EDITORIAL

INVITED SECTION: FESTSCHRIFT FOR LISBETH LUNDAHL

Karl-Georg Ahlström The Origin of Special Education in Sweden
Anne-Lise Arnesen International Politics and National Reforms
Dennis Beach Education Science in Sweden
Per-Olof Erixon Academic Literacies; Discourse and Epistemology in a Swedish University
Ingrid Gogolin The Challenge of Super Diversity for Education in Europe
David Hamilton & Gaby Weiner Dancing at the Edge: Writing for the Academic Marketplace
Elina Lahelma Gender Awareness in Finnish Teacher Education: an Impossible Mission?
Martin Lawn Governing through Data in English Education
Johan Lithner University Mathematics Students' Learning Difficulties
Jenny Ozga Governing Narratives: "local" meanings and globalising education policy
Inge-Bert Täljedal Reform and Reaction in Teacher Education at Umeå University
Pavel Zgaga Education for "a better world": is it still possible?
Elisabet Öhrn Class and Ethnicity at Work. Segregation and Conflict in a Swedish Secondary School
EDUCATION INQUIRY

Education Inquiry is an international on-line, peer-reviewed journal with free access in the field of Educational Sciences and Teacher Education. It publishes original empirical and theoretical studies from a wide variety of academic disciplines. As the name of the journal suggests, one of its aims is to challenge established conventions and taken-for-granted perceptions within these fields.

Education Inquiry is looking for lucid and significant contributions to the understanding of contextual, social, organizational and individual factors affecting teaching and learning, the links between these aspects, the nature and processes of education and training as well as research in and on Teacher Education and Teacher Education policy. This includes research ranging from pre-school education to higher education, and research on formal and informal settings. Education Inquiry welcomes cross-disciplinary contributions and innovative perspectives. Of particularly interest are studies that take as their starting point, education practice and subject teaching or didactics.

Education Inquiry welcomes research from a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, and invites studies that make the nature and use of educational research the subject of inquiry. Comparative and country-specific studies are also welcome.

Education Inquiry readers include educators, researchers, teachers and policy makers in various cultural contexts.

Every issue of Education Inquiry publishes peer-reviewed articles in one, two or three different sections. Open section: Articles sent in by authors as part of regular journal submissions and published after a blind review process. Thematic section: Articles reflecting the theme of a conference or workshop and published after a blind review process. Invited section: Articles by researchers invited by Education Inquiry to shed light on a specific theme or for a specific purpose and published after a review process.

Education Inquiry is a continuation of the Journal of Research in Teacher Education, which is available in printed copies as well as electronic versions and free access at http://www.use.umu.se/forskning/publikationer/lof/

Editor
Professor Per-Olof Erixon, Umeå University, Sweden
Receiving Editor
Assistant Professor Linda Rönnberg, Umeå University, Sweden

The editorial board
Professor Marie Brennan, School of Education, UniSA, Australia
Professor Bernard Comu, Directeur de la Formation - CNED, Directeur de CNED-EFAD, France
Professor David Hamilton, Umeå University, Sweden
Professor Brian Hudson, University of Dundee, UK
Professor Gloria Ladson-Billings, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA
Professor Martin Lassen, University of Edinburgh, UK
Assistant Professor Eva Lindgren, Umeå University, Sweden
Assistant Professor Linda Rönnberg, Umeå University, Sweden
Professor Kirk Sullivan, Umeå University, Sweden
Professor Gaby Weiner, University of Edinburgh, UK
Professor Pavel Zgaga, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Language Editor
Murray Bales, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Guidelines for Submitting Articles
See Education Inquiry's homepage: http://www.use.umu.se/english/research/educationinquiry

Send Manuscripts to: EducationInquiry.Editor@adm.umu.se

©2011 The Authors. ISSN online 2000-4508
Elisabet Öhrn is a Professor of Education at the University of Gothenburg and a part-time professor at Umeå University. Her main research interest incorporates the sociology of education with a special interest in power processes, gender, class and ethnicity. She is currently leading research projects on achievement and gender in secondary school, democratic education in upper secondary school and gender and careers in academia.

Daniel Kallós was a Professor of Education (in Swedish ‘pedagogik’) at Umeå University after 1986. He was Dean of the Faculty of Teacher Education at Umeå University after its establishment in 2000. He was the co-founder and head of the European Network on Teacher Education (TNTEE) 1996ff. He retired in 2002.
Education for “a better world”: is it still possible?

Pavel Zgaga*

Abstract

The belief in continuous progress towards a “better world” and the conviction that good is associated with knowledge and learning have a long tradition. On these bases, expectations have arisen that education substantially contributes to a “better world”. The paper reconsiders this contribution from the aspect of modern progress made in the internationalisation and globalisation of education. The concept of education is discussed in relation to the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, 19th and 20th century nationalisms, 20th century internationalism, the “Europeanisation” process and the contemporary age of globalism. Against the “monocausal view” of globalism, the author reaffirms the recognition of a full range of educational purposes.

Key words: better world, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, internationalism, globalism

I will try to address an old problem in the light of new circumstances: can education contribute to a better world? The belief in continuous progress towards a better world has a long tradition. There is also a long tradition in the conviction that good is associated with knowledge and with striving for knowledge, i.e. with learning. It was already Plato who told us in his famous metaphor of the cave “how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened”, that what we take to be real would in fact be an illusion, that only by means of learning and education we can lift ourselves “in the world of knowledge” and that the last thing to be seen there “is the idea of good” (Plato, 1993:514, 517b-c). Against this background and as also supported by philosophers and scholars of later times, education has been understood as one of most important levers for a better world.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, and particularly in the Age of Enlightenment, solid stepping stones were built on this historical road. A number of scholars and political activists of the time could be referred to here, but let me quote just one – Condorcet, who wrote about his hopes in “the future progress of the human mind” in his hiding place just a few months before his violent death: “We shall point out how more universal education in each country can add to such hopes” and how these hopes “increase even more, if a more general prosperity permits a greater number of individuals to pursue studies, since at present, in the most enlightened countries, hardly a fiftieth

*University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. E-mail: pavel.zgaga@guest.arnes.si
©Author. ISSN 2000-4508, pp.331–343
part of those men to whom nature has given talent receive the education necessary to make use of their talents”. Further, “We shall show how this equality of education, and the equality that will arise between nations, will speed up the advances of [...] sciences” (Condorcet, 1997:208).

It is interesting to observe and reflect on this brave period from today’s point of view. It may perhaps provoke some cynical comments – but it deserves much more than that. No doubt, human attempts in the last two centuries to proceed from “an age of enlightenment” to “an enlightened age” (Kant, 1997:59) have been really troublesome and contradictory. At this point, our observations encounter a number of paradoxes and bring us close to the “dialectics of enlightenment” as we already learned from authors of the previous century. We learned, for example, 150 years after Condorcet that “myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology” as well as that “the end of ideologies” (or “history”) is approaching. Are the challenging times really over? Has the question been answered? Should the philosophical blunders of the past be finally and definitively rejected in the third millennium?

The Age of Enlightenment and cosmopolitan education

I will try to come closer to some of them, starting from Immanuel Kant’s well-known work On Education (1900) – a work which seems unavoidable in this context. What did Kant say about education and progress towards a “better world”?

Like many of his contemporaries in various countries he was particularly optimistic about education. Kant was obviously born in happy times: concerning the Age of Enlightenment, he said it is “for the first time” that “people have begun to [...] understand clearly, what actually belongs to a good education”. To him, education is closely associated with what he called “the perfection of mankind” and “perfection of human nature”. Thus, a clear understanding of the potential of education “opens out to us the prospect of a happier human race in the future” (ibid.:8).

However, he identified a split between what we may call actual (or present) education and education intended for the future. “Parents usually educate their children merely in such a manner that, however bad the world may be, they may adapt themselves to its present conditions”, he complained and stressed that “children ought to be educated [...] for a possibly improved condition of man in the future; that is, in a manner which is adapted to the idea of humanity and the whole destiny of man” (ibid.:14).

There are two text fragments where Kant uses the concept of cosmopolitanism. This may be of particular interest within the context of our theme. The first fragment starts with Kant’s warnings about the narrow scope of approaches to education taken by parents and rulers: not only do they educate their children merely to adapt to the present conditions – they do not aim at “the universal good” at all! Their understanding of education is purely instrumental.
Therefore, it is not the spontaneous desire of parents and rulers but “the judgment of the most enlightened experts”, i.e., not a narrow and partial but a universal and cosmopolitan view, should be put forward as the stepping stone leading towards a better future. Moreover, in Kant’s eyes the basis of a scheme of education must be a truly cosmopolitan; he stresses how important it is to teach youth to move beyond selfish interests and “to rejoice at the world’s progress”. He is very radical at this point (too radical for the ensuing decades and centuries): “although it may not be to their own advantage or to that of their country,” he adds. “We must encourage the youth”, he continues, “in love towards others, as well as to feelings of cosmopolitanism” (ibid.:120-121).

These thoughts are now more than 200 years old. They belong to a period just before the birth of nation-states in Europe. Since the early 19th century, the frequency of the term of cosmopolitanism has not increased; on the contrary, it has continuously been used only rarely – mainly within circles of intelligentsia to describe an individual position, e.g. as an opposition to the aggressive concepts of nationalisms of various kinds. In principle, it has not been used in dominating political and ideological discourses at all. Further, totalitarians have always taken a hostile position on it.

Yet, we should confess that the term cosmopolitanism sounds a bit old-fashioned today. Nevertheless, it seems that today we are much more “citizens of the world” than ever before. Are we? The way I just translated the term with ancient Greek roots – “citizens of the world” – could be strongly disputed. Perhaps we are no more “citizens of the world” than Kant was. What makes a difference between us and people of the 18th century is that we are “globalised”: yet, perhaps not “globalised citizens” but “globalised consumers”. Both “cosmos” and “globe” have something in common but there is not much evidence that a conceptual connection between cosmopolitanism and globalism can easily be proved. These two terms emerged in substantially different historical contexts. However, both are linked to the “eternal question” of whether progress towards a “better future” is possible and what could be the role of education in it.

The 19th century: “the chief function of the state is educational”

At first sight, the appearance of compulsory schooling systems in the newborn nation-states in Europe of the 19th century might look like realisation of the brave ideas of the Enlightenment. They might look like materialisation of Condorcet’s hopes of “progress of the human mind”. They might look like the victory of Kant’s “enlightened experts” over the narrow sights of “parents” and “rulers”. However, this was a new century dealing with new dilemmas and the discovery of new dichotomies which have lasted until today: “individual” vs. “social”, “subjectivity” and “rationality”, “affective” and “cognitive” etc. These dichotomies have importantly marked contemporary debates on education.
Kant’s individualistic *cosmopolite education* opened other perspectives but, as I will discuss later, it led to the concept of *national education* which materialised in the social and political reality of the early 19th century under the leadership of the nation-state. A change from the concept of *cosmopolite education* to *national education* occurred in an extremely complex transition process at the turn of centuries. Here, I lean on John Dewey who analysed this issue in *Democracy and Education* (1915) written right in the middle of the cruelties of World War 1.

He refers to the dichotomies mentioned above and the tradition of an idea of the free and complete development of a “private” personality which is impossible without recognising “social” responsibility, discipline and political subordination. According to him, the nation-state was made in the historical circumstances of the early 19th century as “an intermediary between the realization of private personality on one side and of humanity on the other” (Dewey, 2004:93). These circumstances are characterised by “Germany in the generation occupied by the struggle against Napoleon for national independence” (ibid.:91). He argued that “in less than two decades after his time, Kant’s philosophic successors, Fichte and Hegel, elaborated the idea that the chief function of the state is educational”. “In this spirit”, he concluded this passage, “Germany was the first country to undertake a public, universal, and compulsory system of education” (ibid.:92). We can also find von Humboldt and his Berlin University in this context. The pattern was born and soon spread across Europe and even beyond; yet, it saw a number of national specific modes of its implementation.

One can dispute one aspect or another of Dewey’s argumentation – for example, the role of German idealism on the philosophical side or country-specific modalities of nation-state education on the historical side – but that would go beyond our intention at this point. What is crucial is the specific historical form attached to school at the dawn of the industrial age: namely, *one school for the whole country*; for the sake of the nation, not for the sake of individualistic cosmopolitanism. In a similar way, we can recognise the growth of *national universities* in the 19th century. This form cannot simply be derived from the ideas of the Enlightenment and their philosophical successors; as they had an important effect on historical changes, the real processes were much more complex. Thus, in their pre-revolutionary and revolutionary history of *l’alphabetisation* in France (a treaty on another subject but related to our main theme), François Furet and Jacques Ozouf warned us of a methodological danger – namely, that it is important to distinguish between the “ideology of school” and the “history of school”: if we do not consider this difference, the history of school could be speculatively deduced from e.g. “revolutionary ideas” and the “mythology of school” (Furet and Ozouf, 1977). However, they show a feature which is in no way incompatible with Dewey’s analysis: they argue that on its historical way to the industrial age, the school is revealed as the chief figure of unlimited social power over the happiness of an individual. In this specific form, education carries on its task of contributing to a “better world”.

334
There is another important comment in Dewey’s book: “the new idea of the importance of education for human welfare and progress was captured by national interests”, in particular in the European continental states, he stressed, while “science, commerce and art transcend national boundaries”; they are “largely international in quality and method” (Dewey, 2004:93). In the middle of World War I when the confrontation of nation-states had reached its peak, he reminds us of another dichotomy: welfare and progress is the capital “national interest” but it can only be achieved by tools which transcend “national boundaries”. Science and the arts are by their very nature “cosmopolitan”, not “national”. In a similar way, commerce remaining closed within the nation-state would lead towards an autarchic economy; by its nature, it is “global”.

The 20th century: education beyond the limits of national education

National education systems are children of nation-states. As they have not all appeared at the same time but continuously, literally throughout the last two centuries, and as they are spread geographically across the globe, a huge diversity among them has emerged. This diversity is equally as a result of the politics, government and administration of a particular country or region as well as a result of cultural, religious, linguistic etc. traditions. Polarisation between nation-states, their grouping within political blocs, economic co-operation as well as protectionism have also influenced the characteristic features and differences among them.

Particular features of individual systems were traditionally jealously guarded as aspects of national identity, in certain contexts even sovereignty (e.g. issues of denomination, language, ideology, history etc.). However, as soon as nation-states are not viewed in isolation one from another but a need for their co-operation prevails, these particular features may turn into obstacles. Not only are science and the arts “cosmopolitan”, and not only is commerce “global” but education by its very nature also exceeds national boundaries. We have learned from our histories that the potential of teaching, research and artistic creativity has been always dangerously diminished when a country has decided to close its borders hermetically. On the other hand, when people travel from country to country – and they have always been travelling, as free citizens of their country or illegally and in difficulties – they do not only need to change their money into a local currency but e.g. also to ask for recognition of their own or their children’s educational certificates. Unconnected and incompatible education systems hinder individuals along with political and economic co-operation.

This is nothing new. I repeat these notorious truths in order to stress that they do not necessarily refer to globalisation in education as we understand it today. In fact, the point we have reached refers more to the internationalisation of education that we have been familiar with for quite a long time. Nevertheless, we should not mix the medieval peregrinatio academica with mobility within e.g. the Erasmus programme.
The basic condition of the internationalisation of education is the existence of several nation-states and their education systems.

Internationalisation in education subsumes links and co-operation between different systems which may remain different, even incompatible. There have always been various incentives for internationalisation. Its most traditional form has been university co-operation. The highest scientific endeavours and the most complex academic studies have always depended on the broadest possible academic critical masses. During the 20th century, voluntary inter-university co-operation was unfortunately very limited at certain times and between certain places, e.g. during the period of Nazism in the first half or during the Cold War in the second half of the past century. Nevertheless, even in most “cold” periods there were some “warm” yet isolated exceptions: it is known that when diplomacy failed, small groups of academic people were sometimes used to maintain the lowest possible contact between countries or political blocs in conflict.

Therefore, besides academic or cultural reasons for international co-operation in education there have also been diplomatic and political as well as economic ones. In fact, in the previous century the latter seemed to be stronger. These trends are continuing today. The history of bilateral and multilateral agreements in educational co-operation may appear like a rainbow of possibilities: the exchange of students and teachers, the exchange of experts and expertise, legal matters like the recognition of qualifications, the development of textbooks, the promotion of national cultures, care for ethnic minorities or migrants, language learning, support for economic development, improvements in vocational and/or professional training etc.

To sum up: in principle, the internationalisation of education per se has not been a “menacing” process. It has usually only opened new perspectives and encouraged new developments in national education without “endangering” it. In the final instance, the nation-state remains fully responsible for educational provision in the country. Yet, towards the end of the previous century this characteristic started to appear as an obstacle to further developments or at least as a problem to be addressed. The importance of education (including international co-operation in education) for “human welfare and progress” which was in principle understood “as the national interest” came across the rapidly progressing “science, commerce and art” which are “largely international” in nature and “transcend national boundaries”, if we paraphrase Dewey. Education had stepped beyond the limits of national education.

The late 20th century and “Europeanisation”: “reaching beyond the sphere of the economy”?

This problem has been addressed in the last 20 to 30 years in several ways: inspired by agents of politics, the economy and business as well as of education and culture. As a combination of all three aspects it has been addressed in a fresh way within the European integration processes. As we remember, the story started with coal and
iron, it then proceeded to atomic energy and the European economy at large; finally, common political bodies – a single Commission and a single Council of the three Communities – were established. For a long time there was no direct reference to education in the legal treaties of the Communities; “soft” subsystems (like education and culture) were kept solely within responsibility of the member states, i.e. nation-states.

The *Maastricht Treaty* (1992) not only brought new provisions on defence, justice and home affairs but for the first time also on education. It was agreed that the Community “shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity” (Article 126). Thus, the Community obtained certain responsibilities including in education but the *subsidiarity principle* was applied and final responsibility for national education systems again remained with the member states. This provision remains in place today. However, it was a step beyond the traditional form of international co-operation in education.

During the last few decades, the European Union has grown into an entity which is far from a simple iron and coal community. If the Community had remained focused on iron and coal only, it would have more or less remained a free-trade zone. However, ambitions have always been higher. Recently, Anne Corbett presented a detailed “story” of how universities entered the European agenda (Corbett, 2006); her story starts already in the mid-1950s. This process was decisively pushed forward with the Erasmus decision (1985-87) and followed, at least partly, its own logic: a logic of an “educational Europe” *vis-à-vis* a “technocratic or economic Europe” (ibid.:xi).

Apart from creating EU programmes for co-operation in education, an “educational Europe” has developed over the next two decades – a community of students, teachers etc. who co-operate across borders and across divisions of the past. This is indeed something new and something the old continent may be proud of.

Already in the 1990s, the enhanced educational co-operation across countries – not only between “Member States” but also “Partner Countries” – in a form not previously seen posed a new question which turns back to the authorities in individual countries. Open questions and problems with growing mobility, in particular in higher education, made it necessary to seek convergence among the diverse education systems. The best known example in this area is the Bologna Process. It may be controversial at some points, there may be different interpretations of some principles among countries, but it has proved to be a voluntary process of converging systems and – what I find even more important – a process in partnership where educational institutions, university and student associations and other interested partners from civil society work together with governmental representatives.

In this context, both technical and more substantial issues were addressed. At the initiation of the Bologna Process a far reaching point was raised, namely “that Europe
Pavel Zgaga

is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy” but “it must be a Europe of knowledge as well” (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). This statement is more than a decade old: sometimes contested and forgotten, other times supported and promoted, always again commented on and amended. Regardless of the variety of responses, it has helped keep an important dimension open for continuous discussion.

This dimension is equally important for the “large” Europe (“EU-47”) as it is for the “EU-27”; it also holds important consequences for global higher education. At the end of 2002, in an atmosphere characterised by forthcoming EU enlargement (2004), Viviane Reding, the EU Commissioner then also responsible for education, articulated it in an interesting way: “Our challenge is to build a Europe reaching beyond the sphere of economy to promote sustainable development as a means to meet citizens’ expectations concerning quality of life and cultural and social diversity”. In addition, “what needs to be reaffirmed, on the eve of enlargement, is the role of culture in the development of a European identity without which the Union would be doomed to be nothing more than a vast free trade area” (in: De Groof, 2005:27, 33).

Where are we today? Have we reached beyond the sphere of the economy? There is certain scepticism concerning these aims at the least but this is also an issue that should be readdressed today.

The turn of millenniums: education, globalisation and globalism

The enthusiasm created in Europe by the fall of the Berlin Wall calmed down quite some time ago and something similar has happened with the historical EU enlargement. This decade has been marked on one side by further growth and global economic competition while, on the other, it seems that it has periodically returned to local, partial and even directly selfish political interests. At first blush, it looks strange but in essence it is no surprise: in this so-called “age of globalisation” we encounter phenomena that were supposed to be creatures of the past: protectionism, nationalism, exclusion, homophobia, intolerance etc. This is far from just a European problem, it is global. It is related to our questioning of the belief in continuous progress towards a “better world”. We have started to question: globalisation – is it a good or a bad thing?

The term globalisation which was launched two or three decades ago and entered everyday language has slowly turned from a promise to a menace. Today, amongst the broad public it most probably attracts more opponents than defenders. However, we continue to buy cheap items made in China and save money to send our child to a good university abroad. It is always wise to remain careful with general feelings and common terms of everyday language. As I already briefly mentioned, the term globalisation is often taken as a synonym for a number of seemingly “similar” terms; as a result, misunderstandings often arise.

On the other hand, there is another important distinction which was, at least to my knowledge, proposed by Ulrich Beck: he distinguishes between globalisation as
an analytical concept and *globalism* as an ideology: “To me globalism is the view that the world market displaces or replaces political action; it is the ideology of world market power, the ideology of neoliberalism. This is a monocausal and economistic view which reduces the multi-dimensionality of globalisation to one dimension, the economic dimension (which is also envisaged as a linear process) and which only formulates other dimensions – globalisation of ecology, culture, politics, civil society – as subordinate to the system of the world market, if they are formulated at all” (Beck, 1997:26).

In certain way, the history of mankind and civilisation could be interpreted as the “history of globalisation”: a process of becoming ever more interdependent, a process of growing connectivity in political, economic and cultural life across the world. We can observe either absolute monarchies or nation-states or multinational organisations as modes of political organisations at various stages of “globalisation”. Similarly, traditional national education systems as well as emerging contemporary common “education areas” (like the Bologna-inspired *European Higher Education Area* established in March 2010), “research areas” or perhaps “knowledge areas” can be regarded as organisational forms responding to challenges of a given phase of “globalisation”. Yet, this is a very broad and abstract approach; when discussing our times and education today we need more concrete answers.

In modern times, interdependence as the main characteristic of globalisation has reached a level which is incomparable with previous ones. Thirty years ago, at the very beginning of the discussion on globalisation, Daniel Bell noted that the nation-state had become “too small for the big problems of life, and too big for the small problems of life” (Bell, 1987:9). This witty note could also be applied to education: the role of the nation-state regarding education has changed. On one side, it is stressed more and more often that education should be governed closer to local communities or – as in the case of universities – with full respect for institutional autonomy. On the other, education was almost jealously kept within absolute national responsibility for many decades although in recent decades it has not only entered the EU Treaty but also international law. Let us remind ourselves, for example, of the conventions on the recognition of qualifications which are so important not only for migrants and mobile students but which at least indirectly contribute to strengthening mutual trust, to quality enhancement, to the transparency of education systems and provision and, last but not least, to the convergence of systems.

To recapitulate: we are encountering issues and problems of a global nature and we have to invent tools and approaches that can effectively address global problems. Both national and local problems still exist and education will remain to serve specific needs of specific social, cultural and economic contexts (i.e., identities, cultures, professions etc.), yet we are also encountering issues that exceed local or national importance and can and should be addressed globally (i.e., education for peace, human rights, tolerance, environmental protection etc.).
Pavel Zgaga

After discussing globalisation and education I now turn, as Beck suggested, to education and globalism as “the view that the world market displaces or replaces political action”. What seriously affected educational concepts and education systems around the turn of millennia is globalism rather than globalisation. The traditional mission and aims of education, the educational contribution to a “better world” has been seriously challenged.

Ten years ago, Thomas Friedman asserted that “the driving force behind globalization is free market capitalism” (Friedman, 1999:9). As we can recognise from the title of his book, this is also to be understood as the driving force for a “better world”: the “Lexus” (the Toyota luxury vehicle division) symbolises the drive for (economic) prosperity and development while the “olive tree” symbolises the desire to retain identity and traditions. As education has always had to serve both – as prosperity and development as well as identity and tradition – it now finds itself in a situation of uneasiness. It is confronting a difficult dilemma: either prosperity or tradition? The turn of millennia we passed a decade ago was a high point of “the greatest economic boom in history” as it has often been declared. Deregulation, privatisation and markets became sacred words which seemed to have no alternative – at least no alternative when the public sector is under discussion. This has been promoted as a path to prosperity, to a “better world”.

Of course, there have also been frequent and numerous protests as well as loud disputes about these theses. Polemics on GATS and contests against the “commodification” of education of the first half of this decade illustrate the area of education very well. Despite protests, education systems have been strongly affected by globalism. Public education provision has practically everywhere been put in question and accused of not being efficient and quality. “Values” have become an economic, not an ethical concept. The “customer friendly” education has to satisfy “customer needs”; it has to be based on a right to choose and, of course, “purchasing power”. The discourse of “new public management” has drowned out more traditional discourses and the school as well as the university have become an “enterprise”.

There is a long list of further proposals of this kind and perhaps an even longer list of their criticisms in contemporary literature. Many authors have been warning against the extreme and thoughtless application of the “invisible hand” theory to social areas like education. The belief that the “invisible hand” co-ordinates human actions best and that free enterprise will lead to a better life for everyone, even those who now look disadvantaged, was critically assessed many decades ago. What seems to be the key criticism of today it is that the “invisible hand” theory, when applied to every corner of social life, makes things such as the polity and public spaces or public care and the public good totally redundant. Both the public school and the public university are part of this redundancy. Parallel to the growing power of the world market we are witnessing a decrease in the power of the nation-state.

In this perspective, Michael W. Apple critically noted that “[d]emocracy is no longer a political concept” if “[s]chools are to be treated with the same market-oriented logic
Education for “a better world”: is it still possible?

as bread and cars”; “rather it is wholly an economic concept in which unattached individuals – supposedly making ‘rational’ choices on an unfettered market – will ultimately lead to a better society”. However, “public institutions are the defining features of a caring and democratic society” he adds (Apple, 2008:12, 14, 15).

For the last three or four years we have been receiving ever more signs that “the greatest economic boom in history” is over. The financial crisis and its effects on the economy, politics and society have certainly affected education as well. Nothing will be like what it used to be. According to voices heard from the other side of the Atlantic after the outbreak of the financial crisis, it has already had major impacts on education. “Most comments about the effects of the financial crisis on higher education have focused on the possible drying up of student loans [...]. The effect of this drop-off will be most pronounced for students in higher-priced private institutions and for-profit trade schools” (Hauptman, 2009:22). Is this an opportunity to rehabilitate the idea of public education – or perhaps just a step towards expanding the waves of crisis from private to public education?

Also on our side of the Atlantic these dilemmas are not only hypothetical. Based on information collected from National Rectors’ Conferences, the EUA reported a wide variety of situations across Europe: some governments are announcing and implementing budget cuts for higher education but some are also increasing the level of available public funds, especially for academic infrastructure. Pier Ugo Calzolari, Rector of the University of Bologna, recently warned at a Magna Charta Observatory conference (2009): “Presently, higher education institutions appear to be objects of hopes but also of growing concerns”. Whatever the next scenario will be, in European higher education the most ambitious reform goals of the next few months and years will have to traverse the most uncertain economic paths.

Conclusion

At the end, let us again ask: can education contribute to a better world today? The question seems now quite rhetoric; we have not heard any new arguments that seriously question the link between good, knowledge and education. We hear every day that education is of “vital importance for our knowledge societies”. Of course, in the new context there is a polemic and perhaps also confusion about what should be understood as a “better world” as well as what should be understood as a “good education”. Yet, this is not the first time this has happened in human history.

However, the link has changed its semantics profoundly. The chief function of the nation-state was educational and it had to provide public funds to execute this task. We have not forgotten that the task was predominantly ideological: to build national citizens and to support national labour markets. Teaching, learning and knowledge were dependent on the state: for the sake of the nation, for its “better future”. Yet, the modern history of education has been connected to both social subordination and social emancipation.
With the fusion of the once hostile national markets into the global market of today we are witnessing the retreat of the state from caring for public education. “Our citizens should be responsible!” This trend has occurred in the most obvious way in higher education where it seems easiest to argue in favour of its dependence in the market dimension: students should pay fees as future professionals who will gain a lot of money; unless universities receive positive feedback from entrepreneurs their “science” is without any value etc. Today, there are ever more social groups competing for ever fewer public funds and public goods. In this atmosphere, education is understood less and less as a public good. The slogan is changing from a “better world” to a “better life”.

But education is a public good – even in the worst conditions. We should perhaps ask a different question: what hinders it from contributing to a “better world”? My answer will be borrowed from Ulrich Beck: the “monocausal view” which reduces the multi-dimensionality of education to one dimension, the economic dimension. To make the point clearer: I am the last one to argue against the importance of education for economic development. The point refers to an ideological reduction which endangers the concept of education. It is vital to recognise a full range of educational purposes, for example in the form articulated in Jacques Delors’ report to UNESCO: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be (Delors, 1996). It should not be forgotten that this recognition requires promoting the goal of reaching beyond the economic sphere.

Pavel Zgaga is a Professor of the Philosophy of Education and Education Policy at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. He has held several research grants and directed a number of national and international projects on education policy and particularly on higher education topics.
Education for “a better world”: is it still possible?

References


EDITORIAL

INVITED SECTION: FESTSCHRIFT FOR LISBETH LUNDAHL

Karl-Georg Ahlström The Origin of Special Education in Sweden
Anne-Lise Arnesen International politics and national reforms
Dennis Beach Education Science in Sweden
Per-Olof Erixon Academic Literacies; Discourse and Epistemology in a Swedish University
Ingrid Gogolin The Challenge of Super Diversity for Education in Europe
David Hamilton & Gaby Weiner Dancing at the Edge: Writing for the Academic Marketplace
Elina Lahelma Gender Awareness in Finnish Teacher Education: an Impossible Mission?
Martin Lawn Governing through Data in English Education
Johan Lithner University Mathematics Students’ Learning Difficulties
Jenny Ozga Governing Narratives: “local” meanings and globalising education policy
Inge-Bert Täljedal Reform and Reaction in Teacher Education at Umeå University
Pavel Zgaga Education for “a better world”: is it still possible?
Elisabet Öhrn Class and ethnicity at work. Segregation and conflict in a Swedish secondary school