

Comparative Education: Professional Grapenuts?

Though the purposes of comparative education are not too clearly defined, several values can result through study of education in other cultures.

THE HABIT of educators to look at the work of schools in other countries is a time-honored and respectable practice. Philosophers and historians of antiquity commented about the methods of other nations for educating their youth. Every student of the development of the American school is well aware of the reports of Horace Mann who toured the continent to study current practice in the schools of the most highly developed nations of his day. His observations were the basis of many features that make American schools what they are today.

In our day a favorite game of many persons seems to be that of making pronouncements about the philosophies of child rearing and the practices of schooling children and youth around the globe. This "game" is played, however, not only by the learned and the professional, but by businessmen, housewives, farmers, and youth themselves.

The reasons for this great interest in education are manifold: communication has vastly improved through the means of modern science; travel has increased greatly; the advance of science has become of paramount importance; the power blocs in the world realize that education is a weapon of prime impor-

tance in maintaining a position of world leadership; change in social and economic life is so rapid that the old patterns of education obviously become obsolete literally overnight. Nor must it be supposed that this interest in schools is one which pervades the USA alone. Particularly in Europe are there endless discussions and debate over educational philosophy and practice in this country, due in some measure, no doubt, to the many visitors brought to our shores in recent years through various governmental and quasi-governmental programs.

In a recent letter to an American friend, a German teacher who, after reading of the general discontent with schools here, set off by the launching of Sputnik, wrote:

When we German teachers visited the United States ten years ago, your remarkable schools were a constant source of wonder to us: particularly the opportunity given each child to develop according to his talents and interests at a rate of speed suitable to him. We would be so very happy if it were possible for us to do the same in our schools. Here the curriculum is too easy for the bright, too difficult for the dull. We depend on drill, drill and more drill, followed by examinations at every step. The benefits of this sort of schooling are soon

lost. Allowing your children to develop and learn naturally is the secret of the tremendous productive energy of the American people. It would be a great pity for you to lose the greatest resource you have by now beginning the kind of educational lockstep from which Europe suffers.

To match this popular interest in what is happening in schools on a global scale, many colleges and universities have established courses and, in some cases, departments of comparative education. Textbooks in the area are appearing in ever increasing numbers. Professional periodicals are filled with articles describing the details of many programs in many places.

Very often the result of all this fervor has been complete confusion and frustration. Seemingly the objective behind most of the search for information about schools and schooling in other lands has been to try to find answers for such questions as these: Are *they* better than *we* are? Do *their* children learn more than *ours*? Are *they* ahead of *us* in science? In mathematics? Why are *their* children better at learning foreign languages than *ours*? In the USA, most pressing of all questions in this year of criticism seems to be, "Are Russian schools better than ours?" And to many citizens an obvious answer seems to be, "Of course they are! Who launched Sputnik first?"

A Total Program

One working in the field of comparative education soon learns that answers to such questions, particularly in terms of better and best, are not easily found, if ever they are found. One needs always to ask, "Better or best for what purpose?" Furthermore, one learns that one cannot look simply at the educational system of a country to learn anything very significant about the product of its schools. One

must look as well at the complete social, political and economic structure which that educational system attempts to maintain and serve before one can make sense of the many details which go into a total program of education for a nation's children.

Kandel stresses the importance of understanding this point of view, quoting from a speech given by M. E. Sadler in 1900. In this statement, Sadler emphasized the need to "try to find out what is the intangible, impalpable spiritual force which, in the case of any successful system of education is in reality upholding the school system and accounting for its present efficiency." Sadler continues:

In studying foreign systems of education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside. We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties and of battles long ago. It has in it some of the secret workings of national life. It reflects, while seeking to remedy, the failings of national character. By instinct it often lays special emphasis on those parts of training which the national character particularly needs. Not less by instinct, it often shrinks from laying stress on points concerning which bitter dissensions have arisen in former periods of national history. But is it not likely that, if we have endeavoured in a sympathetic spirit, to under-

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stand the real working of a foreign system of education, we shall in turn find ourselves better able to enter into the spirit and tradition of our own national education, more sensitive to its unwritten ideals, quicker to catch the signs which mark its growing or fading influence, readier to mark the dangers which threaten it and the subtle workings of hurtful change? The practical value of studying in a right spirit and with scholarly accuracy the workings of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and understand our own.¹

Because education is thus interwoven with the total culture pattern, all authorities in the field seem well agreed on this point: Comparative education cannot be comparative in terms of being generally better or best. This is particularly valid when considering an educational pattern which a given nation hopes to adopt for its own simply on the strength that it seems to be functioning well and serving the needs of the country where it was established and developed as a part of the total national culture.

Therefore, comparative education cannot carry on the study of education of and by itself, for education cannot be divorced from the total culture which nurtures and supports it.

From this discussion it would seem clear that being concerned primarily neither with *comparison* nor with *education*, the discipline now commonly referred to as comparative education is a form of professional grapenuts. The label given this area belies the real nature of what such a discipline can hope to achieve—supplying, perhaps, *some* nourishment to professional endeavor, through the particular insights it may furnish, but clearly deceptive of its true

purpose because of the title commonly given it.

Values of Comparative Study

What then can be accomplished by study in this field? I should like to suggest four possible values which can result through taking a global view of education and through trying to understand why different nations have arrived at different solutions for their common problem of preparing citizens in ways which will prosper them and guarantee their own perpetuation.

The first is that such study forces one almost immediately to review and to look more deeply into the cultural life of each national group than most students of education have previously done. Only so can one make some sense of the discrete facts that can be assembled regarding any system of education. Thus one must take a fresh look at the history of France to understand the emphasis on the purely academic learning in French schools; to consider economic problems in England to realize why her school system remained so long undemocratic in its failure to provide educational opportunity for all; to assess the social structure of Germany to understand the hold which a two-track system of education established in that country; to understand the welfare-state philosophy of the Scandinavian countries to account for a number of practices in their schools.

These examples are perhaps too obvious, but as one begins to look into them, other facets of study open up. Students in classes in comparative education often declare their intention to return to studies in the liberal arts college having to do with history, economics, sociology, anthropology, art, and others in order to probe more deeply into the reasons underlying certain educational develop-

¹ Quoted in I. L. Kandel, *The New Era in Education*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1955. p. 9-10.

ments. This sort of relationship certainly strengthens both the areas of general knowledge of the world and of professional understanding as to how schools operate and what functions they attempt to fulfill.

The second value comes from beginning with educational development and trying to trace social and cultural developments through these manifestations. One notable example of recent date may be quoted. In December of last year, Premier Khrushchev announced a very fundamental change in the educational program of the USSR. The period of compulsory schooling is to be raised from seven to eight years and then beyond that point, formal education is to be part-time until the end of the secondary school is reached. Each pupil is to have actual work experience as a major part of his educational program.

Writing in *Pravda* for September 6, 1958, I. Kairov, president of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the RSFSR gives a preview of this decision and some reasons for it.

In the 1930's the Soviet schools were assigned the task of preparing youths for entrance into technical schools and institutions of higher learning by giving them a good grounding in the basic sciences (Russian language, physics, chemistry, history, geography, etc.). This was dictated by the necessity of preparing in the shortest time, hundreds of thousands of young specialists for the nation's economy and culture. For the past 25 to 30 years, the schools have been working on the fulfillment of this task, and, for the most part, they have been successful. At the present time, there are more than six million specialists with secondary and higher education working in the national economy—almost 33 times as many as existed in pre-revolutionary Russia. An authentic cultural revolution has been carried out in our country.

The general education secondary schools, however, being oriented to the preparation of their graduates into institutions of higher learning failed to pay attention to labor education and to Lenin's ideas on polytechnical education. There occurred a definite rift between the schools and life which became painfully apparent in the post-war years when the graduates of the secondary schools began to enter into industrial and agricultural production.

Graduates of the secondary school demonstrated a lack of preparation for real work. Many of them thought that graduation from a secondary school should relieve them of the necessity of doing direct labor as workers or farmers. The schools failed to change their program in time to keep up with changing conditions.²

Any student of education and of the accomplishments in the economic development of the Soviet Union during the past two decades may well take this change in educational policy as a starting point to trace the outlines of the new Seven Year Economic Plan which has been subsequently announced by Khrushchev. This new mobilization of manpower through a change in the educational program will mean something entirely different in the economic output of the nation. Such understanding gives one a basis for judging the merits or demerits of the educational effect made by the change in the schools.

Or one can look at the results obtained in various areas of the world when an educational system from without was imposed upon people in colonial status. The Philippines are a prime example, with persistent problems of illiteracy, lack of economic development and political stability, even though they have had three different so-called "advanced" sys-

² Translation furnished by William Benjamin, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee.

tems of education imposed upon them. India today suffers from an over supply of narrowly trained academicians and clerks and is sadly lacking in trained mechanics and skilled workmen of all types.

In the Middle East, weak governments struggle to free established curriculums from old patterns. In Lebanon, for example, children still spend more time on the geography of France than on their own land; study the French language more intensively than their own Arabic. In Asia, where polluted drinking water is drawn up in buckets from rivers and ponds, children in most schools are busy with such problems as these: "Faucet A can fill a tank in 8 hours. Faucet B can fill it in 10 hours. Suppose both faucets are turned on at 8 o'clock in the morning. At 10 o'clock, faucet B is out of order and must be closed off. What time will the tank be full?"

By presenting such irrational and often ridiculous situations to students of comparative education, they are led to make studies of cultural patterns which must form the basis for establishing a rationale for the development of a truly functional educational system. Only by taking account of the developments in government, economics and total social pattern can a school system be set up which will ultimately lead to a betterment of conditions in the so-called underdeveloped areas of the world.

Thirdly, the study of comparative education makes use of many types of learning other than textbook study. It encourages combing a community for resource people who can answer questions concerning cultures and schools. It encourages travel and the learning of foreign languages. It spurs the creation and useful functioning of all sorts of international professional organizations,

conferences and the publication of reports and periodicals. It encourages good use of all sorts of exchange programs for teachers and students.

Finally, comparative education can hold up a mirror for any nation to see its own school system more clearly and wisely. This can be done without being too much concerned about the *better* and the *best* as regards other systems. Sadler makes this point in the quotation from him previously cited. Margaret Mead further points out this advantage of looking at cultures other than one's own:

In all of these comparisons between American and Samoan culture, many points are useful only in throwing a spotlight upon our own solution, while in others it is possible to find a suggestion for change. Whether or not we envy other peoples one of their solutions, our attitudes toward our own solutions may be greatly broadened and deepened by a consideration of the ways in which other peoples have met the same problems. Realizing that our own ways are not humanly inevitable nor God-ordained, but are the fruit of a long and turbulent history, we may well examine into all of our institutions, thrown into strong relief against the history of other civilizations, and weighing them in the balance, be not afraid to find them wanting.³

Certainly schools are one extremely important aspect of the total cultural pattern, and as we analyze generally how this piece of it serves other peoples, we begin to understand better what functions our own schools can serve in the total pattern of national and international life in view of cultural goals.

Most important of all perhaps in the study of comparative education, is the

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³ Margaret Mead. *Coming of Age in Samoa*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1928, p. 233.

8. Do certain colors have more significance to pupils than others?

9. Are pupils aware of the characteristics of the illustrations employed?

10. Does the proportional increment of achievement as determined by the media differ between I.Q. levels?

11. Are there attitudes which can be evaluated as to the pupil and teacher reactions to given styles of media?

12. Is there a difference between the interest in a learning situation and the actual acquisition of knowledge?

13. Do any styles of media stand out as being significantly harmful?

Because of the controversial nature of the statistical results of this research study, it is felt that supplementary double-checking would be wise in order to prepare for criticisms which may arise. Extreme care must be taken by any group doing research in an area which is so strongly dominated by personal experience and opinion. Therefore, several more months must be devoted to careful scrutiny of all the procedures, experimental and statistical, before the results are made public.

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realization that no one form of organization, no one set of philosophical premises, no one system of instructional practices, no one arrangement of subject matter really makes any school system good or guarantees any type of outstanding product. All school systems have graduated those individuals who can

take their places with the worthiest of mankind; all have turned out miserable failures. The real worth of a school is to be measured by the spirit that pervades it and this spirit depends in large part on the individuals who serve it. The value of stimulating the creativity and purpose of the individual is sharply focused in a recent excellent evaluation of American schools:

Much of our present-day social achievement is manifested by group effort. It is our ability to marshal and unite the skills and abilities of thousands of individuals that makes possible the achievements of modern technology. It is a condition of modern society that we spend our lives in an atmosphere of collaborative effort.

But while the strength of cooperative effort is impressive, there is danger that we may misunderstand the true source of that strength. The danger is that we may forget the individual behind a façade of huge and impersonal institutions. The risk is that we will glorify science and forget the scientists; magnify government and ignore the men and women who discharge its functions; pin our hopes on education, business or cultural institutions, and lose sight of the fact that these institutions are no more creative or purposeful than the individuals who endow them with creativity and purpose.¹

Finally, a study of comparative education brings home to teachers everywhere that they are an important part of a global endeavor whose aspirations and problems have everywhere much that is common, despite the many outward differences. They realize anew, particularly for their profession, the truth of the words of the wise Confucius, "All within the four seas are brothers."

¹ Rockefeller Brothers Fund. *The Pursuit of Excellence: Education and the Future of America*. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1958. p. ix.

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