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EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND THE CRISIS OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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Abstract – This paper was designed not as a research product but as a speech to comparative education colleagues. It argues that there is a crisis of educational quality in many parts of the world, and that there is a parallel crisis in the quality of educational research and statistics. Compared to other major public responsibilities in health, agriculture, population and family planning, educational statistics are poor and often getting worse. Our international and national statistical institutions are impoverished, and we as a profession have been part of the problem. We have been so busy arguing over differing research paradigms that we have not paid sufficient attention to our common professional responsibilities and common professional goals. The paper suggests that we, as professionals interested in comparative education issues, begin to act together more on these common and important issues.

Zusammenfassung – Dieser Artikel ist nicht als Forschungsprodukt sondern als Ansprache an Kollegen im Bereich der vergleichenden Bildung zu verstehen. Es wird argumentiert, daß die Qualität des Bildungsangebots in vielen Teilen der Welt in einer Krise steckt und parallel dazu eine Krise hinsichtlich der Qualität der Bildungsforschung und -statistik besteht. Verglichen mit anderen wichtigen öffentlichen Verantwortlichkeiten in den Bereichen Gesundheit, Agrikultur, Bevölkerung und Familienplanung sind die Statistiken im Bildungswesen oft dürrtig mit sinkender Tendenz. Unsere internationalen und nationalen statistischen Einrichtungen sind verarmt, und wir sind als Berufszweig Teil des Problems. Wir haben so geschäftig über auseinanderdriftende Forschungsparadigmen diskutiert, daß wir unseren allgemeinen beruflichen Aufgaben und Zielen nicht nachgekommen sind. Dieser Artikel schlägt vor, daß wir, als an Themen der vergleichenden Erziehung interessierte Berufsgruppe, mehr in diesen allgemeinen und wichtigen Angelegenheiten zusammenarbeiten.

Résumé – Le présent article a été conçu moins comme le produit d'une recherche que comme un entretien avec les collègues de l'éducation comparée. L'auteur prétend qu'une crise de l'éducation sévit dans de nombreux pays du monde entier, et qu'on observe parallèlement une crise de la qualité de la recherche en éducation et des statistiques y afférentes. Comparées aux autres grands domaines de la fonction publique tels que la santé, l'agriculture, la population et le planning familial, les statistiques de l'éducation sont médiocres et vont souvent en empirant. Nos institutions internationales et nationales de statistique sont affaiblies, et nous avons une part de responsabilité dans ce problème en tant que membres de la profession. Nous avons été si occupés à discuter des différents paradigmes de recherche que nous n'avons pas prêté suffisamment attention à nos responsabilités et à nos buts professionnels communs. Cet article suggère que nous commençons, en tant que professionnels intéressés par les questions d'éducation comparée, à agir ensemble davantage sur ces problèmes communs et importants.

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Crisis of quality

Few among us would disagree with the proposition that there is a crisis of educational quality. Of course people worry about different consequences and attribute the crisis to different causes. Political and business leaders worry about how their nation can gain economic competitiveness in the face of educational decline. Teachers and administrators tend to emphasize problems of classroom management, learning, student discipline, curriculum logistics, and the shortfalls in educational finance which makes a decline in educational quality inevitable. And parents worry over the prospects of their children's individual chances in a world where patterns of occupational mobility are complex and changing rapidly.

And there are differences too by region. In the United States the worry is principally over the cafeteria of curricular choice, the sense that, given the plethora of competing cultural and individual demands, students are not well prepared in the fundamentals. In Japan the worry is over the ability of young people to adapt to a world of new expectations, the sense that the monoculture of uniform and highly traditional ambitions is unstable. Young Japanese will have roles to which they will have to adapt, new leisure responsibilities, new concepts of gender functions; many will live outside Japan, speak different languages and be required to understand other ways of life. For the Japanese the curriculum must prepare for the changes required for these new experiences, but without losing the essential elements of their traditions – the typical challenge, as C. Arnold Anderson put it, of “trying to educate up but not away . . .”.

Countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America are preoccupied by fiscal crisis. Already at a disadvantage by comparison to the financing of OECD school systems, they have watched as their ability to maintain their systems has fallen precipitously. In Western Europe the crisis is one of abundance, of weakened purpose as the supply of schooling reaches second generation universality and the demand, normally associated with scarcity, lessens ambition to try hard and to sacrifice for an increasingly distant and highly questionable personal security. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the crisis has taken another form altogether. There the principal worry is over a lost common purpose, the sense that with the fall of central planning and a single approved philosophy, there is nothing to replace the reason for national motivation and personal sacrifice. Civic leaders in Los Angeles and Moscow are asking similar questions: how can education be used to promote national purpose yet ethnic tolerance; how can individuals be motivated if their personal freedoms are seemingly limitless?

In essence, it is a time for many to return to first principles; it is a time to ask why the state should support public schooling at all. It is a time when we, as professional educators, must answer the increasingly vehement inquiries emanating from the political, industrial and parental groups: How good in fact are our schools? How well prepared are our young people? How much would

it cost to improve educational results? How well are our schools being managed? How are our schools in comparison to schools elsewhere?

International crisis in educational research

The fact is that we do not have adequate answers to these questions. But the situation is worse than that. We do not even have adequate descriptions of our schools, much less answers to what is wrong. We do not have accurate estimates of unit expenditures; we do not have any estimates on the financing requirements of specific curricula over which there is such impassioned debate; we have very little to say about how time is allocated in classrooms; very little about patterns of attendance and drop-out, and precious little about learning patterns.

Even more complicating is the fact that in some parts of the world our descriptive information is getting worse, not better. In sub-Saharan Africa we are losing track of enrollments, of whether teachers are even getting paid, and of textual and other available materials. Is there any ministry in sub-Saharan Africa that can say that it knows more about what textbooks are currently available than it did 20 years ago? Twenty years ago we were arguing over the data requirements for school location planning; today we would be fortunate to know even where current schools are located, much less the ideal location for any new schools. But sub-Saharan Africa, though extreme, is hardly isolated. Do we have any better statistics on India's Tamil Nadu, Brazil's Ceara, or Indonesia's Suluwezi than we did 20 years ago?

And what about our international improvement efforts? Do we have better, more intense, more comprehensive training programs available through IIEP and other organizations than we did 20 years ago? The answer is no. The number of staff positions at major international training organizations have been frozen for several decades. Even the people occupying those positions are the same. Does the UNESCO office of statistics, the hub on which we all depend, have a better capacity to provide technical assistance than it did decades ago? The answer is no. In the 1960s the office of statistics used to manage a series of country-by-country training workshops and used to bring key statistical officers to Paris for consultations on statistical procedures and guidelines. No longer. Today the office is barely able to manage the load of raw data, much less control for quality problems of what is sent.

And what about accuracy? Do we have any more confidence than we did two decades ago that the data being sent were representative? Given what we now know – from independent inquiry – about the variability of educational quality from one republic to another of the former USSR, are we confident that our techniques of statistical control and our reliance on whatever public authority is currently available are adequate professional measures? And if they are not, are we any more courageous at admitting it than we were 20 years ago? The answer is no.

It is true there has been sporadic progress – the OECD indicators project is a good example of professional collaboration; so is UNESCO's *World Education Report* and USAID's IEES project; so is IEA's TIMSS project and ETS's International NAEP. But these projects have been woefully underfunded, and only irregularly supported. And, however important, these can hardly be expected to satisfy the depth and urgency of the questions being asked today of schools and school systems.

If we were doctors, we would be calling attention to the medical crisis at hand. We would be honest with the public and point to the lack of information on which to make a reasoned diagnosis. We would be calling into question suggestions for innovation and cure – on behalf of political authorities – in a context of such empirical ignorance. So why have we educators been so silent? Why have we not been more articulate, and more successful at pin-pointing the absence of minimal information on which to work?

What is wrong?

There are two basic causes for the crisis of educational research: one is a lack of funding, and the other is the lack of professional consensus on what to use it for. The two are inter-related. But let us discuss first the issue of funding.

In some ways it would be imbalanced to cite statistics from North America as though they were representative of the world; but in the financing of educational research, the quality of allocated resources in the USA is many times that in the rest of the world. Knowing American trends alone can give one an idea of trends elsewhere. And in the United States, we know that spending on educational research has been characterized by two elements: by paucity and by decline.

Over the decade of the 1980s federal research and development increased for other sectors of the economy by about 25 per cent according to the General Accounting Office, while federal funding of educational research declined about one-third, and is now down to about 100 million dollars per year. Expenditures on educational research is approximately 0.0003 per cent of the expenditures on education itself (about \$300 billion per year). Moreover, foundations and other non-governmental organizations are hardly in the picture either. A recent survey conducted by the National Academy of Education of 28 major foundations discovered that less than four per cent of their grants are targeted for educational research.

Are there other endeavors where the descriptive research base is so weak? In private companies, such as computer firms, the research and development investment may approximate 16–28 per cent of their operating costs. The US federal government, for all of the political furor over the quality of education and the need for improvement, will spend less on educational research and development between now and the year 2000 than it will spend on a single bomber. The National Institute of Health will spend one billion, five hundred million dollars this fiscal year alone in search of a cure for cancer; this is more

than what will be spent on educational research and development for the next 15 years.¹

Is this an isolated instance? Is the record of governments other than the USA better? Are there foundations in Europe, missed in the GAO survey, abundantly financing educational research? Are there countries spending equivalent amounts on education research as on health? As on defense research? Is there any place, or is there any category of country where the crisis of educational research does not apply? I don't think so.

Then why is there so little research support in the field of education by comparison to other sectors? Why is it that the support for educational research is declining at the same time as questions about education and the political attention directed toward education is increasing? Whether the American presidency is won this year by a Republican or a Democrat; no matter which party ends up in Downing Street or in Canberra, the fact of the matter is that educational problems are listed among the most pressing issues of our time. So why is there not similar attention to the research requirements on which to base solutions?

Part of the problem is the nature of our enterprise. It is true that finding a cure for ignorance is not analogous to finding a cure for cancer. It is true that the system of education, which touches about one person in three on a daily basis, is vastly more complex than a new computer product, even more complex than a mission in space. It is true that political leaders and industrialists over-simplify; it is true that suggested solutions are often banal, often redundant, often contradictory. This is all true.

But is this any reason why educational research should be ignored? Is this the reason why the educational research community should be so silent and ineffective in articulating the minimum levels of information necessary for educational operations? Is this the reason why the educational community in OECD countries is so silent about the fate of the professional colleagues in developing countries? Doctors have a program so that they can work on medical emergencies across national boundaries. Is there a single educational or teachers' association with a similar program? Is the fact that the educational enterprise is complex an explanation for lack of organized professional compassion?

Lack of consensus

Part of the answer is us. We educationists, as individuals, and as a profession. We are a part of our own problem. Not only are we not able to agree on the priorities for more educational research, but some of us have even argued that more money for research would injure rather than benefit school children if that research could not be spent in the specific direction we want it to be. The educational research community has behaved like the French Fourth Republic – with a purity of purpose so extreme that the ship may have to sink before compromise can be considered.

There are basically four sides in this “war of paradigms”: First there are the “irredentists” who believe that no educational solution is viable unless autonomously invented by local cultural authorities. Second, there are the “single solution specialists” who have an answer already ready – educational technology, vouchers, modular learning, management information systems, distance teaching, decentralization, etc. Third, there are the “conspiritists” who believe that empirical research with universal standards of excellence violates natural complexity and is politically unacceptable because it places educational research institutions on the periphery at a disadvantage. The periphery can be either an out-of-the-way community college, or the best university in the Philippines. Fourth and last are the “modelers” who believe in absolute interpretations of social science. These four basically different views of the purposes of educational research have polarized the educational community into a situation known as “thorn” – the stance of a rabbit when confronted by overwhelming circumstances, frozen in place and unable to move in any direction, even in a direction of compelling self-interest.

And political leaders are tired of this. They are tired of the educational research community’s eternal squabbling. Political leaders tend, with justification, to dismiss any profession which cannot effectively agree on basic principles. In essence: we deserve every piece of research poverty we have been given.

What should we do?

First, we should agree to agree on something. It is simply unacceptable for a profession to behave as though it had no basic principles. Second, we should agree on a short list of minimum information and the requirements for its provision. Third, we should agree to admit the obvious – that the current level of educational information is inadequate; that the provisions for its maintenance is declining, and that one cannot expect a world of peaceful economic and social interaction without minimum levels of educational support. This minimum should include an estimate of the required financial resources.²

What is a minimum level of education support? What educational information is required?³ What is an adequate level of technical assistance for developing countries? What form should that assistance take? What international and bilateral institutions should be involved? What other research questions, in addition to their descriptive information, should be answered? Where is the financing to come from?

These are not questions I can answer. All I know is that we have an unusual circumstance. We have an increasing amount of attention to the problems of education and a decreasing level of information about education. We have a world system of needs for the first time, where similar information is in demand in all 15 republics of the former Soviet Union and in the state of Ohio simultaneously. All I know is that we have not been effective as a profession

in obtaining consensus among ourselves, and that this lack of consensus has been politically costly. All I know is that we will never improve the state of educational quality if we do not have better information. All I know is that the crisis of educational research is partly in our own hands to solve.

Notes

1. Arthur E. Wise, Testimony before the House of Representatives Sub-Committee on Select Education, on H.R. 4014: The Educational Research, Development and Dissemination Excellence Act, March 17, 1992.
2. If such a program were to cover new efforts to collect essential descriptive information, improvements in statistical quality controls and effective programs of training and technical assistance, I would estimate the minimum financial requirements to be in the order of US\$100 m per year in 1992 dollars.
3. My list would include information on private school enrollments, net enrollments, non-government contributions to education, cost per student by level and by curriculum specialization, availability of learning materials, academic achievement, and periodic labor market tracer information.