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Journal for Research and Debate

editorial: Provincializing 'Western Education'

On Education

Theories of 'education' (broadly construed) have traditionally relied on premises and frameworks that may be called Euro- or Western-centric. Allegedly universal theories of education or the educated person in most cases did not and do not sufficiently take into account the existing global plurality of culturally, religiously and socially embedded conceptions of education. To provide an example from the German debate, which may certainly also be applied to other contexts as well: Until recently, scholars in the German tradition of Bildung did not systematically start thinking about the possibility of translating 'Bildung' into other languages as well as about potential functional and semantic equivalents of the term.

Keywords: 'Western Education', decolonial, editorial, postcolonial

Theories of 'education' (broadly construed) have traditionally relied on premises and frameworks that may be called Euro- or Western-centric. Allegedly universal theories of education or the educated person in most cases did not and do not sufficiently take into account the existing global plurality of culturally, religiously and socially embedded conceptions of education. To provide an example from the German debate, which may certainly also be applied to other contexts as well: Until recently, scholars in the German tradition of Bildung did not systematically start thinking about the possibility of translating 'Bildung' into other languages as well as about potential functional and semantic equivalents of the term (see e.g., Mattig, Mathias & Zehbe 2018; Tenorth 2020; Terhart, 2006). This is somewhat surprising, given the universal scope of the conceptual, normative and epistemic validity claims traditionally associated with 'Bildung', and also in light of the obvious fact that the German tradition itself presents only one, very specific and thus perhaps 'provincial' set of approaches in the immensely rich 'world' of educational traditions. Likewise, histories of education as well as histories of childhood have been criticized for ignoring pretty much all other educational traditions around the world. Similar criticisms have been developed with respect to the established canon of 'great thinkers' (of predominantly dead white men) in older and newer histories of philosophy of education, in which the assumption that the history of 'education as such' starts with Plato and Aristotle and then goes on with Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Kant etc. has seldom been questioned until recently. In this way histories of education and of the philosophy of education for a long time and still today reproduce problematic Eurocentric views (see also the critiques of Blaut, 1993; Chakrabarty, 2008; Conrad, 2019). This also holds for the way colonialism and imperialism have been (and still are) dealt with in schools in Western countries (see e.g., Bentrovato & Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2019). In many cases, it seems that for curriculum planners colonialism was not much more than a footnote in world – that is European or Western – history. At the same time, for instance in the UK, new forms of nostalgic and partly revisionist ways of thinking about imperialism and colonialism are flourishing.

These well-documented Euro- or Western-centric and usually also nationalistic biases in educational theory and practice cannot be separated from the history of colonialism and imperialism that has shaped our world in the last approximately 500 years. Especially the work of postcolonial and decolonial scholars has provided ample reasons to be skeptical concerning approaches that disregard the colonial and imperial legacy's influence on the way we theorize and research education, its meaning, purpose, organization, practice and history. They have pointed out that the often implicit normative, conceptual, anthropological and epistemological premises of 'Western' theories of education (which are obviously themselves immensely heterogeneous; Enslin & Horsthemke, 2015) have to be deconstructed and criticized as expressions of historically grown global power asymmetries and injustices (Andreotti, 2010, 2011; Andreotti & De Souza, 2012; Culp, 2019). This critique has also been applied to older and newer conceptions of global learning or Global Citizenship Education, which tend to rely on genuinely Western values, conceptions of the self and rationality and thereby reproduce neoimperial and neocolonial ways of thinking about education in and *for* the world. Since education itself was a central instrument of colonial domination, and colonial conceptions of education designed to ensure dominance in the colonies were developed roughly at the same time as the major principles and conceptions of modern Western educational theory and practice (Castro Varela, 2016), this critique gains even more force and plausibility. Moreover, one should also take into account that many of the traditional paternalistic justifications of colonialism and imperialism took recourse to typical 'educational' arguments and rationales: 'the people in the colonies cannot yet govern themselves, because they are not yet sufficiently educated and civilized' etc. as was argued, for instance, by liberal thinker John Stuart Mill (for historical justifications of colonialism, see Pitts, 2005). Due to these similarities and contemporaneity some post- and decolonial thinkers argue that colonial frameworks are indeed *constitutive* of Western modernity and modern education. As a consequence, it remains disputed, what an *end* to colonial thinking in (Western) education could look like (Forster, 2017; with reference to the work of Mignolo). In conclusion, it is certainly not an exaggeration to state that education is at the heart of contemporary debates about post- and decolonial theory – both with respect to its ambivalent role in the intergenerational reproduction of established global hierarchies and power asymmetries and with respect to the possibility of overcoming or at least counteracting these hierarchies (see e.g., Spivak, 2012).

In light of these and related critiques of ahistorical and ideologically laden Western conceptions and traditions of education we believe that we need more serious and critical engagement with the colonial and imperial legacy of educational theory and practice. Or, in other words: we need a lively debate about the necessity and possibility, the prospects and pitfalls of decolonizing and provincializing 'Western Education' in a globalized world. This involves, among other things, a de- and reconstruction of the normative and epistemic horizon, alleged and justified scope of legitimacy, global impact, and also limits of 'Western education's' (neo-)colonial and (neo-)imperial legacy. This goes along with a historical and sociopolitical contextualization of its central founding concepts and their underlying universalist validity claims, such as autonomy, progress, development, individuality, rationality, open future, and education itself, to name just a few. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has put it in his seminal work 'Provincializing Europe':

> To 'provincialize' Europe was precisely to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity. It was to ask a question about how thought was related to place. Can thought

> transcend places of their origin? Or places leave their imprint on thought in such a way as to call into question the idea of purely abstract categories? (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. xiii)

In short: This issue of on_education will focus on critiques as well as defenses of 'Western' conceptions of education as they are developed in different theoretical frameworks and traditions. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the contributors to this issue, who in some cases wrote their pieces under extraordinary and difficult circumstances.

The Editorial Team

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Recommended Citation

Editorial Team (2020). Provincializing 'Western education'. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *3*(7). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2020.7.0

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