

COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION: NEW ISSUES, NEW DILEMMAS

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ABSTRACT

Some issues in the 1960s and 1970s have passed from the scene, their concerns settled. Others continue unabated. But, new issues have developed, which have allowed an expansion of the field in unprecedented ways. This chapter will review each.

Keywords: Education research; theories; originality

BACKGROUND

Two issues were prominent in the 1960s and 1970s. Manpower planning was the dominant method used in the economics of education and in planning the expansion of school systems. This was challenged by the invention and diffusion of economic rates of return and cost benefit analysis. With respect to curriculum, the principal debate revolved around the assumption

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that the more vocational the curriculum the more “practical” the labor market outcome. Planners often argued that curricula tended to be “overly academic.” To be practical all schools were said to require wood-shop, metal-shop, agriculture, and (for girls) domestic science (Heyneman, 1986). Both manpower planning and diversified curricula were counter-productive to the genuine demands of students. Manpower planning allowed solely for the expansion of vocational and technical education leaving primary, general secondary, the liberal arts and the social sciences unattended (Heyneman, 2003). Diversified curricula infused subjects which did not lead to greater chances of employment and increased the per/pupil expenditures by 2.5 times (Heyneman, 1985,

1987). These concerns have dissipated and no longer seem to hold the same preoccupation as they once did.

CONTINUITIES

But other issues have continued unabated. Our field can be thought of as having a war of paradigms in which there are basically four categories of combatants. First, there are the “irredentists” who believe that no educational solution is viable unless autonomously invented by authorities in a developing country. Second, there are the “single solution specialists” whose answer is prepared before the problem has been stated. Some promote educational technology, distance teaching, decentralization, management information systems, vouchers, modular learning, etc. Third, there are the “conspiritists” who believe that empirical research with universal standards of excellence violates the natural complexity of life and is politically unacceptable because it places educational research institutions on the periphery at a disadvantage. The periphery can be either an out-of-way community college or the best university in the Philippines. Fourth, are the “modelers” who believe in absolute interpretations of the social sciences. Often these may be economists, but frequently today they can be any evaluation specialist married to the virtues of randomized trials (Heyneman, 1993a, 1993b). These four basically different views of the purposes of educational evaluation and research have polarized the educational community into a situation known as “tharn” ! the stance of a rabbit when confronted by overwhelming circumstances, frozen in place and unable to move in any direction. These “wars” continue to adversely affect the reputation of our field, and have it characterized as one of low consensus.

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The break-up of the Soviet Union and the re-positioning of Eastern and Central Europe in 1990s deeply affected the field of Comparative and International Education (Heyneman, 2000). Notions of development no longer were confined to “building-up” new organizations and institutions in parts of the world where there were few. Instead they had to incorporate the “building-down” of organizations and institutions in those parts of the world where they were universal, but given the shift in the economy and polity, inappropriate. But the 27 new countries of the Europe and Central Asia Region were not the only influences generating demands for new ideas. With the emergence of the Republic of Korea, China, Indonesia, South Africa, Brazil, Turkey, Malaysia, and India the demand for comparisons tended to include OECD countries instead of low-income countries. The OECD began to be seen as a standard enhancing for countries outside the OECD members in terms of both input and output statistics. Some may view this development as a rise of a new international power; I see it simply as a response to the

natural demand from ambitious countries which do not wish to be solely classified as “developing.”

Because higher education has become a tradable commodity, because there is open competition for students studying abroad, countries in many parts of the world have placed pressure on their higher education systems to become a leader. This, in turn, has placed considerable pressure on faculty ! whether they have the resources or not ! to establish themselves internationally by publishing in peer-reviewed journals such as the one which I edit, the International Journal of Educational Development. Regardless of how small or poor, regardless of what language is chosen for instruction, no nation today can avoid wanting its own universities to be famous. Some might argue that it is unrealistic. Yet the political demand for world class universities continues unabated. To become famous, many have noticed that publications were of critical importance, preferably in an international language, and English in particular. Moreover it has been widely noticed that peer-reviewed publications are not identical, that some are highly selective, have high impact factors, and are regarded by others as being leaders in terms of citations and references in the field. This has led to an avalanche of articles being sent to the IJED from countries which before may not have been heavy participants ! Vietnam, Iran, Turkey, Columbia, Laos, Myanmar, and of course, China.

One positive aspect of this avalanche is the new diversity of cited sources. For instance, among the IJED articles most cited last year, three

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from Asia were among the top ten. Moreover, the use of the IJED by students and scholars outside of OECD countries has steadily climbed. In the last two years downloads in India have increased by 11%, in Hong Kong and China by 35%, and the Republic of Korea by 41%. Downloads of IJED articles in Asia now constitute 21% of the total, roughly corresponding to the downloads from North America (22%). East China Normal University now ranks number three in the top institutions downloading IJED articles. The location of corresponding authors has also been shifting. In 2011, 42% of the corresponding authors were located in Europe, but in 2015 that portion fell to 26%, while the portion of corresponding authors in Asia rose from 10% to 22%.

However, it would be a mistake to suggest that an increase in the quantity of articles submitted corresponds to an increase in their quality. In my experience, the quality of articles from parts of the world new to publishing tends to develop in four stages. The first is one of “random attempts.” Under publication pressure from local universities, authors are unfamiliar with the publication process itself and of a journal’s specific interests. Few have read the IJED statement of purpose which outlines the journal’s interest and the areas in which the journal is NOT interested (articles more appropriate for

education psychology, technical/vocational education, etc.). An author might see the word “development” in the journal’s title and submit an article on nuclear energy because it has something to do with development. Some articles are sent out of desperation. For instance:

Dear Editor, I am ... a PhD student in I already wrote my dissertation and provide an article that I should take it’s accept and print in a foreign journal. My request to you is, given that I do not have much time to defend my dissertation and I need to this article accept to defend, I would like you to review and answer me about this article as soon as possible. Please review this article soon

Articles in this first stage are replete with grammatical errors, wild claims of evidence, and confuse personal opinions with research results. They are neither comparative nor have a sense of how their particular research fits into a wider literature. These are rejected quickly. However, each rejection is accompanied by an explanation as to the nature of the problem. In other words, journals such as the IJED now function as global educational institutions.

These explanations may have an effect because over time the articles from these same areas begin to change. Randomness becomes less of a problem. Authors become more familiar with the published literature and with the format and styles of more acceptable dialogue. On the other hand,

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authors tend to try and mimic what they see as successful. This second stage of quality is one of imitation. Articles will assume the topics and format of an already-published article which they intend to imitate. Plagiarism is a serious problem. These articles are also rejected quickly, but again with an explanation as to the reason for the rejection. For instance, authors are sometimes told from where their plagiarized words had been derived.

But again, over time, the candidate articles from certain countries begin to change. Mimicking becomes less of a problem. Nevertheless they continue to draw upon topics popular elsewhere. Issues, methods, and debates are selected which, in terms of attention, have been dominant in OECD countries. This standardized approach to Comparative and International Education is exacerbated by the lemming like behavior of foreign aid agencies which have disproportional levels of resources for research and evaluation. This third stage might be characterized as topic standardization ! female school attendance, classroom and management interventions, school choice, vouchers, mainstreaming, the whole word method of teaching literacy, performance incentives, and the like.

The fourth and final stage of quality development is that of unique originality. This is the most difficult stage because it requires that authors venture where none have

ventured before. It implies that the work must adhere to world standards of professional leadership, independence, and individual autonomy. Articles in this category are rare. Nevertheless they constitute the gold standard in terms of sponsorship in any major journal.

THE WAY AHEAD

The struggle to find truly original work is of profound importance. Our field continues to be distorted by the over-abundance of work associated with development assistance agencies. This tends to be self-congratulatory with respect to institutionally sponsored solutions and deeply faddish in purpose. How much more evidence is necessary to conclude that putting girls in school in Bangladesh is a good investment?

It is difficult to characterize what topics might be of interest but I tend to look for those whose line of reasoning diverges from the norm. Girls are traditionally under-represented, but today females in middle and high-income countries tend to be over-represented. Students of color tend to perform worse in the United States but not necessarily in Canada or the

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United Kingdom. One might look to the effects of shadow education on adolescent immaturity, the connection between schooling and community social cohesion, the school effects of ameliorating historical ethnic or religious conflict. In my view, the question is not simply to reiterate the themes and problems which have been identified in North America or other OECD countries, but rather to identify themes, problems, and results which are new to us all and of deep interest to us all. That is the sign of the fourth stage of development in quality and should be the objective for education research in our field generally.

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