

Part 1

Comparative and International Education & History of Education

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Towards the Recovery of Education: Reaching for 2030 and Comparative and International Education

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reflect on what the changing context brought about by the Pandemic mean and can mean for the repositioning and reinvigoration of Comparative and International Education in 2023. The paper commences with the Sustainable Development Goals and the Incheon Declaration, as the vision humanity has set for itself for 2030. The paper then maps out the gap between the reality of education globally in 2015, when the goals were set, and the vision for 2030. The intervention of the COVID-19 Pandemic increased that gap. This paper argues that at the same time the Pandemic brought with it an opportunity to redesign education in the world, benefitting from the opportunities offered by technology. The paper further argues that in effecting such a redesign of education in the world, the scholarly field of Comparative and International Education has a pivotal role to play to – to connect to the theme of this book and of the conference of which this volume is the proceedings of papers presented – to use education experiences of the Pandemic and post-Pandemic times, to learn to not only recover education to its pre-Pandemic state, but to ensure the recovery has enough momentum to move beyond the pre-Pandemic level, surging towards the goals set for 2030, i.e. building new better education systems.

Keywords: Comparative and International Education, Incheon Declaration, post-Pandemic world, Sustainable Development Goals, technology enhanced education

Introduction

Despite an unprecedented education expansion project the past seventy years being a signature figure of the contemporary era in world history, by 2020 education worldwide still had many deficiencies. Then suddenly COVID-19 came and aggravated existing problems in education even more. as its object of study education (systems), such systems in their societal contexts, and a comparison of education. In all this the

field of Comparative and International Education stands central, having as its scope of study this worldwide education expansion and reform project, and having assumed as one of its roles guiding the world towards realizing Sustainable Development Goal Number 4, pertaining to education.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on what the changing context brought about by the Pandemic mean and can mean for the repositioning and reinvigoration of Comparative and International Education in 2023. The paper commences with a portrayal of humanity's collective vision for education by the year 2030. The shortfall in education globally by 2020, measured against this goal, is then analysed. The further setback, but also the changes precipitated and the opportunities created by the Pandemic are then investigated. The implications and possibilities of all these for Comparative and International Education are then identified.

The Sustainable Development Goals and the Incheon Declaration: Humanity's vision for 2030

In response to the ecological crises as well as other challenges facing humanity, the global community has formulated their "Sustainable Development Goals" as its collective vision for the world in 2030. On 25 September 2015 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted Resolution 70/1: "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", listing the following Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals: Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere; Ending hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; Ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; Achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls; Ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; Ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; Promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; Building resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; Reducing inequality within and among countries; Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns; Taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; Conserving and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; Protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and Strengthening the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015).

Based on a meeting convened by UNESCO in Incheon, South Korea, 19 to 21 May 2015, the Incheon Declaration was drawn up by the over 1600 participants from 160 countries, including over 120 Ministers who attended the meeting. This Incheon Declaration unpacked Goal 4, and is the global community's vision for education by the year 2030 (UNESCO, 2015). From the United Nations Document spelling out the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, and especially from the Incheon Declaration, it is clear that Goal 4 distinguishes it from the other in that it (education) is

seen not only as a Goal in itself, but as a means to and precondition for the realisation of each of the other Sustainable Development Goals.

The shortfall: the state of education in the world

With respect to all three dimensions of quantitative participation, quality and equality, the state of education during and in the years after 2015, when the Sustainable Development Goals and the Incheon Declaration were drafted, shows a massive shortfall, when held up against the Sustainable Development Goals and the Incheon Declaration as goals or vision. On the quantitative dimension, even before the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, 258 million children of school-going age across the world (or 17% of the cohort) were still not attending school (UNESCO, 2020b).

The word “quality” appears prominent in Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, dealing with education. ‘Quality’ in education is a difficult term to define, and has many facets. The following components of education quality can be distinguished: input quality (financial expenditure on education and physical facilities), process quality (quality of teaching and learning taking place), output quality (that is what students know and can do upon leaving or at a particular point in an education system) and product quality (that is what difference education has made on the life and work of the student after having left the education system). On all four components of quality the education systems of the world are seriously wanting. For example on output quality, even nations with well developed education systems, such as the United Kingdom, have expressed concern about less than desired education output quality. Government figures in England put it that around eight million adults in England have the numeracy skills proficiency at the level of primary school children (Isgin, 2023). Even more concern-raising is that 60 per cent of disadvantaged pupils do not possess basic mathematics skills by the age of 16 (Ibid.).

“Equality” in education is similarly a term to which many meanings have been attached, and a term that escapes attempts to define it in one short statement. However, no matter how equality in education is defined, stark inequalities especially along (but not limited to) the dimensions of socio-economic descent, gender and racial/ethnic status, at all levels of education access, survival in education, output or certification, and product equality exist in all societies. To illustrate with one example, in a recently published article Abdourahmane (2021, p. 15) reports the following salary inequalities between men and women of equal education qualifications in Saudi Arabia: those who have completed primary school education: men average 5 901 Saudi Riyal per month, women 4 063 (i.e. a wage gap of 1 838 Saudi Riyal per month); those with completed secondary education as highest qualification: men 8 874 Saudi Riyal per month versus women 5 202 (i.e. a gap of 3 631 Saudi Riyal per month); those with bachelor degrees: men 13 148 Saudi Riyal per month versus women 10 257 (i.e. a wage gap of 2 891 Saudi Riyal per month); those with master’s degrees: men 18 720 Saudi Riyal per month versus women 11 805 (i.e. a wage gap of 6 716); and those with doctorates: men 26 701 versus women 23 372 (gap 3 321).

The onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic: setback and opportunity for education

Then, on top of the already not optimal state of education in the world, the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic at the same brought a further

deterioration. At the beginning of the year 2020, the global community was caught off-guard by the unexpected and rapid outbreak of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) Pandemic. According to Ensign and Jacob (2021), schools are among the worst institutional casualties of complex disasters.

The immediate reflexive response to the Pandemic, in the education sector, was for authorities to close education institutions. Statistically, this has affected about 91% of the global student population (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020c), followed by a decision that education should move towards a distance education model, with teaching take place on-line and learning should take place at home.

It is not difficult to argue that such an arrangement will spell:

- the end of education opportunities for many students;
- for other students it will negatively impact on the quality of education they receive; and
- it will be those students already in a disadvantaged position regarding unequal access, survival, certification and life chances, who will be affected disproportionately adversely, thus inequalities in education will be exacerbated (Wolhuter, 2023).

To belabour these points. An extensive survey among primary and secondary schools in South Africa conducted a few months into the national lockdown and school closures precipitated by the COVID-19 Pandemic, found that 29% of all learners had lost all contact with their teachers, 79% of schools that are dependent on school fees (from parents) could not manage to collect such fees, and 51% could not succeed in sending any homework to their learners (Slatter, 2020, pp. 6-7). It is not difficult to hypothesise from this that it is the already deprived learners (from poor households) suffering most; those who are on the wrong side of the digital divide with no computers at home, and with parents likely to be the least well equipped and least capable to offer assistance at home.

On the other hand, the Pandemic has coerced those in charge of education systems worldwide, to make the change towards harnessing the plethora of technology available in the world of today, to promote the movement towards quality, equitable inclusive lifelong education for all. It should be borne in mind that education is known to be a very conservative sector of societal life, characterised by inertia and resistant to change – a feature of the education sector first highlighted in HRW Benjamin classic publication *The Saber Tooth Curriculum* (Benjamin, 1939). The Pandemic has forced the education sector to embrace technology it has thus far to a large extent eschewed. It is in this schema where Comparative and International Education comes into the play.

An assignment for Comparative and International Education

Any education strategy or innovation can only succeed if that strategy is attuned to the total education system context as well as societal context in which it is tried. The scholarly field of Comparative and International Education has in its purview the study of education systems, the study of education systems in their interrelationships with the societies in which these systems are embedded, and finally the comparison between education systems, in their societal contextual interrelationships. From such comparisons finer or refined statements can be made regarding education systems – societal contextual interrelationships, and also refined statements regarding the interrelationship between various components and elements of education systems.

It behoves scholars of Comparative and International Education to investigate the education ravages brought by the Pandemic, and how these were sought to address by harnessing technology. These efforts should be assessed within the plethora of education system and societal contexts that they were done in all parts of the world, and out of such a scholarly exercise can transpire recommendations as to how to successfully employ technology in pursuing the noble education goals of 2030 spelled out in the Sustainable Development Goals and in the Incheon Declaration. It is also the belief of the author that Comparative and International Education should rise to this occasion, it can also go a long way towards addressing the following serious lacuna besetting the field of Comparative and International Education, as identified by Wolhuter and Jacobs (2022):

- unresponsiveness or a lack of adequate response to new vistas beckoning;
- the “black box syndrome”;
- the lack of an autochthonous theory;
- an inadequate presence at universities; and
- an enduring Northern Hegemony.

To these can be added the lack of impact registered by Comparative and International Education scholarship (cf. Khumalo & Niemczyk, 2022).

To belabour some of these deficiencies evident in the field. The “black box” syndrome refers to the overconcentration of societal contextual forces shaping education systems, to the detriment of attention being paid to what is actually taking place within classrooms and institutions of education regarding teaching and learning. The field is thriving on theoretical frameworks that were developed in cognate fields of scholarship, particularly Sociology, Economics, Political Science and Anthropology, what is sorely missed is theoretical frameworks that was developed placing education systems in their societal contextual interrelationships central. In large parts of the world the field has been marginalised in its presence at universities, initial teacher education programmes and graduate programmes of education in particular. In terms of epistemological and theoretical predilections, thematic foci and scholars active in the field, a persistent Northern Hegemony is visible. Finally, these shortcomings are some of the reasons why the field fails to register a demonstrable impact in terms of academic impact (feeding into the broader family of Education sciences and beyond), impact regarding improving education practice in schools and classrooms and improving the design and reform of education systems, and impact regarding informing the formulation of education policy.

Conclusion

By means of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Incheon Declaration in particular, humanity has set itself a lofty and inviting vision to pursue towards 2030. Yet in order to achieve that goal, there is a steep mountain to scale. Moreover, the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic has simultaneously rendered the achievement of the goal more difficult and galvanised humanity in reaching to the possibilities offered by technology to pursue its noble aims. In this equation Comparative and International Education is a pivotal factor to get to the solution to connect to the theme of this book and of the conference of which this volume is the proceedings of papers presented – to use experiences to learn to not only recover education to its pre-Pandemic state, but to ensure the recovery has enough momentum to move beyond the pre-Pandemic level,

surging towards the goals set for 2030, i.e. building new better education systems. It is the wish of the author that the deliberations of the conference and the papers published in this book will feed the building of a more virile field of Comparative and International Education, rising to the occasion of the post-Pandemic world.

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