

# Part 1

## Comparative Education & History of Education

**NIKOLAY POPOV & AMRA SABIC-EL-RAYESS**

### WILLIAM RUSSELL ON SCHOOLS IN BULGARIA

#### Introduction

Ninety years ago, in the early spring of 1923, a 33-years old American professor visited Bulgaria with the goal of learning about Bulgaria's school system. He studied all aspects of Bulgaria's education: its history; broader socio-economic, political and cultural context; changes consequent to the World War I; education-related statistics; system's structure, administration and financial framework; elementary, secondary and vocational education; teacher training and their instructional approaches; and curriculum design. By the summer of 1923, he returned to the U.S. and wrote a book in which he described and analyzed everything he had seen in Bulgaria.

At the time of his visit to Bulgaria, this American scholar, William Fletcher Russell (1890–1956), was a Professor of Education, as well as the Associate Director of the International Institute of Teachers College, Columbia University. His book, titled *Schools in Bulgaria*, was completed in the autumn of 1923 and published in 1924 as first in a series published by the International Institute of Teachers College. The International Institute was established in February of 1923 with a \$US 1 million grant from the Rockefeller Foundation (Bu, 1997). The Institute's mission emphasized the importance of providing specialized courses for foreigners; examining foreign education systems; and collaborating with foreign nations on education-related issues (Bu, 1997). No known records specify why the Institute's Director, Paul Monroe (1869–1947), sent William Russell to Bulgaria immediately after the Institute had been established. Though it is possible the educational reforms initiated by the Agrarian Party, which held power from 1920 to 1923, were of a particular interest to the Institute and its scholars focused on understanding foreign education systems.

#### William Fletcher Russell: Life and Career

Following in the footsteps of his father, James Russell – a well-regarded educator and former dean of Teachers College – William Russell became one of the most influential educators in the field of international and comparative education in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1914, William Russell obtained his PhD from Teachers College and, within few years, became a prominent figure internationally. He traveled through Europe and taught in Japan and Siberia, as well as advised and collaborated with various governments and institutions on the issues of education

(Bigelow, 1957). Influenced by his international work, some of his publications included *Schools in Siberia* and *Schools in Bulgaria* in 1919 and 1923, respectively.

By 1923, William Russell returned to Teachers College as a newly appointed Associate Director of the International Institute and closely collaborated with his father, then the Dean of Teachers College. Succeeding his father in 1927 as the Dean of Teachers College and ensuing from his interest in foreign nations, Russell worked to promote scholarship in the arena of international education and was particularly known for his commitment to maintaining relations with the international alumni of Teachers College (Bigelow, 1957).

While serving as the Dean of Teachers College, Russell (1938) elaborated on his vision for a viable and progressive university structure. Russell was ahead of his time in that he saw higher education as inevitably moving towards a highly specialized platform that serves multiple purposes (Russell, 1943). He argued that individual schools within a university should exercise independence and flexibility in a thematic and curriculum design (Russell, 1938). Throughout his work, Russell often expressed his interest in the notion of specialization rather than uniformity within higher education and pointed to its manifestation through the emergence of different institutions within universities, such as undergraduate colleges, research centers, and professional schools. Each should be allowed to serve a different purpose, Russell argued.

In his capacity as the Dean of Teachers College, Russell delivered an Interim Report to the Trustees of Teachers College, Columbia University, on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1943, calling for the establishment of five specialized centers that would respond to an increasingly diversifying demand for education by different sub-groups of students. Of particular interest is his call for the establishment of the *Center for Workers in International Education* that Russell envisioned as essential in preparation for the post-WWII re-establishment and re-design of the educational services across the nations notably impacted by the war. Progressive for his times, Russell's view remains relevant today as we witness proliferation of specialties and sub-specialties in every field, including that of the international and comparative education.

During the WWII, Russell (1943) did not stop at only urging Teachers College to prepare itself for the post-WWII influx of foreigners in search of new ideas and reformative practices in education. He also pointed out that the American education could benefit from examining foreign education systems, a view that was clearly evident from Russell's paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Teachers College Alumni Association held on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1924. Russell, then the International Institute's Associate Director, spelled out his vision for the Institute by stating:

From the earliest beginnings we have been a nation of importers. All we had at the start was brought from Europe. From time to time new ideas would arrive from abroad to be incorporated in our school system or modified. Even Teachers College began as a school for promoting manual training and practical arts, – goods which only shortly before had been received from Russia by way of Scandinavia. Later on in the period of redirection and reorganization, it was a group of young merchants of light who directed the process... Statistical method was imported from England, mental measurements from France... Teachers College is only a small illustration of the process. Any complete

account of the foreign contributions to American education would necessitate an encyclopedic work (Russell, 1924a, p. 4).

In short, Russell remains one of the key figures whose call for learning from foreign systems promoted and later helped formalize the establishment of the field we call today international and comparative education.

### **Book Review: *Schools in Bulgaria***

*Schools in Bulgaria* (1924b) is a relatively short book yet one with an abundant level of detail on Bulgaria's educational system. As the author writes:

This account of elementary and secondary education in Bulgaria is the result of several weeks of intensive study of the educational situation. It was not the original intention of the writer to publish any such account... But the changes since the war proved to be so interesting and the educational administration of the farm bloc such a curious combination of extraordinary educational insight and practical ability, that it was considered worth while to write the whole matter down (Russell, 1924b, p. vii).

The book covered a variety of issues including a thorough review of the country's economic context; administrative structure of Bulgaria's education; and the curriculum and teaching methodology as applied to the country's elementary, secondary, and vocational education. In Chapter I, Russell discussed the socio-economic context and described Bulgaria as "a nation of small landowners", "transportation and communication are poorly developed" and "the means and methods of farming are still quite primitive" (p. 5). He then moved into Chapter II where he discussed a historic emergence and evolution of education in Bulgaria by pointing to the country's past tendency to educate through schools established and managed locally. He also noted that it was only recently that the country moved towards the state-based and centralized control. In doing so, Russell contextualized what he had observed in Bulgaria by comparatively referencing the emergence of the educational systems in the U.S. and England. He noted that, "[a]s was the case in both England and America, so in Bulgaria, all Bulgarian schools were founded and supported by generous individuals, wealthy benefactors, parish communities and various cultural organizations" (p. 9). On several occasions, Russell specifically pointed to descriptions or provided citations of school rules, regulations, curricula and syllabuses to make the content more relatable to its readers. Russell also wanted to relate his overall vision of the Bulgarian school system to the American readers who likely had no prior exposure to any substantive research on the educational setting in Bulgaria. As he started to share his observations on Bulgaria's schools, Russell was explicit in his intent to target the American audiences by sharing a set of short terminological definitions "which will give to the American reader the clearest idea of the Bulgarian educational situation" (p. ix).

While Chapters I and II are largely descriptive, in Chapter III Russell reflects on the post-WWI changes in Bulgaria's educational system. Russell demonstrated his in-depth knowledge of the political, social and educational changes that transpired during the Agrarian Party's rule. He was fascinated with the level of determination with which the Agrarian Party leaders introduced educational reforms in Bulgaria:

They did not believe that the salvation of Bulgaria would come from any magic panacea, nor could any good come from a philosophic or communistic socialism. Hard work, joyful labor, sobriety, health, thrift, conservation, education, discovery of national resources, and the simple life were the keywords of this party... They were diamonds in the rough. But they came with the idea of having an end of idle talk... They were frankly partisans. They ruled with a rod of iron. Their stern measures eventually led to their downfall; but so far as education is concerned, is extraordinarily interesting to see people in charge of schools who have new ideas which they firmly insist upon putting into school-room practice without endless talk and discussion (pp. 13-14).

As he transitioned into Chapter IV, Russell thoroughly reviewed the administrative structure of education in Bulgaria, discussing specifics on the work and roles played by the Ministry of Education, the school inspectors, school principals and local school committees. This chapter remains one of the more detailed historic references on school administration in Bulgaria in the early 1920s. In Chapters V through VIII, Russell focused on preschool, primary, secondary and vocational education, as well as the teaching methodology employed in Bulgaria's schools at that time. While Russell clearly sought to understand Bulgaria's context and ways in which to frame various education-related issues, he was equally determined to relate his Bulgaria-specific observations to the American readership through numerous points of comparison. Russell was a comparativist, and his perspective on education in France, Germany, Russia and other European countries enabled him to insightfully examine the school system in Bulgaria.

In Chapter IX, Russell insightfully observed that the political, geographic, and cultural context is key in formulating and understanding a systemic or strategic change in education. He specifically recognized the salience of the Agrarian Party classifying educational reforms as equally important as those pursued in any other domain. In the process, Russell also acknowledged the broader value of reforms that had occurred in Bulgaria's educational system as pertinent and applicable to other nations by directly labeling Bulgaria's educational experience as "an educational experiment, the results of which may be inspected by all" (p. 89).

Russell's study on education in Bulgaria is an illustrative example of 'mono-comparison' (Popov, 2002, pp. 62-63), a case study approach focused on problems in one country with only sporadic comparisons to other countries. Russell concentrated on Bulgaria, but without the intent to methodically compare its system to that of another nation. Russell (1924b), however, did give examples, juxtapose statistical data, and make brief comparisons between Bulgaria and other countries, most often the United States.

In summary, Russell's study on Bulgaria remains historically significant for several reasons. Firstly, this was the first book on Bulgarian education that was written by an American scholar, and it is likely the first book on Bulgarian education that was written by a foreign author. Secondly, the establishment and work of the International Institute of Teachers College from 1923 to 1938, when it was closed, was key to the institutionalization of comparative education in the 1920s and 1930s. Therefore, it is of special significance to the field of international and comparative education – and particularly to the scholars in Bulgaria – that the first book of the Institute's study series was written on Bulgaria. Thirdly, the Agrarian Party's impact

on formulation of Bulgaria's education is continuously assessed by Bulgarian historians, so Russell's work – as that of an American scholar with extensive exposure to the international context – is of a unique value in improving broader understanding of this particular era in the development of Bulgaria's education and beyond.

## Conclusion

In his capacity as the Associate Director of the International Institute (1923–1927) and Dean of Teachers College (1927–1949), William Russell's engagement with Bulgaria's education continued following his publication of the book on the country's schools. Several Bulgarian scholars visited both Teachers College and International Institute in the second half of the 1920s and the 1930s (Popov, 1999). In celebration of the University's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (1888–1938), William Russell was awarded an honorary doctorate by Sofia University in May of 1939. In closing, Russell was a visionary who not only made a significant and historic contribution to our current understanding of Bulgaria's educational system, but his push for the international research and examination of foreign education systems helped validate a need for the emergence and increasing institutionalization of the growing field of international and comparative education.

## References

- Bigelow, K. W. (1957): In memoriam: W. F. Russell. *International Review of Education*, 3(2): 243.
- Russell, W. (1924a): Merchants of light. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Teachers College Alumni Association on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1924. Archives of Teachers College Library.
- Russell, W. (1924b): *Schools in Bulgaria*. NY, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Russell, W. (1938): The true and complete university. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 15(3): 252-266.
- Russell, W. (1943): An interim report to the Trustees of Teachers College Columbia University on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1943. Archives of Teachers College Library.
- Bu, L. (1997): International activism and comparative education: Pioneering efforts of the International Institute of Teachers College, Columbia University. *Comparative Education Review*, 41(4): 413-434.
- Popov, N. (2002): *The World Comparison: A Challenge to Comparative Education*. Sofia: Bureau for Educational Services. (In Bulgarian)
- Popov, N. (1999): History of Bulgarian Comparative Education. In: Bishkov, G. & Popov, N. *Comparative Education*, 1999, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 78-108. Sofia: University of Sofia Press. (In Bulgarian)

Prof. Dr.habil. Nikolay Popov  
Department of Social Education and Social Work  
Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education  
Sofia University  
Sofia, Bulgaria  
npopov.bces@mail.bg

Dr. Amra Sabic-El-Rayess  
Department of International and Transcultural Studies  
Teachers College  
Columbia University  
New York, USA  
as2169@tc.columbia.edu