

Ethnicity and education: a historico-educational perspective

C.C. Wolhuter

North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa

Charl.Wolhuter@nwu.ac.za

Introduction

In spite of interminable claims that the present era is one of globalisation, of materialism or of individualisation; current and recent events in Kazakhstan, the multicultural residential areas of Birmingham, and the gruesome turmoil in Rwanda and Sudan demonstrate that ethnicity is still a powerful social factor, which should be taken into account when designing societal structures such as education systems. The aim of this article chapter is to illuminate the issue of the handling of cultural diversity in education from a historical perspective.

The article commences with an explication of the value of historical perspectives in the illumination of contemporary educational issues. That is followed by a reconstruction of the handling of the issue of cultural diversity in education systems during each of the main phases of the historical evolution of education systems.

The value of historical perspectives in illuminating educational issues

The significance of historico-educational research is conceptualised as:

- the explanation of contemporary education (Venter, 1986: 3). Contemporary education is crystallised reality – the outcome of forces which operated over a long time;
- the elucidation of present-day educational issues (Venter & Van Heerden, 1989: 50; Beales, 1989: 140-141; McCollough, 2000: 57-62; Robinson, 2000: 57-62). From a historical reconstruction of contemporary educational issues the causes, contributing factors, implications and extent of problems could be grasped, as well as guidelines for addressing those problems;
- assistance with the design of a future educational dispensation (Coetzee, 1989; Anderson, 1976: 44; McCollough, 2000: 1; Robinson, 2000: 57-62). The design of an educational dispensation for the future should be based upon an understanding and critical assessment of the origins, development and nature of the present educational system. From such a critical comprehension could be constructed a clear vision of future policy and practice.

The first schools

According to the best available evidence, schools were established for the first time in history in Egypt and Mesopotamia, by about 3000BC, shortly after the innovation of writing. According to Fägerlind and Saha (1984: 32) few scholars have thus far attempted to document and to explain the origins of schools. The anthropologist Yehudi Cohen has constructed an interesting theory, according to which schools were founded to serve political objectives. According to Cohen (1970: 55) schools developed as specialised, differentiated institutions in what he called “civilisation states”. Civilisation states, such as Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, Ethiopia, and the states of the Aztecs, Incas, Hebrews, Japanese and Chinese entailed the political unification and integration of smaller economic and socio-cultural entities. One of the pre-conditions for the survival of such states is the integration (unification) of smaller, local loyalties and the replacement thereof with loyalties toward the state. This is

important for especially the elite whose task it is to maintain the borders and the integrity of the state. Therefore, it was necessary, according to Cohen, that at least a section of the population – the elite – receive school education. In such a situation the accommodation and allowance of space for ethnic diversity are, obviously, besides the question.

Middle Ages

Most of the schools of today can trace their descent to the Middle Ages, from which the schools of modern Europe had developed and from where they were, in turn, transplanted to the extra-European world, be it by means of colonisation and/or missionary schools. The two basic school types of medieval Europe were the missionary schools and the cathedral schools (Boyd & King, 1964: 101-117). The purpose of the cathedral schools were to train church leaders (bishops), while the monastic schools prepared novices for life in the monastery (although the monastic schools were later also attended by the so-called *externi*, i.e. learners who did not intend to spend their lives in a monastery, but merely wanted to benefit from the education provided in these schools) (Duggan, 1916: 72, 84). These schools prepared learners for the theocentric medieval European society, with its twin political and ecclesiastical structures of authority, with the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. The curricula of these schools were the 3 R's (reading, writing and arithmetic), the rudiments of the Christian religion (Bible and psalmody) and the seven liberal arts (dialectics, rhetoric, Greek and Latin grammar, music, geometry, arithmetic and astronomy).

The seven liberal arts were taught as handmaidens to gain a better understanding of the scriptures. Education was oriented to the *jenseitiges* (preparation for the hereafter, i.e. life and world after death) (Pistorius, 1982: 113). To the limited extent that education was secular, it was provided to reinforce the church and the supra-cultural Holy Roman Empire. The reflection and accommodation of contemporary culture were not on the table; much less cultural diversity.

Renaissance

During the Renaissance the emphasis shifted from the next world and life to the present world and life. This increased emphasis on the human being is encapsulated in the term *humanism* (Van Zyl, 1973: 60). Humanism and the new attention on the present world and life also gave rise to a new appreciation of the classical (Greek-Roman) culture (Power, 1962: 336). Desiderius Erasmus, the leading Renaissance figure in Northern Europe, attached great value to education. The wholesome influence of the classical culture could only be accomplished through education (Coetzee, 1958: 174). Erasmus was very clear regarding who should receive education: only the "order of the learned" – the gifted individuals (*Ibid.*). In Southern Europe, Vittorino de Veltre's palace school was very influential. Vittorino attempted to combine the spirit of Christian life with the educational apparatus of the classical culture (Power, 1962: 357). While the Renaissance represented a broadening of educational objectives and of curricula (From religion only to religion plus Greek-Roman culture) as well as a broadening of the school-attending population (from clergy only to clergy and aristocracy), it was still an elite rather than a popular education. Renaissance leaders, for example, refused to attach any value to education through the medium of the European vernaculars. The Renaissance schools, with

their fixation on Greek-Roman culture, looked down on popular culture, and there could be no space for the accommodation of cultural diversity.

Reformation

Humanism's emphasis on the human, the individual and reason also gave rise to a reaction against the church of the Middle Ages, and to a renewal in the field of the church, namely the Reformation. Whatever the differences were between the leaders of the Reformation, they were unanimous as to the following two principles:

- faith should be based upon the Bible (and not the authorities of the church)
- each individual should interpret the Bible for him-/herself.

The above principles had radical implications for education. In the first instance it meant that all people had to be able to read and to write. Secondly, the Bible had to be available in the vernacular, and not only in Latin, as was the custom during the Middle Ages, as each individual would best be capable to interpret the Bible if he/she read it in the vernacular. Therefore, education through the medium of the vernacular was supported. The contention among the leaders of the Reformation was that the state should establish and maintain primary schools to which parents would be obliged to send their children. In 1528 the Elector of the German state of Saxony requested Philip Melancthon, professor at the University of Wittenberg and follower of the Reformation leader Martin Luther, to draft a plan for education in Saxony. The ensuing Saxony Plan made provision for a public primary school in every village in Saxony. While there was a public primary school in every village in Saxony, universal school attendance was still a distant ideal; and while provision was now made for primary school through the medium of the vernacular of the dominant culture, there was no way in which provision was made for cultural and linguistic diversity.

Seventeenth Century: Rationalism and Realism; and Eighteenth Century: Enlightenment and Naturalism

After the religious wars of the seventeenth century, the principle of religious freedom became entrenched. In this less circumscribed atmosphere, where the church's hold on people and on society was broken, a new movement gained momentum, to make reason the supreme authority in each individual's life. For John Locke (1632-1704), the first exponent of the Rationalism movement, reason was the only guide for the attainment of truth. The objective of education would then be the development of reason and control of life by reason. Mathematics gained increased value in the school curriculum.

Following the epistemology of the Empiricists, of whom Francis Bacon (1592-1670) was the leading figure, the Realists, under John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), pleaded for the study of *realia* – current life and nature – in schools. Consequently the natural sciences gained a place in school curricula.

During the next century, the ideas of the Rationalists were taken further when the philosophers of the Enlightenment used *reason* to investigate institutions of society. The other main philosophical current of the eighteenth century – Jean Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) Naturalism – advocated a form of education which allowed the natural unfolding of the child's natural abilities by means of a spontaneous occupation with nature: subsequently, more value was attached to the study of nature

in schools as well as to education through the medium of the vernacular (the child's natural language).

While the above philosophical streams of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries resulted in a further broadening of the school curriculum, they did, as far as addressing culture is concerned, at best see to it that enhanced value was assigned to the dominant culture in which schools functioned. The accommodation of cultural diversity was, again, not on the table.

Nineteenth Century: Rise of the Nation State and of National Education Systems

One of the major moments in world history is the rise of the nation state in the nineteenth century (Hartshorne 1989: 33). The state became a powerful political, social and economic institution. Power was seated at a central point. That was made possible by post-1800 technology of transport and communication, such as railways and the telegraph (Idenburg, 1975: 71). The institution of universal, compulsory education was one of the instruments which the state employed in order to achieve the objective which it regarded as desirable (Hartshorne, 1989: 103; Welch, 1991).

The state attempts to mould national unity by means of the education system: therefore local loyalties should be prevented and be suppressed, and as the most permanent identifications are formed during the early years, education acquires particular value. In fact, education is regarded as the major agent in the political socialisation of youth and in nation-building (Fägerlind & Saha, 1984: 120). Thus, during the early years of the modern nation-state, state-supplied systems of universal, compulsory primary education came into being, for example by means of the Guizot Act in France in 1833, in Prussia in 1806 and in England by means of the Balfour Act of 1902. In view of the objectives of these national education systems, as portrayed above, they would reflect the dominant culture, and these systems were anathema to the accommodation of cultural diversity.

Post-Second World War Trends

The post-Second World War era has been characterised by increasingly multicultural societies. Furthermore, the excesses of the war forced the issue of human rights to the foreground. Advocates of human rights rejected the idea of the unlimited sovereignty of states and governments. Human rights came to be regarded as *summum bonum*, as elevated above the will of people or of a majority, of states or of governments, and as something inalienable. After the Second World War the issue of human rights was internationalised, by i.a. the International Jurists who entered the debate (1952) and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (1948) (Suid-Afrikaanse Regskommissie, 1988: 50).

On 14 December 1960, UNESCO accepted its Convention against Discrimination in Education, which was signed by 68 countries, after being accepted by the General Assembly of UNESCO. This convention confirmed the principle that discrimination in education, on grounds of race, gender, language, religion, political or other beliefs, national or social origin, and economic position or descent, constitutes a violation of human rights (Suid-Afrikaanse Regskommissie, 1989: 64). The convention contained detailed prescriptions regarding the provision of education too.

The result of all these developments was the institution of multicultural education in the countries of the developed world (such as Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand). Multicultural education attaches value to pluralism (Kelly *et al.*, 1988) and rejects the idea that schools should aim at the assimilation of all learners into the dominant culture. Schools should rather strive towards the enrichment of all cultures, and should make children tolerant and appreciative of other cultures. These were, for example, the principles which were brought into the education system of England by the Rampton Commission (1981) (Great Britain, 1981) and especially the monumental Swann Commission (1985) (Great Britain, 1985).

Early Twenty-first century trends and their impact on education

The trends of the early twenty-first century include the communication and information revolutions, increasingly multicultural societies and the empowerment of minority groups, and the demise of the once omnipotent nation-state (*see: Steyn & Wolhuter, 2008: 12-34*).

The sustained influx of Third World migrants into the developed countries, the contemporary creed of human rights and the erosion of the power base of the nation-state (which will be discussed) in the next paragraph all contribute to the replacement of the melting pot policy (namely the enforcement of one, officially sanctioned culture by the state, and the suppression of the cultural life of minority groups, as they are regarded to be a threat to the integrity and sovereignty of the state) by multiculturalism (extending positive recognition to cultural diversity, be it linguistically, religiously or otherwise). The loss of power by central governments and the world-wide information network (which can circumvent the authority of the state) also contribute to the empowerment of minority groups.

The communications and information revolutions, the globalisation of economies, the down-scaling of governments out of economic necessity, and Third World governments in execution of IMF and World Bank directives, all contribute to the denudation of the power base of the state. To fill the vacuum created by the loss of power by central states, the locus of power shifts into two opposite directions: upwards in the direction of supranational and international structures, and downwards by means of decentralisation in the direction of sub-national and local structures, and eventually to the level of the individual.

The combined effect of the trends outlined above is to give further momentum to the trend of granting positive recognition to the cultural diversity; a trend which has commenced in the late twentieth century.

Conclusion

A combination of societal trends which are manifesting themselves in the early twenty-first century have forced an about-turn in the centuries-old practice of education systems being employed to socialise all into the culture approved of by the ruling class. The education systems of North America and Western Europe have already begun to be reformed in line with the new principle of the accommodation of cultural diversity. While the general pattern in the rest of the world is a persistence of the practice of the past – namely that the education system will foist down the

officially sanctioned culture onto learners – inescapable societal trends, such as the demise of the once omnipotent nation-state, and the information and communications revolution, will eventually force these states to change their education policies too.

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