

Introduction

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Education in Developing, Emerging, and Developed Countries: Different Worlds, Common Challenges: Comparative and International Education and the New World

Abstract

After having harboured a very nominalistic conceptualisation of the education systems of the world before 1950, scholars of Comparative and International Education embraced the developed-developing countries dichotomy since the middle of the twentieth century. In this paper it is argued that this conceptualisation of the world has become increasingly anachronistic and also problematic for a number of reasons. Other taxons that have been suggested among scholars in the field include emerging countries, BRICS, and the Global South. The merits of the employment of the taxon of Global South are argued for. At the same time a host of challenges are besetting the education sector globally, in the Global North as well as in the Global South. These challenges can be subsumed into three categories, namely access to and participation in education (quantitative dimension), education quality and education equality. It is argued that the education experience of the Global South with respect to all three of these are also instructive for the Global North. It is also suggested that the Global South coming to its right, and levelling the current unequal playing field in Comparative and International Education and rectifying the preposterous structure of knowledge in the field, may well be the defining feature of a next phase in the historical evolution of the field of Comparative and International Education.

Keywords: BRICS, Comparative and International Education, developed countries, developing countries, emerging countries, Global South

Introduction

One problematic aspect of the evolution of the field of Comparative and International Education is that it has been trapped into a mode of extreme nominalism. The “factors and forces” age in the field reached its zenith during the interwar decades, but continue to have a formative influence on the field. The notion that every (national) education is the outcome of a set of unique societal contextual forces has imbued in the field an underlying belief in extreme nominalism (see Wolhuter, 1997). During the

1960s, during the social phase in the evolution of the field, and when Modernisation Theory became the main theoretical framework, the categories “developed” and “developing” countries became much in the vogue in the field.

The thesis of this paper is that the use of the terms developed and developing countries are becoming more and more objectionable, and that emerging countries, BRICS, and Global South are categories well worth giving more prominence in the field. Secondly, the paper will put it that there are global, universal challenges faced by education systems, and will highlight the proposition of scholars that it is the Global South which is currently appearing to assume the vanguard position with respect to many societal as well as education developments in the world.

The paper commences with an overview of the two categories of developed and developing countries that have been in circulation in the field since the mid-twentieth century, and why these terms are becoming increasingly untenable. The new categories of emerging countries, BRICS countries and Global South, and the value thereof as conceptual tools in Comparative and International Education are then discussed. Common education and broader societal challenges facing the world at the current point in time are then outlined, and the place or role of the Global South vis-à-vis these challenges are explored. In conclusion the implications of this new world for the construction of the field of Comparative and International Education are spelled out.

The problematic dichotomy of developed-developing countries

The impact of sir Michael Sadler as one of the groundlayers of Comparative and International Education, and the “factors and forces” stage in the field that followed Sadler’s Guilford Lecture, has imbued the field of Comparative and International Education with an extreme nominalism. This sense of nominalism was reinforced by founding father Isaac Kandel’s notion of (unique) “national character” as shaping force of (national) education systems. This conceptualisation of the assortment of education systems in the world came difficult to maintain in the wake of the social science phase of the field in the 1960s, particularly with Modernisation Theory rising to the position as main theoretical framework in the field at that time. In line with Modernisation Theory scholars in the field adopted the dichotomy of developed-undeveloped countries, later (in an attempt to be culturally-sensitive) to developed-developing countries, or even more developed-less developed countries.

This dichotomy can be criticised on various grounds. One objection is that the taxon of developing countries spans a wide spectrum and diversity of countries and education systems. For example, on the per capita income line, the developing countries taxon spans all the (in terms of World Bank classification) low income countries, lower middle income countries, as well as upper middle income countries. There is also the problem that this dichotomy, and nomenclature, suggests one model of the development (that of the West) to which the rest should aspire to and necessarily will develop to. In such a conceptualisation of the world is also a thinly-veiled condescending view of the extra-Western world. This stands in sharp contrast to the de facto position of this part of the world, or then the Global South. Geographically the Global South is multiple times larger than the Global North. Demographically the centre of the gravity in the world has shifted, a long time ago to the Global South. Furthermore, an increasingly majority of the global population are residing in the Global South. Economically the Global South is

responsible for an ever-larger part of the global economic output. Moreover, the majority of enrolments, at all levels of education, are to be found in the Global South.

New taxons: emerging countries, BRICS, Global South

Three new taxons that have been suggested in Comparative and International Education and beyond are that of emerging countries, the BRICS countries, and the Global South. World Bank economist Antoine van Agtmael introduced the notion of “emerging countries” in 1981. These are countries not yet in the same category of developed countries, but appearing to be rapidly proceeding to that level. The MSCI Emerging Markets Index considers the following 25 countries as emerging countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Greater China (that is including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan), Colombia, Czech Republic, Egypt, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, (Republic of, or South) Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey and United Arab Emirates (MSCI, 2020). This author has argued for the use of the emerging countries as a taxon in Comparative and International Education (Wolhuter, 2021).

The BRICS countries is a grouping that has come to the fore in global geopolitics the past decade and a half. The acronym BRICS is derived from the five constituent countries, namely Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. In view of their impressive total area, demographic weight and increasing economic strength, this grouping has been hailed as a counterweight in the post-Cold War unipolar world. The grouping has also been portrayed as an attractive taxon for scholars in the field of Comparative and International Education to use. Recently (2023) it has been agreed to admit six new members: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the United Arab Emirates. The problem with using this as a taxon in the field of Comparative and International Education, is that neither in terms of contextual ecology nor in terms of education features or development, do these countries have much in common. The only feature they share is opposition to Western and especially American hegemony (and even in this instance, the position of one of the key BRICS countries, India, is at best lukewarm or dubious).

The term “Global South” was coined by Carl Oglesby (1935-2011) in 1969 (Oglesby, 1969). The term is usually taken to broadly cover Latin America, Africa, Turkey, the Middle East and Asia (excluding Russia and the high-income Asian countries or jurisdictions, such as Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan). While Global South certainly has a geographic expression with its heartland as demarcated by Oglesby, this author has argued in a forthcoming publication (Wolhuter, 2024) that this demarcation has to be expanded and adapted to new conceptualisations of space in the field of Comparative and International Education and beyond. These new conceptualisations refer to conceptualisations of connections rather than uniform, contagious special blocks, and, also allowing a genealogical meaning to the term “Global South” (see Wolhuter, 2024).

Of these possibilities this author has argued that the Global South offers the most promising new taxon to employ by scholars in the field of Comparative and International Education; moreover, the Global South coming to its right in the field constitutes an imperative and desideratum that may well become the signature feature of a next, immanent, phase in the evolution of the field (Wolhuter, 2024). This, which also provides an answer to a question asked in the author’s paper in the BCES conference paper two

years ago (Wolhuter, 2022). It has been customary to delineate the historical evolution of the field of Comparative and International Education into eight phases. The first five is then those identified by Noah and Eckstein (1969) as a phase of travelers' tales, a phase of the systematic study of foreign systems of education for borrowing, a phase of international cooperation, a "factors and forces" phase, and a social science phase. These cover the evolution of the field till the end of the 1960s. Then Paulston identified three phases: a phase of orthodoxy (which is the same as Noah and Eckstein's social science phase), a phase of heterodoxy (1970s and 1980s), and a phase of heterogeneity (since about 1990). This author has argued (Wolhuter, 2022; Wolhuter, Espinoza & McGinn, 2022) that this periodisation is also in need to updating, i.e., because of a problematic naming and typification of the last (heterogeneity phase) and of the fact that this periodisation suggests that there was no development in the field since 1990. The author has also suggested that a present phase can be identified as an eighth phase (Wolhuter, 2024). This phase can be described as Criticism against Northern Hegemony. This construct can be related to a number of related strands visible in the field. These strands detectable in the scholarly discussion in the field are criticism of the imposition of one model of development; criticism of foreign aid and of international agencies; anti-globalisation; criticism of neo-liberal economics and its impact on education; calls for the decolonisation of education and of Comparative and International Education; criticism of racism in education and in Comparative and International Education; an appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems; and allegations that scholars of the Global South find themselves on an unequal playing field (Wolhuter, 2024). Then bringing the Global South to its rightful place by addressing each of these criticisms will herald a next or ninth phase in the evolution of the field, namely a phase of the Affirmation of the Global South.

Common education challenges facing the world

In the meantime, a plethora of common education challenges are facing the world. Taking the model of Wolhuter (2014), these challenges can be analysed along three dimensions, namely the quantitative dimension, the qualitative dimension, and the equality dimension.

The quantitative dimension refers to adult literacy levels and to enrolments. While this dimension at least, may at first glance gives the impression of being primarily or even exclusively a Global South challenge, it can be stated that in an age of globalisation challenges faced by the Global South have global implications. It is estimated that globally 244 million children aged between 6 and 18 years were out of school in 2021, the majority of these are in the Global South (UNESCO, 2022).

The qualitative dimension refers to quality at the levels of input quality, process quality, output quality and product quality (Wolhuter, 2014). Concerns about quality of education at all four these levels are worldwide, even in the Global North (for example, about concerns by the United Kingdom government on education in the United Kingdom, see Isgin, 2023), but are more pronounced in the Global South. As an illustration to the last point, the outcomes of the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) for Grade 4 learners can be cited. Of the top five countries, all were located in the Global North: Singapore (average score: 587), Hong Kong (average score: 573), Russia (average score: 567), England (average score: 558), and Finland (average score: 549) (Mullis et al., 2023). By contrast the five countries with the lowest

scores were all located in the Global South: Brazil (average score: 419), Iran (average score: 413), Jordan (average score: 381), Egypt (average score: 378), and South Africa (average score: 288) (Ibid.).

The equality dimension refers to inequalities along the lines of gender, socio-economic status, and race/ethnic status at the levels of access, survival, certification and product. While inequalities on all these dimensions and at all these levels are present throughout the world, disparities are starker in the Global South. For example, the gender parity index at the level of senior secondary education in two Global South regions Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia are respectively 0.88 and 0.95, compared to 1.01 in North America and Western Europe (Global North) (UNESCO, 2011).

The Global South

The question is now where or how does the Global South fit into this picture of education challenges facing the world. This author contends that not only is the Global South context, in terms of geography, demography, and economic strength increasingly important factor in the global equation, but in the new geopolitical calculus, characterized by the dissipation of the Washington Consensus, and the rise of new nodes challenging the unipolar world that has held sway since the end of the Cold War, the Global South is assuming ever more importance. In fact, some of the new or promising nodes of power (such as China and India) are located in the Global South. As an example of the growing economic prowess of the Global South, China has emerged in recent decades as the second largest economy in the world. In 2023 the gross domestic product of India as overtaken that of the United Kingdom, to become the sixth largest economy in the world (Trading Economics, 2023). On the growing share of the Global South in the global demography, a comparison between the population totals of Africa and Europe the past seven decades can be cited as illustration. In 1950 Africa's population of 230 million was half that of Europe, by 1985 it drew level (at about 480 million each), by 2025 it is predicted that Africa's population will be three times that of Europe (Kennedy, 1993, p. 25).

Furthermore, a number of social science scholars also put the Global South in a leading global position with respect to social or societal dynamics. For example, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) present the interesting argument that societally, the rest of the world, North America and Europe in particular, is now moving down a road that has been travelled by Africa – a statement that has also been expressed by political leaders and in the public discourse in South Africa. This same contention has also appeared in a publication authored by three leading scholars in the field of Comparative and International Education: Takayama, Sriprakash and Connell (2017). To belabour this point on the importance of the Global South with another example — one very relevant to a discussion on education and a discussion in Comparative and International Education: there are currently 26 million refugees in the world — the largest number ever recorded, and half of which are children (Monkman, 2022, p. 4). The education of these refugees and their children presents a very specific challenge to humanity. While — rightfully and commendably — much attention has been given to the refugee challenge in the Global North, 85 percent of these refugees are being hosted in developing countries (Monkman, 2022, p. 4).

Furthermore, not only in contextual ecology has the Global South been moving to the vanguard position in the global line-up, but the geographic centre of gravity of the

global education project has been moving decidedly to the Global South. The differential growth in enrolments between the Global North and the Global South and the resultant current enrolment totals at all levels of education testify of this change. Another indication of this shift is that whereas the number of higher education institutions barely changed in the Global North, remaining at around 20 000 from 2006 to 2018, in the Global South the number almost doubled from a little over 40 000 to about 70 000 — a significant component of the global total of 90 000 institutions of higher education (McGregor, 2022). World higher education student numbers are now more than 200 million. But the number of students in the Global North reached a maximum in 2011 and has been declining since, to come to around 58.3 million in 2018. By contrast, the enrolments in the Global South have almost doubled, from some 78 million in 2006 to 150 million in 2018 (Ibid.).

Conclusion

Over the course of its history during the post-Second World War era, scholars in the field of Comparative and International Education have become ensnared in the developed-developing countries dichotomous conceptualisation of the world. This conceptualisation appears to be increasingly anachronistic and problematic. New taxons that have been suggested include that of emerging countries, of BRICS and of the Global South. The merits of the last have been argued in this paper. The growing stature of the Global South in terms of contextual factors and education systems development make the Global South a unit of increasing value for scholars in Comparative and International Education to investigate for its own value (understanding education in the Global South), but also for its value in coming to a more complete understanding of education in the contemporary world, and for its illuminate value for education challenges which are also faced in the Global North. Bringing the Global South to its rightful place in the scholarly pursuit in the field, may well result in a next phase in the historical evolution of the field of Comparative and International Education, a phase of which the Global South coming to its right be the defining feature.

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