

Over-educating the World – Exploring a Taboo in the International Educational Discourse

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Abstract

Mass education is now a worldwide feature of modern nation-states. This is true for primary and secondary education and increasingly for higher education and more recently lifelong learning. Strongly standardized forms of school organization, curriculum and educational purposes have spread rapidly throughout the world often highly detached from local realities and with clear signs of over-education, which can only be explained if education is understood as an ideology promoted at the world cultural level by international organizations. These are the main tenets of neoinstitutionalist world polity research on global educational expansion and will serve as a theoretical frame for this paper, which is based on qualitative analysis of education documents from a wide array of international organizations.

keywords: *Over-education • Lifelong Learning • World culture • International Organizations*

Introduction

Education has become a taken-for-granted structural element of modern nation-states. Its unique status as both a human right and an obligation (compulsory mass education) has seen dramatic success worldwide, at least since WWII. Recent discourses in international education radicalize this long-term trend stressing Education for All and Lifelong Learning for All. International organizations are spearheading this international discourse. Among them some are more prominent (e.g. UNESCO, WB, OECD, EU) and others have only recently discovered education (development banks, regional bodies in other areas) and are less researched.

In attempts to explain such diffusion functionalist theories are certainly the dominant lines in education science and in international organizations alike. Most prominently, from a more economic perspective, human capital theory supposes an alleged economic importance of education, which has been considerably strengthened since the 1960s. This is true for both more and less industrialized countries. Arguments that call for ever more education for ever more people to solve ever more problems differ little between poor and rich countries. If differences exist, they are in degree rather than in kind. They share a similar set of functionalist claims of the putative effects of education – from economic growth and employability to environmentally-friendly behavior and lower child mortality.

I will stress in this paper that the importance given to education as a panacea for all ills and a premium means for empowerment, development or progress in general might help us to explain the unintended side effects of educational planning, which become visible upon closer scrutiny of educational documents.

Some theoretical considerations

It is perhaps helpful to recall that education in neoinstitutionalism or world polity has been characterized (1) “as institutionally chartered to be universal, standardized, and rationalized”; (2) as “very highly institutionalized at a very general collective level”; (3) as “institutionally chartered to conduct the socialization of the individual as the central social unit” (Boli, Ramirez & Meyer 1985:147-149).

All three elements allow us to shed light on the phenomenon of over-education from different angles. The first – rationalization - leads us to the process of theorization. By theorization I mean “[...] the self-conscious development and specification of abstract categories and the formulation of patterned relationships such as chains of cause and effect” (Strang & Meyer 1993:493). In our case, the cause is education and the effect is employability, personal and social development and many other putative effects which cannot be dealt with in this paper (health issues, peace, and happiness). Universality and standardization are only consequences of rationalized theorization and translate into global models of how “to do education” as promoted by IOs.

Yet, if rational approaches (and their models) cannot provide evidence of any effects (as in education), the general collective level in the (2) element from above comes into play as a supporting cultural ideology. Central in this ideology is the status of the individual (3).

Findings: Education and the problem of rationality

In this section I present a selection of my analysis of more than 250 documents from more than 60 IOs (IGOs and INGOs). Documents are produced, published and authorized by IOs and deal with education and – in addition – lifelong learning (LLL) as their main topics.

The theorization of education and LLL is marked by a peculiar tension between what is believed or theoretically assumed education and LLL can bring about and what IOs can ascertain – based on their analytical apparatus – it actually does bring about. This tension is most visible in organizations that discuss findings from educational research. The WB as the most research-oriented organization in the sample is particularly fruitful in this respect.

Based on human capital theory, the WB (2003b:6) states that

“Technological progress is likely to raise the value of education in producing human capital (Schultz 1975). As developing countries liberalize their trade regimes and open themselves to technology transfer from industrial countries, the value of education rises. Education thus becomes more important.”

In a similar logic, the OECD (1996:32):

“The share in value-added high technology industries has increased from 1970 to 1991, in some countries more than in others. Although causality cannot be inferred, this link points to a positive relationship between skills, technology, innovation, productivity and competitiveness.”

What exactly the nature of this relationship is, seems impossible to determine and it is worth noting that the high-tech share has increased before LLL had been put on the agenda. When it comes to assess the impact of education as a causal factor, the WB (2003b:6) is cautious.

“Large indirect effects of education, operating through intervening variables, raise the social rates of return significantly, sometimes with long delays. The size of these effects is not clear, however, with some estimates yielding negative and others yielding very high positive values [...].“

In part, the empirical ambiguity is explained by the difference between quantity and quality in education:

“Research assessing the link between the quantity of education (in terms of enrollment or average years of schooling) and economic growth has been encouraging but somewhat mixed,² perhaps because ultimately what matters for growth is not the years that students spend in school, but what they learn.” (WB 2011b:12)

The AFDB (2007b:5) is aware of the same problem in technical and vocational skills development (TVSD):

“The many benefits claimed for TVSD (e.g. higher productivity, readiness for technological change, openness to new forms of work organization, and the capacity to attract foreign direct investment) all depend on the quality of the skills acquired, and a dynamic environment in which they can be applied.“

What exactly improves quality is difficult to say as the EU (2001:48) admits when stating that “At present, the relationship between resources and the quality of lifelong learning remains unclear.”

The controversy can also be observed in more country-specific contexts:

[...] compared with general education, TVE led to higher earnings in Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, more or less equal earnings in Indonesia and India, and lower earnings in Pakistan.⁸⁷ The reach of TVE in rural areas is often very limited.⁸⁸ In some countries, TVE has actually reinforced socioeconomic inequalities rather than fostered social mobility.⁸⁹ Poor quality and inequitable access are key constraints in many countries. (WB 2013:176)

Reviewing educational impact in six countries (5 in Africa and India) the AFDB (2007b:73) warns that the

“[...] 'economic rates of return' literature must be interpreted with great caution“ since “Changes and complexities in the labour market, especially in contexts where regular waged jobs are an exception rather than the rule, make the validity of data sets used to estimate rates of return highly dubious.“

In the same vein, the WB (2012:48) states that “the available literature is controversial on the rates of return to adult education, with some estimates pointing to no or very low returns and others being more sanguine.”

The 'economic rates of return' approach is, however, *one of the very few* measurable bases of evidence (for functionalist policy making) available. That might be one reason why most of the organizations cling to it despite its shortcomings.

Rates of return can be measured privately (or internally) as changes in earnings and enhanced employability or publicly as higher tax revenues and reduced social transfers. The impact on these rates, however, strongly varies depending on the educational sector and, even more so, on who funds this educational sector. For instance, the EU (2005:15), in turn, sees that “[...] countries increasingly expect individuals and firms to contribute to the costs of adult continuing training and higher education where there are high private rates of return.”

Inasmuch as returns on adult education are mostly private, some IOs, thus, consider private funding as justified although these thorny issues remain somewhat marginal in the policy papers (but see OECD 2004c for example). The debate changes when discussing primary education:

“That said, there is compelling evidence that private and public rates of return to education at the primary and secondary levels are sufficiently high to mark this out as a good investment for society.” (UNESCO 2011b:30)

Identical positions can be found in WB (2013:86).

Confronted with empirical complexities in the vocational education sector, the OECD (2007b:11) – like many other organizations – relies on theory-based policy making:

“Most educational policy makers believe that there is a link between qualifications systems and lifelong learning; however such a link has never been proven. [...] how can national qualifications systems promote lifelong learning in terms of quantity, quality, efficiency and equitable distribution of learning opportunities? The theoretical links between national qualifications systems and lifelong learning are termed mechanisms and each one should have the capacity to change the qualifications system to make it more conducive to lifelong learning. If such mechanisms can be identified, understood and then transformed into concrete robust relationships, policy makers will be provided with a rationale for reforming qualifications systems with lifelong learning benefits in mind.”

Note that in absence of any empirically-proven link, the theoretically-assumed links make their way into policy-making.

While in many cases empirical evidence is mixed or absent and theory might “iron out” the uncertainties, there are clearer instances of education’s negative effects. Although terms such as over-education or mal-education (wrong education) might evoke strong feelings, they simply point to the fact that education systems and labor markets do not work in conjunction as is often implied in theoretical accounts:

“Education is not an automatic panacea for delayed employment. In many Arab states, young people with secondary and tertiary education face longer periods of unemployment than their peers with only basic education. Similarly, in several countries of sub-Saharan Africa, including Burundi, Cameroon, Kenya and Nigeria, youth with secondary and tertiary education have higher rates of unemployment than those with lower levels of attainment [...]” (UNESCO 2010a:83)

More general, for the Middle East and North Africa, the WB (2013:7) summarizes that “A fairly well-educated and young labor force remains unemployed, or underemployed, and labor productivity stagnates.” For East Africa (Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda) the East African Community (EAC 2009:77) states that “Most graduates continue to be jobless as demonstrated by the unemployment figures.” For Papua New Guinea, the Pacific Island Forum (PIF 2007:12f) bemoans that “Each year 80,000 school leavers graduate from educational establishments but only about 5% are absorbed into formal employment.”

The discussion on the benefits and limits of education is particularly interesting when case studies are mentioned. In a country review, EuropeAid (2010c:362) resumes after more than ten years of sector aid (70 million €) in Tunisia:

“Support to general education aimed at an improvement of employability opportunities of graduates has not reduced the rates of unemployment of school leavers, because general education is expected to prepare access to higher education. Part of the unemployment problem is linked to the TVET system, which is still underdeveloped in Tunisia, and the capacity of the Tunisian economy to create the appropriate number of jobs fitting the needs of the new generations is still insufficient, whatever the quality of the education system.”

In a review of three projects¹ initiated to improve TVET and access to higher education, final evaluations are sober, particularly in the case of Chile:

“The program delivered education to 250,000 low-income students during 2003–08. Its availability helped increase overall adult enrollment from 2003 through 2006 (Appendix A).

¹ Two in Chile and one in Colombia; funding volume altogether: roughly 700 million US\$; period 2002-2009.

However, by 2007, overall adult enrollment had declined to previous levels. [...] [...] results on drop-out rates also caused concern. About half of the students did not reach certification, with about a quarter quitting before examinations. There is no assessment available regarding why that happens. [...] The Chile Lifelong Learning Project failed to provide access to a technical education with better curricular links across education levels and better tailored to labor markets.[...]. [...] enrollment in technical education expanded markedly, doubling between 2002 and 2009. But this was attributable to massive increases in public financial aid for technical education and had little if anything to do with any expansion of the kind of technical education that the project expected to achieve.[...] Although evaluations of impact on doctoral enrollment are not available, the data suggest that this support may have contributed to the expansion of enrollment in national doctoral programs.“ WB (2012:11f.)

Many IOs believe that the main cause for such phenomena is the mismatch between what education systems produce and labor markets need. Member states, therefore, have to assure that “education is completely linked to the labor market” (EAC 2009:77).

BusinessEurope (2012:2-3) sees the problem in neoclassical terms:

“The unemployment rate of the EU now stands at around 10%. This corresponds to 24.5 million men and women without jobs. At the same time, there are 4 million unfilled vacancies in the EU. The explanation for these conflicting figures is a clear mismatch between the supply and demand of skills. The fact that educational systems' outputs often do not correspond to labour market needs contributes to unemployment, in particular among the young.“

As a solution, thirteen organizations recommend to anticipate labor market needs. Here, LLL starts to resemble again much the “mechanical and old-fashioned manpower planning” that many organizations have actually come to be seen as outdated as it was thought to have “given way to dynamic skills development” (WB 2013:176f.).

Yet, mismatches are again (still?) the result of “inadequate manpower planning and labour market analysis” (CARICOM 2009:6). Part of this effort to anticipate labor market needs is making educational intervention shorter. For Latvia, the IMF (2013:43) finds that:

“The labor market has changed more quickly than the supply of VET programs (CEDEFOP, 2012b). The real work environment, technologies, working methods are in a constant transformation, while it takes time and requires substantial financial investment to adjust the study programs and the equipment to the actual situation in the labor market. The MoES (2009) (Ministry of Education and Science; M.Z.) found that,

given changing labor market needs, demand increased for VET programs with a relatively short duration.“

Organizations hope that education and labor market needs can be brought together if only the right methods have been found:

“Experience suggests that the relationship between different aspects of qualifications systems is also important in determining how far they translate into lifelong learning results, but again we need to develop methods and measures to provide concrete evidence to enable governments to fine-tune their qualifications systems and policies.”
(OECD 2007a:7)

Only one organization articulates the unpredictability of labor market needs and the possibility of “market failures” as barriers to such planning efforts. Unpredictability of primarily market “behavior is mentioned by the WB (2013:175):

“The importance of skills cannot be over-stated (box 5.7). But caution is needed before jumping from this recognition to the launching of large skills-building programs. The root cause of skill shortages or mismatches might not lie with the education and training system. Shortages and mismatches may instead result from wrong signals generated by market distortions and institutional failures elsewhere in the economy.”

Such large skills-building programs are, however, being launched with the help of IOs in Turkey (250,000 courses per year) and India where up to 500 million people are to be trained and retrained by 2022 (WB 2013:175).

Despite many empirical ambiguities and – it appears – dilemmas, few organizations admit that there might also be obvious risks associated with LLL. Apart from general over-education or mal-education, international metalworkers (IMWF 2009a:44) see that

“[...]the expectation of leaders, citizens, and students of national education systems—that education can be an engine of economic progress and a chance for people to transform and improve their lives—all point to the immense challenges that these systems face and push for ever greater flexibility, all of which increases stress and insecurity among workers.“

Moreover, some organizations are aware of widening educational inequality: Reviewing 10 years of EFA, UNESCO (2000:13) sees that “growing educational disparities within and between countries are a matter for serious concern.” Another ten years later the picture has not changed (UNESCO 2011b:31). These inequities can be found in the areas of “ECCE, primary and secondary education, TVET and adult literacy“ on grounds of “Gender, Poor/vulnerable, HIV/AIDS Disabled/special education needs, Geographic (e.g. region),

Conflict-affected areas, Ethnicity, Out-of-school children, Rural/urban, Religion, Not specified“ (ibid.). It seems there is inequity in every education sector and with regard to every criterion possible.

Almost unchanged, the argument goes for more industrialized countries, too. The OECD (2004c:21) warns that “the patterns of participation in lifelong learning that prevail so far run the risk of *further undermining* social cohesion rather than *enhancing* it.“ And a few years later, the tone becomes even darker:

On a broader, societal, level, the large structural changes threaten a new polarisation between the knowledge “haves” and “have-nots”. The distribution of learning opportunities is quite uneven. Unemployed individuals have fewer learning opportunities than the employed; those in small and medium-size firms have poorer access than employees of larger firms; opportunities for those with secondary school education or less are significantly fewer than for those with post-secondary education; women are at a relative disadvantage compared to men. The large earnings gaps between those with and without post-secondary education, furthermore, widen over the lifetime. These discrepancies can damage the very basis of democracy. (OECD 2007b:9)

Conclusion

We know from Strang & Meyer (1994) that theorization works best if social units (organizations, states, economies, individuals or societies) are treated comparable although they might display a high degree of heterogeneity in the first place. If, over time, social units have become isomorphic, this might more reflect the outcome of a normative project than one of a positive cumulative scientific progress and an accurate observation. At the extreme, such post-hoc rationalization completely conceals its ideological origins.

With LLL we are not at such an extreme though. The absoluteness with which LLL is promoted can only be explained, I argue, drawing on the fact that education is both rationalized *and* “very highly institutionalized at a very general collective level” (Boli, Ramirez & Meyer 1985: 147). And this general collective level is a cultural one. And IOs themselves are sometimes aware of it:

“There is broad agreement, backed by research findings, that education enhances people’s ability to make informed decisions, be better parents, sustain a livelihood, adopt new technologies, cope with shocks, and be responsible citizens and effective stewards of the natural environment.” (WB 2011b:11)

This “broad agreement” existed before research on education has become so proliferated and it continues to exist without research findings. It comes into play whenever research findings are ambiguous, mixed or simply absent.

Moreover, it is exactly this “broad agreement” that makes alternative views of education increasingly impossible both among educational policy makers and academia. It makes it impossible, for instance, to not think that herding children in Ethiopia or Mongolia should have some form of modern standard education (UNESCO 2010a). Earlier waves of criticism that pointed to cultural imperialism or neo-colonialization in education (Bochner 1979, for a review) and proposed more or less radical responses from (less radical) indigenization (Kumar 1979) to (more radical) deschooling (Illich 1971) have petered out.²

The same “broad agreement” that is embedded into a quasi-religious institutional panoply also makes it impossible to think that there is something called over-education, turning it into an implicit taboo. Earlier debates in education warned that over-education, that is, producing more training than is needed, might be inefficient (Teichler 2002 from a liberal posture) or even destructive in that it causes anomie (Huntington 1986 from a conservative posture). In both cases, over-education was seen as the lack of effective state control (Collins 1979). In fact, states were worried about such developments and in some cases did react against higher education expansion.³ Similar concerns could be observed in the development discourse in the 1950s and early 1960s when manpower planning and technical training were the overriding priorities in the educational aid sector and fears of “diploma disease” loomed large (Dore 1976).

Today, this has changed. The old model of a closed national society has made way for a model of an open liberal national and increasingly de-nationalized society with strong

²Fundamental critiques are indeed difficult to find. But see contributions in Leach & Little (1999).

³The reaction was strongest in Communist countries for political reasons (fear of producing an elite) and educational reasons (producing skilled labor beyond requirements); (Ramirez 2002).

emphases on human rights *and* human capital. In such a model, over-education cannot exist as education is by definition progress; and where the research findings suggest the contrary⁴, the “broad agreement” from above steps in.

With the world shifting from manpower planning to brainpower planning, IOs morph into an epistemic vanguard defending and promoting the perception of and knowledge about education as the ultimate cause for individual and social progress defying facts that if taken more seriously would challenge some of the core assumptions about the relationship between education, labor markets and development in general that reign in policy discourses throughout the world.

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⁴ It is beyond the purpose here to discuss at length the literature on the highly mixed evidence of the various alleged effects of education. Note that even within the WB criticism has had some attention: “The Task Force believes that traditional economic arguments are based on a limited understanding of what higher education institutions contribute. Rate of return studies treat educated people as valuable only through their higher earnings and greater tax revenues extracted by society.” (Task Force on Higher Education and Society 2000:39 as cited in Heyman 2005:41).

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