Editorial: structure and agency in education: the role of comparative education

Education is a familiar word. So familiar, indeed, that its meaning is rarely questioned. In recent years it has tended to become synonymous with state-provided national systems of schools and universities. Education is what happens in these institutions; it is provided by teachers and absorbed by students. A number of other assumptions are associated with this familiar construction—not least that it is both the right and the duty of Governments to conceive policies about what should be taught, to whom and how, and that having been conceived, such policies will be realised in institutions and classrooms through the directive power of governments. These assumptions are now so deeply embedded in modern societies that they have assumed the status of axioms.

One of the tasks of comparative studies is ‘to make the familiar strange’—to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in conventional discourse through the use of rigorous and systematic explanations of similar phenomena in different cultural, geographic, social or chronological settings. Comparative studies of education, like their cousins in politics, anthropology, religion and social policy, draw on a wide range of social theories and methodologies to engage in this project. The result, as is well illustrated by this issue of Comparative Education, is a challenge to many of the prevailing assumptions about what education is for and how it should be delivered.

The opening paper in this issue by Korsgaard sets the scene well in its rehearsal of the implications for the Nordic adult education tradition for the emergence of a European ‘demos’. In his discussion of the implications of what Habermas has referred to as ‘post-national democracy’ (Habermas, 2001) Korsgaard confronts the new educational challenges of our age as it pursues ‘the people’s enlightenment’. What does such a term encompass? Inclusivity for sure; self-determination and autonomy; relevance, reward and responsibility for each individual in their educational journey. Underneath this brave vision of lifelong learning for all according to personally determined need, inclination and capability, however, are the vexed issues of context—cultural, political and social. Who are ‘the people’ asks Korsgaard and, by implication, who has the right and the responsibility in the fluid boundaries of today’s world to decide what should be offered to whom and how, or how the products of such education should translate into the currency of qualifications and credits within a global knowledge economy?

These questions bring to the fore the tension which is at the heart of social life between structure and agency, between the external directives to institutions which shape the social space and the individual’s capacity to choose; to be self-determining. These issues are explicitly and lucidly explored in the second contribution to this issue by Behrens & Evans. Their study of young adults as they emerge from the formal educational system to grapple with the challenge of getting a job, offers a telling illustration of the new challenges facing education and training, and of the need to re-examine the appropriateness of systems devised for a previous era. Perhaps even more powerful, though, is the way their study documents the exercise of subjectivity, choice and agency among even the most disadvantaged young people. It illustrates the complex articulation between different structural contexts—in this case...
England and Germany—and the individuals who must weave their unique realities within them according to their particular configuration of family circumstances, experience, personality and understanding. As the authors suggest, it is only when academics and policy makers have a better understanding of this complex interrelationship, that they will be effective in developing the ‘independence, self-confidence and citizenship’ (p. 35) that these young people need.

If comparative studies of students can powerfully illustrate the process by which learner identities are developed, they are equally revealing of the tension between structure and agency for the teachers charged with providing learning opportunities. Ibrahim Makkawi’s account of how Palestinian teachers in Israel grapple with the alien structures of a hostile political entity, provides a powerful illustration of the capacity of individuals to exercise personal agency even in the most constrained of settings. It also illustrates a second theme in this issue, that of the fundamentally political character of formal education systems and equally of the centrality of education to the political project.

But if one of the most significant contributions of comparative education has been to make explicit the ideological and political role of formal education, equally important is its capacity to document the tortuous network of influences and micro-politics which governs its realisation. Each of the last three papers in this issue illustrates this broad theme, particularly in relation to the impact of colonialisation in the construction of the historical platform for education in particular societies. London’s study of schooling in Trinidad and Tobago; Kan & Vickers’ study of history curricula in Hong Kong; and Ansell’s account of rural girls’ education in Zimbabwe and Lesotho, each in its own way illustrates the complexity which results from the synthesis of structure and agency in a particular setting. Each paper illustrates the ‘variety of faces’ of conservatism that constrain educational reform either against explicit political agendas, as Kan & Vickers argue in relation to Hong Kong, or the desire to make education a more useful, relevant and positive experience, as in contemporary Southern Africa. Equally, the comparative studies in all three of these papers also illustrate the impact of contemporary economic and political pressures which make it more difficult for countries to create genuinely novel educational approaches.

Wastage, irrelevance, political indoctrination: these are the negative side of the balance sheet of formal education in many of the countries focused on in this issue of Comparative Education. They aggregate into a depressing testimony of coercion and control which is a far cry from Korsgaard’s ‘people’s enlightenment’. But the Nordic Adult education tradition also provides a vision for a new educational philosophy: a challenge to policy makers around the world to consider what a genuinely empowering education might look like; how to strengthen agency rather than structure, and to produce individuals who are committed, confident and flexible learners. But if comparative education studies have a unique power to illuminate the nature of such a vision, they also have a unique power to reveal the political, historical, cultural and economic forces that work against the realisation of such a vision.

Education is a powerful and potentially dangerous tool. We dare not leave its core assumptions unchallenged. As an academic community we have a duty to use our skills to reveal current realities. Perhaps, even more important, is our duty to set out a defining vision of what education could be like in the twenty-first century.

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