

## *The Importance of International Cooperation in Educational Research*

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**T**HERE are many reasons for expanding and strengthening international cooperation in educational research. Some of these reasons relate to the nature of scientific inquiry. Other, and perhaps more important, reasons derive from the nature of the modern world.

Scientific research in education, as in the behavioral sciences generally, is a search for empirically valid and theoretically interesting generalizations about the behavior of human beings. This search is hampered by many obstacles, not the least of which is the problem of cultural bias or distortion. These problems are illustrated by two types of error to which educational research, as indeed all social scientific research, is prone. One is the error of "over-generalization." We assume that what we discover to be true of the learning-teaching behaviors of some part of the human species is true of the behaviors of all of the species, when in fact it is not.

A second error is found in our tendency to "under-generalize." In this case we assume that what we discover to be true of the behavior of some given part of mankind is uniquely true of only that part, when in fact what is true of the part is also true of the whole. Thus the search for reliable knowledge about the process of human education in large measure is a matter of progressively eliminating generalizations which erroneously assume either more or less commonality in our species' learning-teaching behaviors than does in fact exist.

There is obviously no royal road to success in this enterprise, but one thing is clear, as the papers in this symposium illustrate. This is the fact that only through comparative, cross-societal research can we hope to evolve an expanding fund of reliable knowledge about the process of education. For this, if for no other reason, international cooperation is an essential requisite of long term, sustained progress in educational research.

For short periods of time and in regard to relatively narrow problems, comparative, cross-national inquiry is possible without active international cooperation. This is true in the sense that American, Japanese, French, and

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other researchers can undertake projects which do not demand the active support and cooperation of fellow researchers in the nations where the research is being conducted. Yet in the longer run and in regard to the larger problems of educational research, comparative, cross-national inquiry demands the active collaboration of scholars from all parts of the world for reasons that are at once intellectual and political.

There is another set of factors pointing up the importance of expanding international cooperation in educational research. These are to be found in the widely acknowledged, but still little understood or accepted, fact that we live in an increasingly interdependent world. As the geographer Robert Harper has observed:

Throughout most of history, mankind did exist in separate, almost isolated cultural islands. . . . now most of humanity is part of a single world-wide system.<sup>1</sup>

The economist Kenneth Boulding makes the same point noting:

Because of what has happened in the field of technology . . . in the past few decades, the world has become a "spaceship," a small rather crowded globe hurtling through space to an unknown destination and bearing on its surface a very fragile freight of mankind and the "noosphere" which inhabits men's minds.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these implications are obvious. For example, American educators clearly must develop a better understanding of educational systems in other nations. However, the implications of the fact that we now live on "spaceship earth" would seem to go well beyond the need simply to enhance our understanding of "how things are done" by other peoples in other lands. In the study of any phenomenon we have a choice of focusing upon the parts or upon the whole. We can, for example, study rocks or the quarry, trees or the forest, individual cars or the traffic system, etc.

For obvious and unavoidable reasons, educational research, like social science research in general, historically has been a study of parts. Today there is a pressing need to develop a new perspective, a different set of orientations. We need to begin to treat mankind as a whole. We need to evolve a species-focused or mankind-centered research on the processes of human education. This is to say, we need to begin the arduous task of developing research which takes as its unit of analysis the human species as a whole. This is research grounded on the premise that the understanding we seek is an understanding of the educational life of mankind as a whole, in contrast to understandings of educational experience of the various parts that form this whole.

Clearly, the evolution of species-centered research in human education represents a gigantic undertaking. This implies among other things the identification and selection of research problems of significance to mankind as a whole as well as research designs which are global in scope. These are obviously tasks whose magnitude requires the support and active collaboration of educators and other behavioral scientists from all parts of planet earth. □

<sup>1</sup> Robert Harper. "Geography's Role in General Education." *Journal of Geography* 65: 182; April 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Boulding. "Education for Spaceship Earth." Paper prepared for the Foreign Policy Association's study of international education, May 1968.

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