficult terrain, he cites geography as a contributory factor in respect of government failure to provide adequate social services including education. However, whilst acknowledging similarities of need between the urban and rural poor, Cummings posits that geography is "the most powerful force leading to peripheralization" (ibid p. 15) with large nations doing the poorest job in providing a universal service. Brazil then, with its vast

landmass encompassing 8,512 square kilometres, must surely be one of the worst offenders?

BRAZIL IN CONTEXT

Brazil's recent emergence as one of the new burgeoning economies, along with Russia, India and China, (collectively known as BRIC) has seen the country's economy grow quicker than any other Latin American country, growing by 7.5% last year and set to overtake the UK before the end of 2011, to become the world's 6th largest economy, according to the IMF's Economist Intelligence Unit (Rio Times, 2011). Earlier this year, in a strange reversal of fortunes, the newly elected Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, even pledged to offer support to Portugal, by buying government bonds to alleviate the stricken economy of its former colonial masters.

In a few decades Brazil has gone from being a recipient of foreign aid to joining the list of donor countries, forming an aid alliance known as ABC that largely benefits Lusophone and Latin American states such as former Portuguese colonies Angola and Mozambique, and neighbouring countries such as Peru, (Muggah & Szabà de Carval, 2009). Such generosity is laudable but how, one might ask, is Brazil doing back home, specifically in respect of education for those who remain on the periphery?

Following an ever-increasing spiral of post-war economic downturns and failed stabilization plans, Brazil finally adopted a raft of reforms in 1994 that

began to pave the way for fiscal recovery and higher standards of living. A need to rid itself of the burden of the past and bring about widespread social change eventually resulted in a range of measures designed to address inequality.

According to research reported by Gomes and Câmara (2004), in the 40 years leading up to 2000 Brazil's urban population nearly doubled, rising from just over 45% to reach approximately 81% of the total population. Data from the 1999 National Household Sampling Survey showed that 47.3% of the rural population had no earnings compared to 40.6% of the total population. Child and adolescent labour was also more prevalent in rural areas along with high rates of illiteracy. The earlier 1996 Census had revealed that only 4% of children in rural areas experienced 9 or more years of schooling (from age 3 upwards) compared to nearly 18% of the total equivalent population. Despite endemic problems associated with rurality, the percentage of population employed by agriculture in 1999 was calculated at 24.2%. Given the figures for rural and urban population spread, this appears to be an unfeasibly high percentage. However the figure does not include the rural north, home to the country's most peripheral population where agriculture is practiced less intensively without widespread mechanisation, and also where the majority of the country's indigenous and landless population live.

Despite the late 20th century reforms and the resulting growth in the Brazilian economy, 'undereducation' remains a continuing concern for Brazil (ibid p. 17), along with corruption, violence and poverty. Violence is of particular concern in respect of the youth population in urban and rural areas as murder

is the highest cause of death amongst young people aged 15-25. (Globo cited in Open Democracy, 2006.)

Gomes and Câmara were co-authors of a 2004 UNESCO sponsored report, focusing on a vocational and technical education and training programme called SENAR. They readily acknowledged many state-sponsored educational innovations across the wider educational spectrum such as ring-fenced investment money derived from tax revenues, direct grants, standardised evaluation, local school management, curriculum improvements and teacher training. However, they identified issues of “quality and equity” as the main challenges needing to be addressed, particularly in the peripheral and largely rural north of the country.

EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN PERIPHERAL AREAS – SOME EXAMPLES

Whilst we are mainly concerned with educational provision for children it is useful to note the success or otherwise of services for peripheral adult populations, which often extend to encompass a wider spectrum of learners including children.

SENAR, a Brazilian rural apprenticeship scheme regarded as a pioneer in the field of vocational education, grew out of the post-war, semi-private TVET (technical and vocational education and training systems). SENAR itself was founded by a federal act of legislation in 1991 to provide not only vocational education and training for men and women in rural areas but also to promote

social programmes and increase civic participation in democracy. SENAR is supported by the state through income tax revenue, and managed by a multi-agency board comprising employer and worker representatives. It is run along the lines of a private business, operating at a local level, delivering learning via outreach to rural areas in an attempt to remove the barriers to participation, such as transport costs, and thereby pave the way for a high uptake.

In tandem with its main focus on occupational work-based training, SENAR runs literacy and numeracy programmes, which espouse Freire's pedagogical approach to empowering the peasant class through the 'generativity' of workplace text and 'real' maths, both of which are related to "rural work and life conditions" (ibid p. 32). SENAR also takes account of sensitive cultural issues around traditional gender roles which means that men and women mostly learn in single sex programmes. Tutors/instructors are drawn from the local workforce and hired on an ad hoc basis with many committing to the programme through a shared belief in social and community development.

The 'social promotion' mandate invested in SENAR is defined as "a non-formal, participative educational process, aiming to develop the social and personal abilities of rural workers and their families, as well as to improve life quality" (ibid p. 39). Through the analysis of numbers of learners and hours spent learning it would seem that the informal community aspect of SENAR has had a greater take up than the primary purpose of the scheme, i.e. formal vocational training. The popular appeal of the programme's social strand is

particularly evident in respect of courses focussed on traditional practices such as herbal medicine and those linked to recycling and the improvement of basic services such as water supply.

The success of *Agrinho*, a SENAR supported project aimed at children in rural elementary schools in the state of Paraná, to teach awareness of health issues in respect of toxic agricultural chemicals, became so successful that it was subsequently expanded to cover three cross-curricular topics each year (health, environment and citizenship), reaching approximately 80% of rural and urban elementary pupils in the state, (ibid p. 41).

Meanwhile, the SENAR Rural Citizen Project operates much like a travelling fair, ranging across several states, offering educational and social services as part of large-scale special events. Services include the issuing of birth certificates and identification papers which can be hard to obtain in rural areas, yet which remain vital to full participation in political, economic and civic life. Linking the fundamentals of citizenship to a learning organisation helps to promote the importance of education for all, demonstrating the government's commitment to improving outcomes for its poorest citizens.

However, SENAR's greatest influence is still in the more modernised south where the rural population is more concentrated and agricultural practices more industrialised. Northern and central regions generally receive far less benefits from the scheme except for the north east where social promotion projects are in the majority. Local conditions are a significant factor in the

distribution of SENAR resources with coverage being particularly low in the Amazon Valley where the population is widely scattered and hard to reach.

Two evaluations of the SENAR project discussed by Gomes and Câmara appear to arrive at conflicting views in respect of several aspects of the initiative. A study by a private group of an integrated SENAR programme in less developed areas, which focussed on adolescent literacy, social promotion and occupational education, reported a significant impact on entrepreneurship and educational awareness-raising or 'conscientization', a concept observed and defined by Freire (1970).

However, a contemporary informal evaluation conducted by CONTAG, a grass-roots' agricultural workers' organisation, suggests that because SENAR programmes were largely determined by employers they tended to reinforce existing social systems, limiting opportunities for the collective social transformation that O'Sullivan suggests is imperative for the future wellbeing of the planet. CONTAG proposed that 50% of the SENAR resources should therefore be devolved to the rural unions to pursue programmes which more accurately matched their philosophical principles, particularly in respect of equality of opportunity.

"SENAR's experience has shown that market mechanisms alone are favourable to efficiency, but not necessarily to equity." (Ibid, p. 59)

The most relevant and profound lessons from SENAR in respect of other less

developed countries is the need for a holistic, integrated, community-based approach to education and social development.

In considering the community context within which schools operate in difficult areas such as remote, rural settlements, Williams suggests that, “school-community collaboration may be the only possible strategy for realizing the goal of full access to quality education.” (Ibid, p. 40). In peripheral areas the local community generally has greater influence upon the lives of its children than in urban areas; depending upon a community’s perception of education this can be both helpful and/or problematic requiring sensitive management. For example, a state-imposed national curriculum delivered in a non-native language to a remote indigenous tribal group may threaten traditional core values and therefore be rejected whereas a cross-curricular literacy programme linked to the development of sustainable tourism, for example, may be welcomed. Williams’ ‘Theory C’ proposes the notion of ‘school-community exchange’ whereby both parties collaborate in mutually beneficial development projects (ibid. p. 42). These could include educational programmes adapted to take account of local values and needs, established through de-regulated non-formal means and delivered in a variety of settings.

“The failure to take account of non-mainstream forms of learning (e.g. indigenous knowledge of resource management), combined with the constraints of the job market, risks further marginalizing those populations that education should seek to empower.” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 16)

Programmes such as those established by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) to provide education to girls at the

beginning or end of a working day are one example (ibid p. 45). Others quoted by Williams include several programmes in Colombia, including *Escuela Nueva* which permits student enrolment at any age with progression linked to individual progress rather than allied to the state system (ibid Republic of Colombia, 1990). Evaluation shows that *Escuela Nueva* students outperform their peers in conventional schools in respect of Spanish, maths and socio-civic behaviour, with girls scoring equally as well as boys on tests to assess self-esteem. (Lovell and Fatema, 1989 and Republic of Colombia, 1990, quoted in Williams, ibid p. 55).

Flexible time-tabling and scheduling is one way that education can be delivered more effectively to peripheral populations. However, location is another important factor. The *Vakaswadi* project in India took the idea of school into the meadows, teaching children in small groups as they took turns to watch the cattle, (UNESCO, 1984, quoted in Williams, p. 47). At the other end of the spectrum Indian 'ashram' schools offer students boarding facilities in self-running learning communities where lessons are taught alongside husbandry (ibid p. 51).

If one of the main purposes of schooling is "the inculcation of "modern" values and national allegiance" as suggested by Williams in his critical analysis of the status quo (ibid p. 43) then schooling, as a distinct, state-imposed institutional concept developed by the industrialised west, may be increasingly outmoded. Broader definitions around notions of education and learning have the potential to be both more inclusive and cost-effective, as space is created for

local determination at all levels from management to delivery. Educational programmes which focus on aspects of local culture may also face less resistance and provide a much-needed bridge between the central authorities and peripheral areas.

“When a creative teacher, school, or community organization is able to link education with a devalued or threatened local culture, community interest in education is solidified.” (Williams, *ibid*, p. 56)

The Shuar Radio Education Project in Ecuador worked with community leaders to establish a bi-lingual Spanish-Shuar distance-learning programme that increased educational uptake by enabling aboriginal children to remain in their own communities following a crucial land entitlement process. These newly educated citizens have subsequently stayed in their community helping to develop business ideas in order to further sustain their community.

(Merion, 1984, Williams etc p 56.)

EDUCATION AS PART OF ‘LIVING CULTURE’ IN NORTHERN BRAZIL

On the remote island of Marajó, a land-mass twice the size of Wales situated within the mouth of the vast Amazon River, a local spiritual leader, Dona Zeneida Lima, has established a modern school catering for the children of the island’s timber-workers that draws together many of the threads discussed in this paper. The UNESCO-sponsored *Mystic World School* uses a cross-curricular pedagogical whole-community approach, combining creativity and environmental education as the main delivery mechanisms. The school supports a micro-enterprise training programme linked to the production of

traditional island ceramics and unashamedly incorporates spiritual aspects of the indigenous culture linked to local water deities known as 'caranuas'. The transmission of culturally specific ancient knowledge, wisdom and practices (such as herbal medicine and dance narratives) from one generation to the next is a key plank in the school's methodology, as is the deliberate inclusion of families who work in the industries that threaten local bio-diversity.

The school has close links with the island's Culture Point (Ponto Cultura) which is located in a community centre dedicated to the practice of *Carimbó*, a traditional form of music and dance which has evolved from the days of slavery. The establishment of Culture Points throughout Brazil in 2004 by Gilberto Gil, the world famous musician and Brazilian Minister of Culture, was made in order to identify local actors and creative communities sympathetic to the aims of his cross-cutting policy of 'Living Culture', seen as a key economic driver vital to the country's progress and development.

"At a historic moment in which the fight against poverty has taken center stage in political and economic debates at a national level – following decades during which this problem stayed out of the spotlights – the Federal Government has underscored, in its social programs, the importance of culture for social and economic development and as the driving force behind human development." (Republic of Brazil, p. 38)

Living Culture's links with education are both implicit and explicit with many Culture Points delivering 'popular' or informal education, alongside a more formal schools' programme which enshrines and develops cultural entitlement and learning through creativity. Living Culture recognises the many children and young people who have missed out on schooling and are subsequently

excluded from mainstream society, providing scholarships for young people to benefit from creative apprenticeships with cultural organisations such as samba schools, media organisations, publishing projects, street theatre companies and so on.

The designation of existing community arts projects as Culture Points rather than the invention and imposition of new initiatives demonstrates Gil's innate knowledge and understanding of peripherality. The programme is designed to spread from the margins to the margins and "later to the center" (ibid, p. 9). Acting as key focal points, the Culture Points form a conduit for two-way communication, informing local, regional and national policy as well as implementing a wide range of alternative community-orientated educational initiatives.

The Living Culture programme document cites Vygotsky's "proximal development" model as the inspiration for its methodology (ibid p.37), whereby knowledge is built through collaborative social action learning processes which engage with authentic culture. Each Culture Point is therefore specific to its place. In Marajó it is a Carimbó Club but in Rio de Janeiro it is the world-renowned multi-arts AfroReggae outfit, which began in 1992 as an alternative newspaper project in response to the extreme street violence of Rio's most notorious 'favela' Vigario Geral. Diversity of cultural practice abounds yet the Culture Points feel a sense of kinship and common purpose and are indeed networked nationally. It is an effective and low-cost government scheme which has been noted further afield.

Writing in The Guardian about her rationale for programming the 'Brazil' festival for London's Southbank in the summer of 2010, British cultural heavyweight Jude Kelly pays tribute to the Latin American nation's belief in the power of creativity to change the lives of even its poorest citizens. She bemoans the fact that Britain doesn't have a similar comprehensive government –sponsored policy that would enable communities to work with artists as a cultural right, and suggests that Brazil's democratic urge to transform and reinvent itself is bound up inextricably with artistic vitality. (The Guardian, 2011.)

More recently, at a meeting of arts educators to discuss operational issues for Arts Council England's new arts and education 'bridging organisation' in the north east of England, Katherine Zeserson, Director of Learning and Participation at The Sage Gateshead, suggested that a preferred model for the region would be one that took its inspiration from Brazil's Culture Points.

CONCLUSION

So after half a decade of Living Culture along with other progressive reforms how is Brazil doing in respect of its youngest citizens?

A recent UNESCO regional profile for Latin America and the Caribbean (2011) reports that universal enrolment and completion of primary schooling had been achieved across the region by the end of 2010, with an

improvement at the lower end of the secondary level. However poverty and geographic location continue to affect equality of access. It can most likely be assumed therefore that some areas of rural Northern Brazil remain affected by the integrated rural poverty that goes hand in hand with peripherality.

A recent Brazil Country Briefing based on the Multidimensional Poverty Index (Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, 2011) reveals that child mortality and number of years schooling are the highest indicators of poverty in rural areas and across the country as a whole.

To return to O'Sullivan's central points there is no doubt that our collective survival depends upon a greater understanding of and respect for the world we live in and its interdependent eco-systems. A greater use of inter-generational and community learning could contribute much to the economic argument for local sustainability as well as provide a crucial plank in social cohesion.

The Brazilian senator Cristovam Buarque recently cited planetary politics, and integration through education and ethical modernity as being fundamental pillars for the future of mankind (UNESCO Courier, 2011), p 41-42), creating a dialogue between people and nature.

However, the combination of education and the environment is a powerful mix, especially where sensitive development issues are concerned. In May 2011 two long-standing local environmental campaigners (one a mature

student of pedagogy at the Federal University of Pará) were murdered not far from their rainforest settlement; it is considered that these deaths are linked to the couple's opposition of environmentally damaging commercial interests.

(The Guardian, 2011.) In such cases education becomes a front-line issue as it is longer about a centrally imposed curriculum delivered in a westernised 'schooling' tradition but a social action concerned with a sustainable collective future. Education (for sustainable development) demands not only cultural specificity, as recommended by UNESCO, but enormous courage as well.

(UNESCO, 2009, p-34-5)

By the 1990s 'schooling' and 'education' had become almost one and the same thing with "the acceptance in most parts of the world of the school as a formal institution for acquiring specific and normally universally valuable skills: at base, functional literacy and numeracy." (Gould, p. 1) The global development agenda has seen widespread adoption of schooling as a means to address poverty, and the model used, in most cases, is a western version that has its roots in the mass industrialisation programmes of the 19th century.

"A curriculum shaped by the standardization of learning processes and contents – a 'one size fits all' approach – does not serve the needs of all learners, nor does it respond to the context of their lives. This is becoming increasingly obvious to a growing number of countries which are seeking alternative pathways within educational systems."

(UNESCO, 2009, p. 15)

That the current model is outdated and culturally inappropriate for many developing countries seems not to matter to the agencies that continue to invest large sums in the building, equipping and staffing of schools. But education needs more than a building, some desks and teachers. It needs to

serve the local needs of the population first and foremost. This suggests that the world's poor probably do not need a dedicated building called a school but a means instead to offer education in a variety of community settings or even remotely, using technology. It might also mean teachers operating very differently, becoming partners in learning rather than class managers, with educators drawn from a wide range of social and community backgrounds.

To conclude, 'schooling' in the traditional western sense can be seen as an inappropriate, outdated and ineffective method of addressing the wider Millennium Development Goals. Education For All needs to be precisely that, a birth-right which can be accessed throughout a life-time of individual and collective endeavour no matter how peripheral the community that one lives in might be. Hunger for knowledge as well as for food needs to be assuaged across the globe, and indeed one might feed the other if relevant curricula can be developed to take account of local characteristics and circumstances.

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