EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND THE CRISIS OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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Abstract – This paper was designed not as a research product but as a speech to comparative education colleagues. It argues that there is a crisis of educational quality in many parts of the world, and that there is a parallel crisis in the quality of educational research and statistics. Compared to other major public responsibilities in health, agriculture, population and family planning, educational statistics are poor and often getting worse. Our international and national statistical institutions are impoverished, and we as a profession have been part of the problem. We have been so busy arguing over differing research paradigms that we have not paid sufficient attention to our common professional responsibilities and common professional goals. The paper suggests that we, as professionals interested in comparative education issues, begin to act together more on these common and important issues.


Résumé – Le présent article a été conçu moins comme le produit d’une recherche que comme un entretien avec les collègues de l’éducation comparée. L’auteur prétend qu’une crise de l’éducation sévit dans de nombreux pays du monde entier, et qu’on observe parallèlement une crise de la qualité de la recherche en éducation et des statistiques y afférentes. Comparées aux autres grands domaines de la fonction publique tels que la santé, l’agriculture, la population et le planning familial, les statistiques de l’éducation sont médiocres et vont souvent en empirant. Nos institutions internationales et nationales de statistique sont affaiblies, et nous avons une part de responsabilité dans ce problème en tant que membres de la profession. Nous avons été si occupés à discuter des différents paradigmes de recherche que nous n’avons pas prêté suffisamment attention à nos responsabilités et à nos buts professionnels communs. Cet article suggère que nous commençons, en tant que professionnels intéressés par les questions d’éducation comparée, à agir ensemble davantage sur ces problèmes communs et importants.

Crisis of quality

Few among us would disagree with the proposition that there is a crisis of educational quality. Of course people worry about different consequences and attribute the crisis to different causes. Political and business leaders worry about how their nation can gain economic competitiveness in the face of educational decline. Teachers and administrators tend to emphasize problems of classroom management, learning, student discipline, curriculum logistics, and the shortfalls in educational finance which makes a decline in educational quality inevitable. And parents worry over the prospects of their children's individual chances in a world where patterns of occupational mobility are complex and changing rapidly.

And there are differences too by region. In the United States the worry is principally over the cafeteria of curricular choice, the sense that, given the plethora of competing cultural and individual demands, students are not well prepared in the fundamentals. In Japan the worry is over the ability of young people to adapt to a world of new expectations, the sense that the monoculture of uniform and highly traditional ambitions is unstable. Young Japanese will have roles to which they will have to adapt, new leisure responsibilities, new concepts of gender functions; many will live outside Japan, speak different languages and be required to understand other ways of life. For the Japanese the curriculum must prepare for the changes required for these new experiences, but without losing the essential elements of their traditions – the typical challenge, as C. Arnold Anderson put it, of “trying to educate up but not away...”.

Countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America are preoccupied by fiscal crisis. Already at a disadvantage by comparison to the financing of OECD school systems, they have watched as their ability to maintain their systems has fallen precipitously. In Western Europe the crisis is one of abundance, of weakened purpose as the supply of schooling reaches second generation universality and the demand, normally associated with scarcity, lessens ambition to try hard and to sacrifice for an increasingly distant and highly questionable personal security. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the crisis has taken another form altogether. There the principal worry is over a lost common purpose, the sense that with the fall of central planning and a single approved philosophy, there is nothing to replace the reason for national motivation and personal sacrifice. Civic leaders in Los Angeles and Moscow are asking similar questions: how can education be used to promote national purpose yet ethnic tolerance; how can individuals be motivated if their personal freedoms are seemingly limitless?

In essence, it is a time for many to return to first principles; it is a time to ask why the state should support public schooling at all. It is a time when we, as professional educators, must answer the increasingly vehement inquiries emanating from the political, industrial and parental groups: How good in fact are our schools? How well prepared are our young people? How much would