
WHAT THE UNITED STATES NEEDS TO LEARN FROM UNESCO

Stephen P. Heyneman

The United States of America will soon rejoin the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. There is no question that the United States has much to contribute to UNESCO – the quality of social science investigation, the technologies of educational evaluation, research in the learning sciences, educational technologies, education for the handicapped, comparative education and much research and development in educational policy, higher education, educational leadership and administration. The United States (hereafter US) already learns a great deal from its on-going relationships in the field of education with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Asian-Pacific Economic Council (APEC), the World Bank and the regional development banks. But what can it learn from UNESCO and why is membership of UNESCO useful to the United States? There are four reasons why the US needs UNESCO.

The first has to do with the demand within the US for innovations in education policy reform and the regular monitoring of educational trends among trading partners who are not already members of the OECD. American school systems are in desperate need of innovation and benchmarking of international trends, and these can only be partly fulfilled through its co-operation with OECD member states. The US has important trading partners outside the OECD membership with whom it needs to

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co-operate closely in the field of education – Brazil, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, the Russian Federation, South Africa, to name a few. The trade in education policy (Heyneman, 1997) is not limited to the traditional industrialized nations in Europe or Asia. Ideas for university exit examinations may emerge from Brazil; innovations in voucher plans may emerge from Russia. Of the world's population in school, only 2% is located within the US, and only 12% in the member nations of the OECD. Well over 80% of the world's educational experience derives from nations to which the US has no organized relationship through an international agency. And in spite of the recent increases in educational priorities through the United States Agency for International Development, this gap in data and policy innovation cannot be closed through bilateral aid relationships. The relations and exchanges of information on a regular basis within UNESCO have seen a great improvement from an earlier era of decline (Heyneman, 1999*a*; 1999*b*) and today this is one of the main functions of the new UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Hence, it is in the direct interest of the US to participate and contribute both to the Institute in Montreal and to UNESCO's regular meetings in Paris.

The second has to do with the need of local educators within the US to expand their school-policy cultures. The educational debate within the US has become polarized and fractionalized. Local political interests and local cultural factions are exploiting education. As a result, the debates in the US have sometimes become unproductive and repetitive – vouchers (a controversy since the first discussion appeared in 1948), prayer in schools, creationism, learning to read by the whole-word method. Americans may not always recognize how culturally bound some of these concerns may be. Rejoining UNESCO will allow Americans to have a new view, not about the world necessarily, but about these debates. This more worldly perspective will be healthy.

The third issue concerns culture. The world's culture is honoured, and sometimes protected, by the resolutions of UNESCO. America is an important part of the world's culture – through music, art, architecture, anthropological sites and the like. Americans come from every country in the world, and have an important stake in honouring and preserving the history and elegance of their homelands. What is good for the world's culture is good for Americans. And for the first time since leaving UNESCO, Americans will have an opportunity to help preserve and protect these traditions in other countries on behalf of American citizens.

The last issue concerns education and social cohesion. The world is in a different situation from what it was even a decade ago. We have recently witnessed a rise in violent extremism, and the use of education as a weapon to generate extremism. In some instances, such as in Bosnia, local schools systems have created the problem (Heyneman & Todoric-Bebic, 2000; Heyneman, 2000, 2003*d*). In other instances, extremist institutions financed from outside the local community have influenced local systems.

There is no longer any question about whether the world has an interest and a legitimate concern about international security and there is no question about whether international agencies need to be utilized in an appropriate manner to bring about a consensus on how to reduce the risks of ethnic and social tension. But there is no

consensus about the appropriate role for the international agencies that currently dominate the field of international education policy (Heyneman, 2003*a*).

UNESCO's operational role on this issue is problematic. UNESCO has long had a moral and a professional responsibility in the arena of education and social cohesion. By nature, that role is attenuated, in fact weakened, by its management structure. All Member States (which may not be equally responsible) have an equal voice in deciding budgetary priorities. But the cost is borne disproportionately by a few countries. If UNESCO's sole function were to debate issues, then this structure would be adequate. But if UNESCO is expected to perform operational functions on social cohesion and other delicate issues, then the current structure of every country having an equal voice over budgetary priorities cannot be expected to be effective.

The US cannot expect international agencies to be effective if it remains on the periphery of membership. By rejoining UNESCO, however, the US has the opportunity to help the international community take part in achieving a consensus around a few vitally important issues for international security. Among them:

- What are the legitimate functions for religious and/or ideological schools, and can a consensus be fashioned about the way in which they might threaten international security (Heyneman, 2003*c*)?
- Does the international community have a role in monitoring the functions of educational institutions that pose a threat to international security (Heyneman, 2003*d*)?
- Does the international community have a role in monitoring and evaluating the international trade in educational services and in promoting fair-trade policies in educational services (Heyneman, 2001, 2003*b*; Heyneman & Taylor-Haynes, 2003)?
- Does the international community have a role in monitoring and evaluating the trend in educational corruption (Heyneman, 2003*c*)?

This seems to be the single most important challenge for US foreign policy interests concerning international education: how can it assist UNESCO or any other international agency into becoming more operational and hence more effective in solving these important questions and problems? How can this be managed given the current governance structure? And how should the US contribution to UNESCO be managed? Should it be targeted to further these four important objectives that are deeply important for US citizens?

Summary

The US has a great deal to contribute to the world of education and culture, and it will be a great benefit to the Member States of UNESCO to have the US rejoin. But just as important will be the benefits of UNESCO for Americans who care deeply about the quality of their systems of education, who wish to help improve them by utilizing ideas and products from other countries, and who wish to reduce the dangers to security by increasing the roles and responsibilities of international agencies governed by professional consensus.

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