Part 1

Comparative and International Education & History of Education

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Education Reforms Worldwide: Incoming Tide for Comparative and International Education

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to map the tide of education reforms worldwide and to spell out the implications thereof for the field of Comparative and International Education – the field of scholarship tasked with assessing and guiding the global education project. In the field the notion of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) has gained currency. In this paper the deficiencies of that concept are identified. These include its non-exhaustiveness, its lack of a theoretical underpinning, and its lack of a normative dimension. It is argued that the field of Comparative and International Education, with its theoretical construct of the education system, its basic theorem of education systems being shaped by societal contextual forces, and the comparative method for approaching education issues and challenges, appears most promising in providing a theory as well as a method for a scholarly as well as a public discourse about education. The most salient societal trends of the twenty-first century world are enumerated, as well as how these have precipitated in changed education objectives, educational management and administration, teachers and students, and curricula.

Keywords: Comparative and International Education, education reforms, education theory, Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), twenty-first century

Introduction

Almost four decades ago, Brezinka (1981, p. 2) wrote:

... When someone wants to do something for peace, he introduces 'peace education', the person wanting to reduce the number of traffic accidents recommends 'traffic education'...

Today that is still true (for example, cf. Lutz & Klingholz, 2017), as policy makers, the media, and the public discourse hold education up as the solution to any problem or challenge facing society; be it the eradication of unemployment, effecting economic growth, combatting crime, or whatever. Humankind has selected education as the ship to meet the new future. Large amounts of public as well as private money are invested into education. The aim of this paper is to map the tide of education reforms worldwide and to spell out the implications thereof for the field

of Comparative and International Education – the field of scholarship tasked with assessing and guiding the global education project.

The paper commences with the societal drivers (or contextual forces impinging on) the education reforms worldwide. The main dimensions of the worldwide education reform project are then outlined, and in conclusion the opportunities which these present for the field of Comparative and International Education are spelled out.

Contextual forces shaping education worldwide

It is a basic theorem of Comparative Education that education systems are shaped by contextual societal forces. The following is an overview of the most forceful global societal trends impacting on education. The first force is the ecological crisis. Humanity is taxing the resources of the earth to the point where not only the survival of humanity, but even the survival of the planet is at stake. This crisis has given rise to the notion of sustainable development, and to the creed of education for sustainable development. Demographically the world is still undergoing a population explosion (though population growth has decelerated in virtually all parts of the world in recent years). People are also getting more and more mobile in the contemporary world.

Humanity is experiencing scientific and technological progress across a very wide front, the most conspicuous include the ICT (information, communication and transport technology) revolution. Economic trends include increasing affluence. However, despite increasing levels of affluence on aggregate level, and diminishing incidences of poverty, economic inequality is also rising. Two other conspicuous trends are the rise of knowledge economies (that is where the production and consumption of new knowledge becomes the driving axis of an economy) and the fourth industrial revolution (the quintessential feature of which is the blurring of borders between the physical, the biological and the technological worlds, an example is the rise of artificial intelligence). A final forceful economic trend (in fact making its impact felt to more than just the economic system) is the neo-liberal economic revolution.

Social trends include the diminishing importance of primary and secondary groupings (these refer to respectively the family and the work place) and the rise of tertiary groupings, that is functional interest groups, such as sports or hobby clubs. One forceful political trends the past thirty years has been that of democratization. The once powerful nation state is losing its stature in the world, and in the vacuum left by the nation state, two other nodes of control or power are moving in. One is supra-national and international structures, and the other is sub-national: provincial, district and local structures, right down to the level of the individual. The last mentioned is part of another trend, namely individualization.

Four religious and life-philosophical trends are salient in early twenty-first society (Steyn & Wolhuter, 2020). The first is the continuing, but new and more complex presence of religion. Despite oft-made statements that the modern age is a post-religious, secular age, religion persists as an important factor in individual lives, as well as in social dynamics. Pew's (Pew Research Center, 2012) survey covering 230 countries found that 84% of the global population still regard themselves as belonging to some religious affiliation. However, three aspects

complicate matters further. One of them is the existence of multireligious societies, which is part of the multicultural make-up of modern societies, as explained above. Secondly, many people regard themselves to be religious although they do not belong to an organised religious community. Thirdly, people no longer fit neatly into categories such as "Christian" or "Sikh Muslim" but construct their own individualised belief systems.

Two other salient life-philosophical trends are the spread of the Western, individualistic, materialistic outlook to all parts of the globe, and likewise, the Creed of Human Rights finding subscription virtually all over the world, as the new moral compass of the world. Education in some form is often included as one of these human rights. On 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations accepted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2016). This basic declaration of human rights has subsequently been complemented by a myriad of manifestos at international, supranational and national levels. On education, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2016) states the following in Article 26(1):

> *Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made more generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible on the basis of merit.*

A last trend is the rise of interculturalism and intercultural education (Steyn & Wolhuter, 2020). In recent years, particularly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, it seems as if the philosophy of multiculturalism and the pedagogy of multicultural education have been superseded by a philosophy of interculturalism and the pedagogy of intercultural education. Markou (1997) explains the four principles of intercultural education as follows:

- Education with empathy, which means showing deep understanding for others, and trying to understand their position;
- Education with solidarity, which means that an appeal is directed to the cultivation of a collective conscience, and to the promotion of social justice;
- Education with intercultural respect; and
- Education with ethicist thinking, which assumes the presence of dialogue.

Dimensions of the international education reform project

The concept of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM, coined by Sahlberg, 2016) has gained currency in the scholarly community. However this paper will argue that while this idea describes some aspects, a complete depiction, and scholarly interrogation of the of the global education project, needs the delineation and inclusion of other dimensions too.

The notion of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)

According to Sahlberg (2016) a global education reform movement (though not a universal reform movement, many nations are not following this model) is evident. The GERM shows five features: 1. Competition and choice (competition between schools, people being given a choice which schools to attend or which schools to send their children to); 2. Standardisation of teaching and learning (standardized

curricula); 3. Emphasis of reading, mathematics and science, as core skills in the curriculum; 4. Corporate models of change; and 5. Test based accountability.

Sahlberg notes that from PISA (International Programme for Student Assessment) it seems that those nations not following the GERM pattern, shows the best education outcomes (at least as measured by PISA test results).

The thesis of this paper is that this is not an exhaustive list of trends in contemporary education, nor does it provide a complete platform for the interrogation of education issues facing twenty-first century society. What is much more promising for a theoretical framework interrogating or discussing education issues is the structure of the education system (for an explanation of this structure, see Steyn & Wolhuter, 2020), while the method and the field of Comparative and International Education has the method (for the method and scope of the field of Comparative and International Education, see Wolhuter, 2020) and constitutes the appropriate scholarly field for such a scholarly discourse to take place.

The following main dimensions of the worldwide education reform project will now be surveyed: educational objectives, management and administrative structures, teachers and students, and curricula.

Educational objectives

Biesta (2013, p. 4) contends that answers to the question "for what reason do we want an education system?" can fit into one of three generic ideal types, namely for the educand to learn skills (e.g. a trade), to socialize (for the educand to learn to adapt to society) and to give the educand opportunities for self-actualisation. While in any society an education system rarely, if ever pursues only one of these types of goals (there relative importance varies from place to place and from time to time), and while there was never unanimity in society regarding an answer, in view of the new society and new global moral order taking shape (as was outlined in the previous section) the place and relative importance of these three should be seriously considered in the contemporary public and scholarly discourse on education. The author is of the view that the last, with its philosophical superstructure in places such as Sen's Capabilities Theory, should be given much weight.

Educational management and administration

The best way to summarise changes in the management and administration component of the education system is to state that the principles of the neo-liberal economic revolution are being carried into education. Under the societal contextual trends shaping education outlined above the neo-liberal economic revolution has been described as a forceful societal trend since the 1980s. The principles of the neo-liberal economic revolution are being carried into education (see Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2019). These principles include performativity, the profit motive, the principle of relevance and rising managerialism. While giving parents greater choice of schools, and competition may induce schools to give their best, the neo-liberal economic revolution, with its narrow, reductionistic view of the human being as a production and consumption unit, has many adverse effects on education too. Steglitz (2019) for example, explains how market fundamentalism harms the basic research function of universities.

Teachers and students

Teachers find themselves in a dilemma of an overly narrowly descriptive deprofessionalised environment, sandwiched between on the one hand a culture of managerialism and performativity from above, and a culture of entitlement among students, boldened by the time-spirit of democratization, individualism, and Human Rights. Such an environment stifles all autonomy, individuality, ingenuity and creativity, and is extremely dispiriting for teachers. The new multicultural society puts the teacher before new demands of Intercultural Education.

Turning to students, the first salient trend is that of massification of educational institutions as enrolment numbers at all levels of education are swelling. A second feature is the increase of diversity among the student corps. Thirdly, the emphasis in education has shifted from teaching to learning. In view of some of the above enumerated societal trends, this is to be welcomed, as is the rise of modern learning theories such as constructionism, replacing the behaviouristic models of the past. Another way to describe this trend is the change from teacher-centred education to student-centred education. Practice however, lags the scholarly discourse (even an education system regarded as exemplary and progressive, such as that of Finland, is still characterized by traditional, teacher-centred methods of teaching and learning, see Andrews, 2013), and in this regard the scholars of Education have an assignment to guide change in practice.

Curricula

While the trend identified by GERM, namely the emphasis on reading, mathematics and science, cannot be denied, curricula are more complicated than that, and many urgent questions surrounding school curricula need to be discussed, in the public and scholarly discourse about education alike. In his worldwide survey of secondary school curricula, Benavot (2004) (admittedly dates, but this still remains the most comprehensive survey of school curricula worldwide) found that languages occupy on average, about a third of instructional time in schools worldwide – rightfully so, in view of the importance of language as basis for any other cognitive pursuit (the Sapir-Whorff hypothesis comes here to mind). In fact in view of changing geo-politics and the rise of multicultural societies and the imperative for intercultural education (identified above under contemporary societal trends) a discussion on which languages should be included in curricula should be high on the agenda of the discussion of education.

There is also, in the current age, an imperative for global citizenship education (see UNESCO, 2014). What this should entail, how the cultivation of a global mindset should be provided for in curricula, and how global citizenship education should be balanced with local and regional imperatives, should also be an urgent topic for discussion about the reform of curricula. Critically belabouring the theme of the previous volume in this series, the author has argued that the concept of "glocal" represents a too easy "cop-out" from a difficult and a complicated question, and that a much more nuanced concept and finer calibrated instrument is needed (Wolhuter, 2019).

Rising societal trends, such as technological changes which include for example the rise of artificial intelligence, has lent new credence or potential value to the humanities. To balance the instrumental-technicist view or assessment of education

and curricula in particular, have resulted in a call for STEAM education, i.e. to add Art (A) to the current clarion cry for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education (see QSI News, 2019).

Conclusion

While the notion of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) is a useful heuristic encapsulating key features of educational change world-wide, it is neither an all-encompassing nor a coherent construct to describe the momentous changes taking place in education world-wide. Much less is it grounded in a theoretical framework, or does it provide a method to interrogate education issues facing humanity in the twenty-first century or provide any normative framework for interrogating such education challenges.

What appears most promising in providing a theory as well as a method for a scholarly as well as a public discourse about education, is the field of Comparative and International Education, with its theoretical construct of the education system, its basic theorem of education systems being shaped by societal contextual forces, and the comparative method for approaching education issues and challenges. The issues of education raised in this volume and the discussions around these issues following the presentations at the conference of which this book constitutes the proceedings of, should be guided by the conceptual and epistemological tools of the field of Comparative and International Education, conversely, these issues provides scholars in the field with a new opportunity to prove their mettle.

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