

Global trends on local grounds - The case of teacher education in Denmark and Sweden

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The aim of this article is to draw attention to the changes in Western (teacher) education in order for Third World educators to estimate their own position when confronted with the latest trends from abroad whether mediated by the World Bank, IMF, OECD, local consultants or others. Thus the aim is not to tell anyone what should be done, but rather to try to provide background information on the Western context in order to enhance locally well-informed decisions.

For that purpose it is important to be aware of at least three things when estimating international trends. First, it is important to realize that recent trends might seem to be based on a mixture of well-informed decisions and economically-driven rationales, often marketed under hegemonic headings and discourses like *No Child Left Behind*¹, *Competencies for the Knowledge-Based Society*, *Globalization* and the like. While often well intended, these alluring headlines often cover substantial reductions in government spending combined with increased external control systems.

¹ No Child Left Behind: See U.S. government site www.ed.gov/nclb

This trend has been analysed by several educationalists like the American Thomas Popkewitz,² who points out that there seems to be a shift from government to governance by *discourse*, the main message to educators being: *Think twice before jumping onto the band-wagon!* Just as governing by discourse is a powerful instrument in the hand of official agencies, so it might also provide room for thoughtful counter-hegemonic changes on the ground.

The second important point is that today it seems that changes in education are often based on so-called “evidence-based” research. Therefore, it is important to know that the results provided are also heavily contested. Within most Western educational settings there is substantial divergence and opposition to measures as well as to means in education and in educational research.

The third important point is that comparative research in education has found that Western educational systems show substantial variation due to differences in history, culture and current political climate. Where democratic traditions are relatively strong, different actors and interest groups try to intervene and have their say, consequently resulting in quite different outcomes. The real challenge in any local setting is thus to be able to distinguish and evaluate general international trends which might give inspiration, and the need for local adaptations which are sufficiently well-informed to be able to cause real improvements, however small.

A theoretical framework for comparative understanding

As stated above, the main aim of this article will be to provide a context for interpretation of educational change, stressing a need for local analysis. I shall do that by providing an example of a general framework for analysis of change inspired by the works of the British sociologist Margaret Archer.³ In addition I shall try to give an empirical example of how this theory has been used in recent comparative research in teacher education in Denmark and Sweden. While this example will be somewhat exotic to dependent

² Popkewitz, Thomas (1998)

³ See the reference list.

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countries in the South, the idea is to show how different two educational systems might be in two otherwise quite similar countries, thus exemplifying the above stated need for insistence on local reflection and analysis in order for solutions for change to be sustainable.

Archer (1996) points out that in Western settings social and cultural fields in society are very different and relatively autonomous in relation to each other. This point of view may be interpreted as a further elaboration of Marx's thesis that human beings think as they live rather than live as they think, viz. that basic structures determine the superstructure.

In Marx's understanding the ideological superstructure, which to a certain extent might be considered the "culture", is decided directly by material conditions. Archer (1996) acknowledges this idea but also points out that culture has its own independent meaning, and under certain circumstances it can be conserved in a society even after the material conditions that originally contributed to the creation of this culture have withered away. In the same way she points out that existing cultural images can be taken over under new material conditions and thus take on renewed life.

Archer acknowledges that culture is rooted in certain social structures, but she points out that culture gradually gets a life of its own and can survive, even when the basic structures that originally created the cultural superstructure have disappeared. This means that the relationships between social structure and agency and between culture and agency represent parallel but separate conditions and that it is necessary to try to analyse the different spheres in order to understand social reality as a mutual interplay between ideals and power and different fields of interest. Archer argues that it is important to maintain an *analytical* theoretical and methodical dualism. She recognizes that in the real world, culture and social structure make up an intangible web, interacting and influencing each other. Analytical dualism thus makes an effort to look at the interplay of factors. Archer distinguishes not only between social structure and culture, but also between structural and interactive levels in both the social structural field and the cultural field.

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Within the cultural field, Archer makes a theoretical distinction between what she calls the “cultural system” and “socio-cultural interaction”. The cultural system is made up of the habits, truths, and tradition pervading any given culture without any interference from any consciously acting subject, an abstract (not conscious) pattern of thought which to a certain extent might remind one of Foucault's concept of discourse. Meanwhile, socio-cultural interaction is decided by power and the struggles between different interests within any given field.

Archer's theoretical framework is very inspiring, because she forces the researcher to make the analytical distinction between social structure and culture, at the same time keeping apart the long-term basic structures and the present day interactive structures within social structure as well as culture. Her ambition by maintaining the analytical differences is to make it easier to avoid putting everything into one single melting pot. Analyzing a differentiated reality is important to ascertain that the different levels might have their own comparatively independent influences, even though no one single factor has absolute autonomy.

One last point about the cultural system is that Archer is calling attention to the fact that the idea of culture as a general type of explanation is a myth founded by the anthropologists who have investigated traditional pre-modern societies. Modern societies are so differentiated that it is not possible to give definite explanations on the basis of a certain ”culture”.

My main argument is that the current theoretical deficiencies in the sociological analysis of culture are directly attributable to the conflation of cultural system integration with socio-cultural integration – a confusion of the two, which was intensified by the myth of cultural integration in all its subsequent sociological manifestation. Consequently the premises and implication enshrined in the Myth must be disentangled and demolished before culture can assume a proper place in sociological analysis. (Archer, 1996, p.1)

In developing countries, on the other hand, culture will still have a much more powerful influence on its own, thus often clashing substantially with theories and trends imposed from abroad, resulting in a state which has been characterised by Staf Callewaert (1999) as being *overlapping under transformation*. By this Callewaert means that most developing countries have a huge pre-modern sector which is slowly being influenced by modern “logic” most often not at their own will or discretion.

Culture and structure – a Scandinavian example

In the following I shall try to translate Archer’s theory into a comparative analysis of two neighbouring Scandinavian countries, Denmark and Sweden, to exemplify how there is room for local variation. One starting point would be to say that during the last 200 years Denmark has had an economic structure where the agrarian economy has played a larger and more consistent role than in Sweden. Consequently the Danish social structure has been characterised by an agrarian population and small self-employed artisans, whereas the working class as well as big industrial capital has dominated in Sweden. Due to the late industrial modernization in Denmark the role of the Danish state through the past centuries might be characterized as based upon shifting alliances between big and small capital and between capital and workers. In spite of the imminent position of the Social Democratic Party after the Second World War, the capital-worker alliance has, however, never been as strong in Denmark as it has in Sweden.

What are the consequences for the educational systems if we are to follow Archer’s way of analysing political processes? In Denmark there have been more than two central economic and political actors, which has often resulted in some kind of stagnation, because no one party has been dominant enough to impose its will. The effect has been a lot of compromises and a patchwork situation which has limited the ability of the state to carry out really coherent reforms, resulting in a situation where different parts of the educational system have been allowed to live their own independent lives to a greater extent than has been the case in Sweden. In Denmark the modern state has only sporadically and for a short period succeeded in becoming a strong centralised state. Especially the field of education has never really been controlled by the state. This has resulted in

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a lot of independent actors and a patchwork of compromises rather than a coherent educational system. Denmark has a tradition for giving power to a lot of independent actors and structures which can only be manipulated indirectly e.g. by the relatively recent market mechanisms. On the one hand this tradition might be considered truly democratic in that it gives room for grassroots influence. On the other hand the tradition is vulnerable today, because the main cultural ideology, which is basically against the central state, leaves the road open to neo-liberal capitalism.

The development in Sweden has been somewhat different, as Sweden became industrialised to a larger extent and much earlier. There the importance of the agrarian sector was limited at an early stage, primarily because much of the land was not fertile enough to support a large independent farming sector, resulting in a large exodus to the USA in the 19th century. People in the countryside usually had to supplement their income from farming with income from e.g. large-scale forestry, mining, glassworks, etc. The Swedish historian Ödman (1995) shows that as early as the 17th century the miners at Kopparberg (a region in central Sweden) had a sense of being part of a collective as a workers' movement. As a consequence of these circumstances, industrial capital and the workers entered into a collective pact with the state as the active centre of compromise furthering a centralized secularized modernism which opened up the development of a modern unified educational system.

Teacher education in Denmark and Sweden – an illustrative example

In his book *Schools and Societies*, American sociologist Steven Brint (1998) analyses different Western educational systems, placing the USA and Germany at different poles according to the age at which each country separated students into different tracks. He concludes that the American system is the most open system in the world, where the largest numbers of young people obtain “higher education”, whereas the German is one of the most restrictive in that respect, because children are divided into separate streams at an early age.

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Brint's main point, however, is that educational systems may contribute to furthering a general feeling in society either that there are clear and visible distinctions between social groups or the other way round, that borders are transparent, that all possibilities are at hand and that it is easy to cross these borders between social classes. However, he does not believe that the more “open” American society in any way removes inequality.

As in other societies, the educational system in the United States plays an important role in the transmission of inequality from generation to generation. In spite of the apparent openness of the system, a wide body of empirical evidence shows substantial gaps in educational attainment among students of different social backgrounds and a significant under-representation in the system's upper tiers of minority students and students from modest socioeconomic backgrounds” (Brint, 1989, p. 224).

Brint points to the fact that the American model has success in integrating the younger generation into the educational system, but at the same time he also stresses that this does not mean that there is less inequality. Instead he wants to emphasize that the American model might be more efficient in creating an impression of open opportunities, but this just covers up the selection process and legitimises inequality, a question which becomes more imminent the more open, democratic and wealthy a country is.

In this perspective Denmark is closer to the German system, whereas Sweden is more similar to the American, and this way of describing an educational system intersects with the question of decentralised vs. centralized systems. This general difference is reflected at all stages of the educational systems of the two countries. At secondary level Denmark operates at least four different tracks for young people, each with its own school buildings, different economic circumstances, teachers with different types and levels of education, and so on, whereas Sweden has one uniform system of secondary education where students to a certain extent may choose their own programmes. As mentioned by Brint above, this does not mean that selection is minimized; the selection is, however, made within the secondary school system, rather than before entering.

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The system of further education has been organized along the same lines. In Sweden, teacher education is one among many university programmes to choose from, whether for pre-school and kindergarten teachers, primary or secondary school teachers, the only difference being the length of the programme that is followed at the university. In Denmark, teacher education for kindergarten teachers is at one type of institution with its own programme, primary school teachers (grade 1-10) are educated at another type of institution, vocational teachers at a third and only secondary school teachers are educated at university, followed by a professional programme that is partly school-based. So variations are abundant. One might ask why the Danes accept such a system, which to an outsider might seem a bit unfair, given the idea that opportunities should be open to everyone. Well, culture might be an answer, given the fact that in a society where the general feeling is that there is a relatively short distance from top to bottom, each of the separate systems manages to maintain pride in its own way of doing things, even if an objective analysis might find that this feeling of homogeneous conditions might be illusionary.

In a certain way this can be demonstrated using one of the answers from a large comparative study which we carried out between 2001-2004. A total of 1350 student teachers were asked different questions about their reasons for going into teaching. One of the questions was: *To what extent did you choose your present institution of teacher education because of its high academic standard?* (Figure 1. High Academic Standard)

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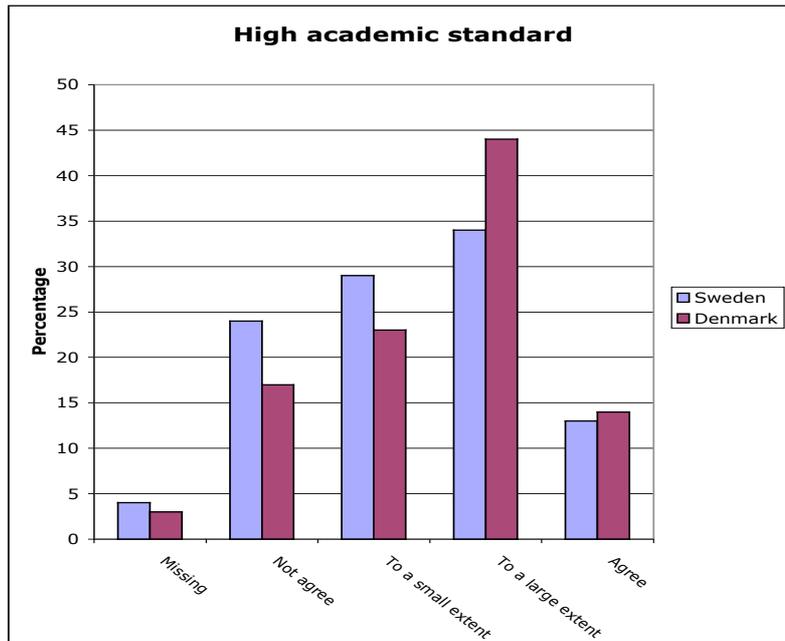


Figure 1. High academic standard

The columns are grouped two by two, where all columns to the left represent results from Sweden and the darker columns to the right represent Denmark (the first pair of columns to the left indicates *missing answers* and can be left out of consideration). From left to right the columns indicate the extent to which students thought they chose their institutions because they had high academic standards. What is interesting is that the Danish students responded more positively than the Swedish, although formally their institutions did not have university status. If this investigation had been carried out in another society where there is a perception of greater distance of power and status, the results might have been different, signalling that culture matters even in modern Western societies.

Which programme is the best? We do not actually know much about this - it depends! Probably many teachers and teacher educators would feel that the Danish system is the best for teacher education because it maintains a professional core directed at teaching for primary school teachers, whereas others would feel that the Swedish system offers more job possibilities and

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higher status. From a labour market point of view, however, we can see that the Swedish system seems to change faster along some indefinite lines of general modernization, so its advantage might be that it is more flexible, whereas the Danish system is more rigid in that early tracking might make it more difficult for people to shift easily into new careers, which is one of the basic conditions in the present-day economic situation.

Conclusion

The main idea of this article was indeed not to persuade Ethiopians or educators from other dependent countries in the South to adopt either the Swedish or the Danish system of education. The idea was to point to the fact that any educational system will have to stand firmly on local grounds, that international trends must be analysed strategically as well as critically, and that such analysis, for example through Critical Practitioner Inquiry, might create room for local actors and counter-hegemonic efforts.

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