Exporting Educational Change: Unexamined Assumptions

Lori D. Rabinovitch

Abstract

This paper takes a philosophical look at what it means to talk about educational change in the context of the global proliferation of Western secular liberal democratic values. A handful of challenges, contradictions, and incoherencies that potentially impede the success of educational change projects in developing countries are examined with a view to furthering discussion about what vision of the learner and society they promote, either implicitly or through taken-for-granted assumptions. Politics, leadership, and timelines become impediments to real change. Brief reference is made to these concepts. The author provides examples from 10 years of international curriculum work on several continents in an attempt to highlight some of the latent irregularities that impede the progress of educational change endeavors.

Background

Countries around the world are increasingly seeking expertise and financial support from international organizations to help them construct and implement reforms of their entire education systems. This is occurring at a time when many previously colonialized countries enjoy independence, have implemented compulsory schooling, and are now addressing outdated and inappropriate curricula that reflect an earlier period in their histories. International education organizations have recently experienced an exponential growth in the number of requests from developing nations for expert assistance in the field of curriculum development.

At first glance, these well-intentioned partnerships represent a pivotal moment of change. But is the confluence of differing circumstances too great for any real change to occur? Which values will dominate these interactions, and what vision of society will be constructed? For example, what happens when religious belief systems meet individualist secular interpretations of the world? Under such conditions, is educational change possible?

As we in the West become increasingly embedded in the humanism of individual rights and the metaphysics of veganism, developing countries are struggling more with the luxury of feeding their populations than with the extravagance of choice. Hegemonic values shared by international organizations are initially unquestioned within these partnerships because they are ubiquitous and because they represent freedom and wealth. Eventually, disseminating values that were not locally derived or articulated, creates separations and contradictions. The end result is often a failure of change on the ground.

Three brief examples, based on personal experiences, are included in an attempt to illustrate these viewpoints.

Educational Change, Curricular Approaches

It is not a new idea to say that one intended purpose of the institutionalized education of our children is, in part, to indoctrinate them into the social norms, values, and beliefs of a given society.

Together with these parochial values, the relationship between knowledge and learners has been embodied in educational change through successive transformations and iterations of curricular approaches. This section briefly surveys educational change and a few curricular approaches and their attendant values; this is significant for understanding the broad currents traversing the international education sector, and for attempting to interrogate the limits and impacts of choices being made, and models being promoted. Strongly held beliefs about education's foundations are carried forward, conflated, and compounded with each potential curricular approach.

The early success of compulsory schooling is traditionally paired with a content-based curricular approach to education. Implicit in this model is the notion, inherited from the Enlightenment, that the world is knowable, linear, and decipherable. Science, but more generally the scientific method, becomes the standard for every curriculum decision from content to method, from practice to evaluation. A strong emphasis on sameness and comparison, on categories and labels, supports the measurements by which educational success is judged. In this scientific model of schooling, there is little explicit discussion of the values being promoted. Autonomy, individuality, and the concept of self are all based on a taken-for-granted liberal worldview. Truths exist unquestioned, and one purpose of education is to learn about, and often memorize, these truths. Almost no attention is paid to the notion that certain facts, words, behaviors, or lines of enquiry and research, serve to privilege some segments of large diverse populations while disadvantaging others. Formal educational settings—schools—are microcosms of, and training grounds for, the real world. This is why schools generally promote certain types of behavior such as punctuality, neatness, respect for authority, uniformity, and even dress codes. Traditional foundations permeate the everyday realities of contemporary educational reforms and curricular approaches, even where more progressive claims are made.

Curricular models such as the whole school model, combined with open classrooms and the communicative approach, represent departures from an almost factory-like model of learning. Adopting postmodern concepts, the open-endedness of relativism and interpretation temporarily replaces the absolutism of truth. Children are seen as individuals, each with their own family history, culture, language, and religious practices. Issues of identity are taken seriously both pedagogically, in terms of how children are taught, and also from an evaluative perspective. Expressive freedom is difficult to manage inside the institution of schooling; a cumbersome dichotomy leads to the coexistence of contradictory values: establishment expectations mixed with individual liberty. Psychology and sociology inform educational change. There is a non-coherence of approaches and theories, leading to individualism transcending the search for truth (Appiah, 2005).

A more contemporary direction for educational movements is towards human rights, towards an immense belief that every child on the planet deserves—and has the right to—formal schooling. Education for all becomes the catchphrase of international agencies; literacy and numeracy are priorities.

Where metaphysics and religion once implicitly justified education's larger purpose (Ferry, 2005), humanist educators seek purpose in the persistent recognition and fulfillment of individual needs. Our modern moral universe is dominated by a philosophy of the rights of humans, and this infuses educational projects. The humanist education project is creative but difficult to evaluate because there is no single vision for a meaningful life. Each person is the author of their own life, and there are no longer absolutes by which to judge meaning and situate truth. Postmodernism and relativism are brief in popularity and are transitory influences on educational change.

Technology begins to alter educational approaches, as well as access to formal schooling and institutions of higher learning. Information is ubiquitous and the Internet is everywhere, providing answers to every question. Huge swaths of the population regularly, and with almost no critical analysis, collect tiny tidbits of information. Literacy becomes a truncated version of itself to accommodate the character limits of on-line websites and applications. Important information becomes abbreviated, diluted. The public is seemingly well informed about a myriad of topics, but not educated by any previous standard. Concurrently, some employers become concerned that prospective employees have graduated from schools with scant knowledge and even less practical awareness of how to effectively and appropriately act in specific situations.

A pragmatic curricular approach that combines traditional content-driven education with action-oriented goals develops around the notion of competency, or situation-based learning. The rationale is to ensure that people who receive formal schooling are capable not only of knowing something, but also capable of applying their knowledge. A socio-ethical component of competency development in every domain underscores the importance of normativity in action. Concepts of social justice, human rights education, and value formation are attached to subject matter. Educational institutions promote cultural cohesion. What we do and how we act serve to construct a social order within and outside of institutions through the application of competencies in school-based or real-life situations.

Many regions of the developed world are seeing their homogenous populations evolve into pluralist, multilingual groups of peaceful cohabitants. The school, formal education in general, is under pressure to establish common denominators. People from disparate backgrounds read the world differently but come together to learn how to reason, analyze, and make choices. Educational institutions become microcosms of the broader society but with more control over inputs and outcomes. Conformity to collectively established rules and norms is a goal of institutional education but without the traditionalism of sameness. People learn about freedom of choice, within established constraints, by taking into account a plurality of values and this creates what Sen (2009) calls capabilities. A dialogic model of democracy is the focus of procedural institutional choices and strategies. People are educated to make choices, to weigh options across a multiplicity of norms, and to understand freedom as more than personal satisfaction.

Global partnerships and trade agreements join together disparate sectors, with unfamiliar forms of cooperation across the world. Application of, and access to, these arrangements requires new linguistic configurations. Vocabularies evolve to integrate changing scientific findings, new technologies, and different forms of organization. Global conversations generate sophisticated terrain. Traditional educational models of literacy and numeracy no longer account for the complex web of moral, ethical,

social, cultural, political, and economic factors that permeate every interaction. Market economy decisions dominate. The market is guided by self-interest and individual goals; the peaceful coexistence of groups across differences requires social cohesion, shared narratives, and community goals. Contradictory impulses are animating the world. Are entire populations being marginalized? Judith Butler (2015) writes about "de-constituting" the person through nonrecognition. Developing countries are only now reforming the content of colonial education systems, while inadvertently retaining traditional structures, methodologies, and hierarchies. Many are yet to address issues of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy. Will the general populations of developing countries be equipped for large-scale decision making that requires, for example, an understanding of global markets or the application of artificial intelligence? As Butler suggests, perhaps globalization can be understood as the new colonialism, equally adept at the structural marginalization of whole populations. Are there educational changes and curriculum development models capable of altering this trajectory? This is the preoccupation of leaders in the developing world; this is why increasing numbers of politicians in emerging economies are approaching international agencies with an urgency to reform their education systems.

International Development Work

It is almost always the case that developing nations seek help from international aid agencies located in Western liberal secular democracies, agencies peopled by education consultants with advanced university degrees from large metropolitan cities with heterogeneous populations. This seldom-stated description of the helping industry is not incidental to the outcomes produced through these interactions. Again, with acknowledgment of the obvious limitations caused by generalizations, many developing countries are governed by a small elite group of citizens who also hold advanced university degrees from Western institutions of higher learning. But the vast majority of citizens who comprise the relatively homogeneous populations of developing nations reaching out for assistance from international agencies, are bound by unquestioned and often deeply religious belief systems.

By the 1800s, Western philosophers treated religion as an obscure and obsolete concept (Habermas, 2012). Today, the presence of religion is once again significant. A philosophical interrogation of how religious or comprehensive worldviews overlap with secular worldviews through the process of international curriculum development work is both important and necessary. With increasing regularity, belief systems intersect in public spaces and geographic locations.

Most Western liberal democracies have moved relatively effortlessly from religious foundations to secular humanism. Shared values are socially constructed in public spaces, including educational institutions. Specific types of civic values are nurtured, and certain forms of communication are taught. Discourse ethics, as a type of communication, allows people to shift from disparate private belief systems to established public practices of mutual respect. Pluralist societies with national secular agendas require narrow and shallow comprehensive doctrines primarily built around issues of social justice. Martha Nussbaum (2013) points to the importance of learning critical faculties such as oversight, respectful dissent, compassion, debate, and analysis. By promoting moral principles, these ways of knowing become integral to the functioning of healthy democratic practices.

Because of the relatively seamless transition from the domination of homogenous religious values to secular market economy thinking, it is easy for developing nations to regard the West's ostentatious affluence with the hope of re-creating it for their own populations. Requests to emulate science and technology-based education systems that dominate certain regions of the world, often result in contradictory categories of knowledge and approaches to learning overlapping with one another. Whole populations understand the world and attendant roles and responsibilities through historically agreed upon myths and narratives. Ritualistic behavior is structured around closed belief systems and a worldview that nourishes the collective and binds it together. Self-referential questioning separates people from group belief systems (Habermas, 2012). Post-metaphysical thinking deconstructs religious content and translates it into forms of thinking unbounded by religion. Western thinking is very fluid and changes with self-understanding. This is different from religious communities that owe their certainty to an external power.

Is it helpful for one region of the world to export categories of knowledge, however successful they may have been for a given population, and expect the same results to occur across the world? For example, oral cultures represent knowledge differently from written and print cultures. Traditional forms of representation not only alter visual images of knowledge, but also what can be known. Although it is true that new resources lead to new learning, it is also true that new learning disrupts taken-for-granted values and assumptions. Are international education agencies equipped with the theories, methodologies, and practices to account for such a complex web of interrelationships?

In a book about the concept of systems, Clifford Siskin (2017) points out that modernity is mediated through the proliferation of systems. The systemization of knowledge is now ubiquitous in technologically advanced societies where new knowledge continues to be generated, organized, and transformed as a result of its juxtaposition to other forms of knowledge. Children born into Western market economies are exposed to the pervasive use of technology almost from the womb. In many instances, technological literacy is more highly developed than classical literacy. This continuously shapes and reshapes the knowledge landscape. To transport these ideas around the world is less about curriculum reform than it is about altering comprehensive belief systems.

Is it advisable, or even possible, for international education agencies to successfully transform curricula whose structure, content, and form emanate from such a different way of seeing the world? In today's education sector, understanding curriculum as a holistic enterprise points to the wide diversity of elements that combine together to orient an education system. Programs of study, pedagogical resource materials, teaching strategies and methodologies, even taken together, play an almost minor role in the significance of institutionalized education for a society. As Habermas (2012) explains, how we access the world, interpret knowledge claims, and form attitudes towards intellectual experiences, are internalized ways of being. They may be taught but not explicitly through curricula. Rather, they are systematically and repeatedly embedded in publicly debated topics of discussion. Everyday vocabulary, important questions, acceptable forms of dialogue, are not incidental to how citizens are raised from their earliest days. These pervasive encompassing forms of education function at a more primordial level than formal schooling.

To enter a developing nation and attempt to reform their formal education system without also considering the existing range and depth of concepts, norms, and beliefs binding together vast segments of the population, is to risk a new burgeoning era of colonialism. Indigenous populations have historically been made to feel alienated within their own communities as a result of practices and norms imposed from societies outside their own, however well-intentioned the goals on both sides.

Critical thinking and open forms of communication foster shared aspirations. But each society must develop its own dreams of the good life. Market shares and machine learning are only a few narrow measures of success, despite their proliferation in the media. Perhaps the question being addressed through international development work is not how to reform the curriculum of a developing nation, but rather how to spread opportunities in general more equitably worldwide. Exporting a curricular approach because it functions successfully in one country, a success based primarily on the fact that it was generated through that country's worldview, does not result in a more balanced overall distribution of wealth and resources.

Turning Point for Educational Change

It is worthwhile to think about education and change as co-mingled concepts.

In a recent book on the notion of uncertainty, Nowotny (2016) writes about our current need for systems that are complex and adaptive; the 21st century will be characterized by innovation. Paradoxically, the data-driven world in which we now operate requires a high level of stability so that algorithms can be created and applied before unanticipated events render them useless and unprofitable. Data-driven decision making predicts future behavior based on past behavior, even taking into account the unpredictability of human conduct. In much the same way, we promote educational change and curriculum reform because the human condition is one of constant evolution and change, even if in practice education remains a conservative domain. Just visit a new city and stroll through the streets looking for schools. With no guidance or signposts, schools are almost always identifiable; they are structurally recognizable. Does resistance to change literally permeate the walls?

Education systems everywhere, in recent years, have benefited from the disbursement of significant economic measures and the allocation of expertise around concepts and ideas deemed most relevant for the 21st century. Developing countries are often somewhat divided when asked to express their educational needs because, while they desire access to the economic success visible on the world stage, they also understand the limits of their own resources and the needs of local populations. The author's firsthand experiences, combined with several years of anecdotal evidence collected during periods of international development work, reveal these contradictions in leadership aspirations at the national level. The varied and irreconcilable needs and values represented by disparate social spaces highlight the harm hegemony can do to real and persistent basic requirements. International experts, speaking from a Western liberal democratic viewpoint that takes for granted social movements such as anti-racism, feminism, equal rights for all sexual orientations, environmentalism, secularism, and so on, may not even see the everyday necessities being glossed over by concepts never locally debated, constructed, or fought for. It is also significant that many international education consultants have secular backgrounds or, if

religious, have learned that in secular societies religious practices and discussions are reserved for private spaces. In many developing countries, religion is a unifying factor. It is not private but public and its attendant practices and beliefs are quite literally written into state-sanctioned educational materials. When one set of educators believes that religion answers an entire category of questions and their partners in the same educational reform project are steeped in the humanist values of secular liberal democracies, the attendant differences are not insignificant. The result of combining international expertise and financial aid with local needs and practices often creates a confusion of values and norms, and an impasse where educational change is the goal.

The project of democracy is another area where differences are glossed over, and assumptions are made about what is best for a given group of people. Democratic procedures support pluralist values and make room for divergent practices and belief systems. Although the language of democracy is becoming internationally pervasive, the actual mechanisms that must be publicly constructed, if ambiguity and difference are to be peacefully integrated, require a long period of gestation. In Western liberal democracies, even with the language and tools necessary to debate complex issues, we are continually steeped in argument and debate about the dominance of traditional values versus a public framework for social justice. Imagine the introduction of an educational reform project that takes for granted the end result of such debates, but where no such debates have taken place, and scant background knowledge is available. Democracy and justice require high levels of literacy. It is deeply problematic when whole segments of the population are excluded from public reasoning but subject to its decisions (Sen, 2009). Traditional models of education promote, usually implicitly, a model of democracy based on the commonalities and shared identities of a population's vision of a society and its values. A republican model of democracy recognizes the normative aspects of collective action with its attendant translation into school as a form of common culture and social cohesion. A potential risk is sameness, uniformity, and loss of authenticity. A liberal model of democracy promotes multiculturalism, diversity, pluralist values, and emphasizes the dignity attached to human rights for all individuals and special interest groups. A potential risk of liberal democracy is that an overemphasis on individuality limits notions of social justice and peaceful coexistence across differences (Rabinovitch, 2005). As Robert Dahl (1998) explains, certain qualities are present in every model of democracy but differences between models are manifested in disparate practices. It is important to learn more about what model of democracy is dominating an educational change process and to analyze whether the concepts of autonomy and citizenship associated with this model are coherent with, and capable of underwriting, the needs of a particular population.

Notions of evaluation, categorization, comparison, classification, and ranking plague Western educators as they argue about objectivity and subjectivity, right and wrong, or even whether there is such a thing as a true statement. Uncertainty has become the new norm for the peaceful coexistence of both people and ideas (Nowotny, 2016). In developing nations, certainty is still a much sought-after goal. Having a trusted means for measuring and comparing learning is a stabilizing factor and provides a country with targets and indicators. Without the attendant belief that all students are potentially eligible to receive work qualifications, as is the belief system in Western liberal democracies, developing countries rely on

technical measurements that create specific kinds of consequences. Differing perspectives about the evaluation of learning are almost incommensurate.

Hegemony

Recently, and as a direct result of on-line schooling during the Covid-19 pandemic, signs proliferated on the leafy front lawns of middle-class Toronto neighborhoods extolling the virtues of face-to-face education and opposing the continued use of a hybrid model of schooling that combines on-line with in-person interactions. At exactly the same time, international education organizations were developing a new hybrid project, specifically aimed at developing countries, that would allow children in remote villages to access daily on-line educational experiences. This simple example not only points to huge disparities in access to schooling around the globe, but also to our deeply held liberal values in the West about the right to, and definition of, quality schooling.

The construction of knowledge comes about through widespread and shared access to formal and informal models of education. But the usefulness of knowledge is enhanced through cross-cultural exchanges, openness to interpretation, and the awareness that social factors contextualize knowledge differently for people across the world. Persistently and very obviously, the Western democratic liberal traditions of scholarship still guide the production of knowledge, its vocabulary, its structure, and—most significantly—what is being valued and shared. Hegemonic approaches to social issues, including education, contradict our perceived need for institutions that promote pluralist values and norms. But a wide range of interest groups can be unwieldy to govern, and even more difficult to educate where the needs of learners are diverse. Hegemony blankets divisions and artificially unites. It creates an adequate level of sameness for governance to succeed. Specific needs, emanating from cultural, linguistic, or religious differences—as well as economic disparities—cannot all be accounted for. The needs are too vast and the demands too numerous for institutional authority. Therefore, despite local initiatives, country-wide reforms, and global funding, schooling remains relatively unchanged around the globe. As Laclau (2000) puts it, hegemony fills gaps.

At a practical level, the educational change process is often led by the selection of a particular curricular model. It matters very much which curricular model or approach is adopted by a country or region because, embedded within this approach, are values about how a certain kind of citizenry is nourished within a vision of society. Curricular approaches, or models, develop over time and their evolution often reflects broader changes occurring at some invisible location outside of an educator's vantage point and entirely separate from the practices of formal schooling.

Curriculum Reform Projects

As it eventually became known, Quebec's "Pedagogical Renewal" project was an attempt to replace the *Régime Pédagogique* that was in place during the second half of the 20th century. The *Régime Pédagogique* was an objectives-based curricular approach that included very specific targets designed to measure fragments of information accumulated and collated over predetermined timelines. The new curricular approach, adopted by the government and implemented incrementally in all publicly funded institutions of learning, was meant to swing the pendulum of education in another direction. Competency-based learning incorporates the content of traditional programs of study but organizes it at the service of active student-centered learning situations. During the period of implementation, it was often the case that educators—both administrators and teachers—learned to use new terminology without actually altering their fundamental understanding of the relationship between the learner and knowledge, between students and teachers. Thus, even in an environment where curricular changes were specifically constructed to address perceived problems in the education system, they did little to influence what occurred during the everyday application of school practices. Underlying belief systems about the representation of knowledge, how learning is measured, and perhaps most importantly, which knowledge has value, represent an almost impenetrable shared foundation. For these reasons, real change was minimal and, in many institutions, nonexistent.

Foundational belief systems are durable and inflexible at an unconscious level. Although Quebec's population has largely purged religion from its public spaces, the hierarchical relationships taught by the Church are well embedded in the psyche of its citizens. It was enlightening to observe how closely teachers adhered to traditional classroom practices even while ostensibly experimenting with innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Actions often originate from unquestioned and deeply held belief systems. As well, they are secured in place with spoken and written words absorbed from infancy. Particularly in contemporary secular societies, few people critically examine the relationship between their public actions and their privately held beliefs. The agreed-upon assumption is that religious thought has been expunged, or at least privatized. In reality, many traditional religious beliefs permeate everyday actions even while vocabulary indicates otherwise.

If this is the context for an innovative and significant liberal democratic educational reform being implemented, with fluctuating levels of success, then the terrain into which these reforms are being exported, is even more intricately complex. Below are a few examples where contradictory sets of concepts intersect to create dilemmas for educators on both sides of the curriculum reform projects.

To begin with, in many developing countries, several first languages are spoken from region to region, with a single official language—often the language of the colonizer—tying together institutional practices. International education agencies offer theoretical ideas, training, and support materials in a given country's official language, but this is rarely the first language of the educators tasked with constructing and implementing an education reform for their country. Embedded in languages are concepts and beliefs about how the world is structured. A group of educators proficient in the official language will be capable of reading and understanding support material without necessarily interpreting its more profound implications and nuances. For example, an unquestioned assumption embedded in

Western liberal concepts is that science and reason lead to truth. In religious cultures, truth is a question of faith. Educational reforms are being introduced into these complicated public domains without the requisite examination of overlapping worldviews.

In some developing nations where the population is deeply religious, the educational leadership clearly articulates their desire to create a secular curriculum that would affirm all religions as equally worthy, which is a decision modeled on contemporary Western social movements. At the same time, only the tenets of their own religion appear in curricular materials, their own religious calendar prescribes holidays, and the Ministry of Education stops all official work during their major holy days. When consultants from international agencies ask about these embedded practices and assumptions, officials do not even have a framework from within which they can understand the question itself. As Appiah (2018) observes, religion is about faith, identity, and community. In a theocratic society where religion is what binds a population together, adding the word secular to official documentation alters very little in practice.

Prominent citizens of developing countries often constitute the personnel responsible for curriculum reform projects. Generally, these educational leaders are Western educated and fluent in the official language of the reform. As a result of living in wealthy nations and experiencing firsthand the freedoms and prosperity of progressive liberal democracies, at times these educators demonstrate an ambition to return to, or reproduce, that way of life. Anecdotal evidence from international education consultants indicates that such aspirations are often not commensurate with the overall skill levels and competencies of a population. As well, a leader's objectives may not correspond to the needs of the general population. The resulting gap creates another roadblock to the successful implementation of curriculum reform projects—confused and unrealistic timelines. Ambitious educational leaders are anxious to demonstrate the results of a successful educational change process, both to their own populations as well as to players on the international stage; simultaneously, personnel on the ground may be struggling to meet the exigencies of a rapid timeline for a complex mix of reasons including: lack of language fluency, a necessity for more training, a clash in foundational belief systems, the requirement to supervise vast geographic regions, disparate levels of needs across the nation, insufficient resources, and self-doubt about their own abilities to enact nationwide change.

In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in the number of requests from developing countries for assistance with their educational change processes and projects. In part, this results from an acknowledgment that colonial curricular systems and materials do not meet the needs of a country's population. As well, with the proliferation of technology and social media, people have access to global market commodities and are eager to share in these promises. Because the rationale of international education agencies is to facilitate curriculum reform and restructuring, they immediately offer their services and expertise.

It takes years of debate and dialogue for a given population to analyze the educational needs of its citizenry. The process is lengthy, in part, because participants are learning to distinguish between the formal and informal organizational structures of education, and the content of a curriculum. An organizational system is about equality and access. How knowledge is organized and prioritized

highlights a country's norms and values. These are complex concepts and require time, vocabulary, widespread involvement, and a familiarization with the rules of consensus making. Without citizen participation, even a so-called reformed curriculum may simply reflect concepts exported from international consultants.

International education organizations and international monetary organizations need each other. A cursory examination of a few websites indicates the areas for which data is collected. Indicators of success are measured in brief increments. In reality, often an entire generation of students is needed before researchers are able to draw conclusions about an educational reform process. In Quebec, a change in political leadership a few years after the launch of a province-wide curriculum reform resulted in immediate changes to some of its important tenets. Insufficient time had elapsed since the reform's inception for concrete improvements to be measurable. In its diluted form, many educators, as well as the general public, characterized it as a failure.

Liberal democracies are deeply influenced by market economies. Markets are volatile, measurable, and immediate. Increasingly, and with growing urgency, people are intolerant of waiting for the results of almost anything for more than a few seconds, let alone a few decades. Education is a long-term project. Educational change in a stable environment is a minefield of resistances and openings. Exporting educational change projects and curricular approaches across the globe is layered with well-intentioned hubris.

Personal Examples

Included in this section are three lived examples from my tenure, over the past decade, as an international education consultant. In each instance, not only did actual practices contradict some of the values espoused by the curriculum reform under development, but my own assumptions about the broader value-terrain in which we were operating. I was part of a team exporting ideas about educational change. These ideas were constructed in a Western, democratic, secular, and egalitarian context. The following three examples taught me that helping countries rewrite their official documentation is the easy part of international curriculum development work. Digging deeper, I discovered the more complex terrain wherein the assumptions of all contributors were embedded.

It is expensive and time consuming for international agencies to send a team of consultants to support curriculum development work around the world. During a trip to a country for which a team of three consultants had been transported from Canada and Europe, an official visit from the Pope overlapped with scheduled work sessions. Traffic was diverted and roads were closed for the papal parade and open-air prayer meetings. However, it was not the inconvenience of city travel that restricted productivity; the country's president declared several consecutive days of national holidays during which almost every member of the Ministry of Education, as well as most teachers registered for the curriculum development workshops, were lining the streets and praying with the Pope. The team's abbreviated timeline resulted in only a cursory presentation of the concepts under investigation.

Unexamined assumption of international education consultants: Religion is a private matter and will not be given priority over organized, time-sensitive, and costly work sessions.

Immediately upon our arrival in another country, the head of our team of international consultants was asked if he would find a replacement for me. This request came from the Deputy Minister of Education responsible for the country's curriculum reform project. The request was made, not because he was unsatisfied with my expertise, work methods, or interpersonal communication skills, but because I was a woman. Although the team leader refused the Deputy Minister's demand, I was left to work alone for most of our visit, accomplishing significantly less than my male counterparts.

Unexamined assumption of international education consultants: Women and men are equal, and should be judged on their merits and contributions to the work process.

While working in another country (which shall remain unnamed for the purposes of this article), each work session began with a prayer. The entire Ministry of Education and all of the country's schools were closed for religious holidays. Despite evidence of a homogenous religious belief system across the country, the Ministry of Education representatives wrote a new curriculum orientation document that included the following contradictory statements:

> This country is a secular state and therefore every citizen has the right to associate with any religion representing their beliefs. Learners will be able to believe in the oneness of God and to understand that there is only God alone, and this God should be worshipped and no other creation.

Unexamined assumption of international education consultants: A secular state is one in which national public institutions and shared cultural practices, including education, are separate from private religious beliefs; private religious beliefs may or may not espouse the oneness or singularity of God, or any God at all.

Postscript

The Minister of Education for Ghana, Dr. Yaw Osei Adutwum, recently traversed his country visiting schools and speaking in classrooms. At the end of each visit, he asked the students if they had any questions. Across the country, not a single child responded, not a single child asked a question. Many students copied down his words in their notebooks. He finished the tour by asking his own questions about why these children do not understand the role they play in the construction of knowledge, or how to use their voices to enter public conversations. Are they implicitly learning passivity in the face of perceived authority? Do they hear his words as formal and institutional, and therefore having no personal relationship to them?[1]

Western secular school systems try to encourage critical dialogue. Children are praised for asking questions and, if done respectfully, for challenging authority. These are some of the characteristics that children need to learn for democratic exchanges to occur. Is this one of the unexamined assumptions being implicitly exported through international education reform projects, and which turns out to be incongruent on the ground?

Note

1. Dr. Yaw Osei Adutwum addressed the African National Commission for UNESCO, September 12, 2022.

References

Appiah, K. (2005). *The ethics of identity*. Princeton University Press.

Appiah, K. (2018). *The lies that bind: Rethinking identity*. Profile Books Ltd.

Arthur, A., Ghanaian Times (Accra). September 14, 2022.

Butler, J. (2015). *Senses of the subject*. Fordham University Press.

Dahl, R.A. (1998). *On democracy*. Yale University Press.

Ferry, L. (2005). *What is the good life?* The University of Chicago Press.

Habermas, J. (2012). *Postmetaphysical thinking II*. Polity Press. (translated by Ciaran Cronin).

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. Verso (2nd edition 2000).

Nowotny, H. (2016). *The cunning of uncertainty*. Polity Press.

Nussbaum, M. (2013). *Political emotions: Why love matters for justice*. Harvard University Press.

Rabinovitch, L. (2005). *Educational reform: An investigation of democracy and the place of the self in Québec education* (unpublished doctoral dissertation). McGill University.

Sen, A. (2009). *The idea of justice*. Harvard University Press.

Siskin, C. (2017). *System: The shaping of modern knowledge*. The MIT Press.

Lori Rabinovitch completed her Master's and Doctorate studies at Concordia University and McGill University respectively, both of which are degrees in the field of the Philosophy of Education. For the past several years, in both her academic research and work experiences, Lori has examined how educational reforms invite a questioning of our assumptions about education and its place in society. Her underlying view is that how we choose to use our knowledge matters deeply. She has participated in several projects in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America on behalf of various Ministries of Education and international organizations.