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Re-Contextualization of Effectiveness and Efficiency in Post-Socialist Education

Abstract

Transformation of post-socialist educational systems is perhaps one of the most interesting and at the same time underestimated in its importance, developments in the history of comparative education. After the three decades of post-socialist development one can note significant differences between the countries which once had identical or very similar educational systems. Perhaps the most interesting topic for comparativists to explore is the question: why instead of convergence do we observe the increasing divergence of education in the post-socialist area? One of the possible answers is that post-socialist countries perceived the new ideology, namely, the ideology of neoliberalism, in their own specific way, which was determined by their historical, cultural and religious heritage. The concepts of effectiveness and efficiency in education can be considered as one of the typical cases of re-contextualization. The paper provides several examples showing that these concepts are still interpreted in different ways in the East and in the West.

Keywords: effectiveness, efficiency, post-socialist education

Introduction

Transformation of post-socialist educational systems after the great changes of 1989-1991 is perhaps one of the most interesting and at the same time underestimated in its importance, developments in the history of comparative education. The post-socialist educational area includes thirty countries in Europe and Asia. Educational systems in most of these countries have become a testing ground for many innovations which Western European countries with well-developed systems of free public services considered too radical or too risky to implement, e.g. privatization of educational institutions or introducing market mechanisms in education. During the first decade of post-socialist development all ideas which came from Western experts and counterparts were perceived rather uncritically and introduced or at least promoted without any significant critical analysis (Rado, 2001). The second decade was marked by a more balanced nature of reforms and growing differentiation in the post-socialist world. Global tendencies, including GERM (Global Education Reform Movement) prevailed, however, in each region and even country they were interpreted and implemented differently. Most of the Central and Southeast European countries became a part of the EU integration project, while some others, namely, Russia and its satellites, started looking for its own way of development. During the third decade one can observe the continuously increasing divergence and difference between the countries which once had identical or very similar educational systems.

After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 the trajectory of educational transition to many researchers both in the East and in the West, seemed rather simple and linear

in nature. Silova (2010) notes that as a conceptual framework post-socialism was relegated to the sidelines of comparative education. The post-socialist condition has been incorporated into the existing framework of convergence theories. The ‘underdeveloped’ former socialist countries were supposed to modernize their systems of education in order to catch up with the contemporary educational ideas and to fit the more ‘advanced’ Western standards. ‘The belief of many researchers was based on the assumption that ‘there is one Western educational model that needs to be replicated in the post-socialist countries and that there is only one way of implementing this model’ (Bain, 2010, p. 31). In this respect the application of convergence theory to education seemed quite rational and evident. The term ‘countries in transition’ was applied to the post-socialist region having in mind the transition from a ‘failed’ socialist system to a ‘superior’ model of Western capitalism. The term ‘transition’ implies the temporary nature of reforms, which should last until the process of changing one model into another is completed.

Different trajectories of educational development

More than a quarter of a century has passed since the collapse of the world socialist system; however, today we have to admit that the process of transition is not over. Moreover, it seems that at least part of the post-socialist world is not moving closer to the previously desired Western model, and in some cases the tendency is quite the opposite. Silova (2010, p. 8) observes that ‘notwithstanding the claims of the global convergence, post-socialism remains a space for increasing divergence and difference, where complex interactions between the global and the local persistently undermine all linear predictions’.

How could this happened and why? Before the end of the socialist era the systems of education in countries of the socialist world had very many common features. Reforms in former socialist bloc countries started more or less at the same time – at the beginning of the nineties of the last century. Consultants and donors came also practically from the same global or regional organizations – the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, OECD, European Commission, etc. No wonder that all these countries received more or less similar ‘post-socialist’ reform packages. Pace of the reforms could be different, but the final result was expected to be more or less the same. However, that did not happen and one of the most interesting topics for comparativists to explore is the question: why instead of convergence do we observe the increasing divergence of educational systems in post-socialist area?

Neoliberalism and post-socialism

The collapse of the previous social model led to a series of crises, the consequences of which are felt even nowadays. Each country tried to find solutions in its own specific way, which was predetermined by the previous historical, cultural and religious heritage, mentality of the people, interpretation of current global tendencies, etc. In other words, one of the typical reactions to emerging difficulties was ‘returning to the roots’ and the pre-socialist ‘roots’ for many of these countries were different. Another possible reason was the impact of neoliberal ideology, which started to prevail in leading Western economies and global organizations

during the last decades of the twentieth century. ‘Borrowing from abroad’ was another dominant model of behavior for the post-socialist world besides ‘returning to the roots’ (Anweiler, 1992). Neoliberal ideas for countries which just started to build capitalism were almost unanimously perceived as an unquestionable set of recipes necessary to follow in order to get rid of the socialist heritage. ‘Caught in the tumult of changes that condemned the past and celebrated the future, we bought post-socialism together with neo-liberalism and other Western products’ (Cervinkova, 2012, p. 159).

Neoliberalism introduced the concepts of effectiveness and efficiency in education. Van der Walt (2017, p. 12) notes: ‘Neoliberalism could be described as a worldwide drive to be more effective, efficient and productive in whatever is undertaken, even to the extent that non-commercial activities such as education are being subjected to norms normally associated with business corporations’. Post-socialist society, which during the soviet period did not think in commercial terms about domains of social activities like education, arts or sports, was eager to take the neoliberal rhetoric for granted.

However, although the ‘global’ reform agenda is clearly visible, it is being continuously re-configured into new (and often unexpected) arrangements across the region. When socialist and post-socialist histories interact with the Western reform projects, the outcomes are often contradictory. Not only are Western neoliberal reforms modified in post-socialist contexts, but they are also directly challenged (Silova & Eklof, 2013). The concept of effectiveness and efficiency in education was one of the concepts, which each country interpreted and introduced in its own post-socialist way.

The concepts of effectiveness and efficiency

After the collapse of the socialism the ‘outdated’ educational model inherited from the past was to be replaced by a more effective Western one. The key question was: what education system is effective in accordance with the Western standards? One of the most popular explanations heard from the World Bank and OECD experts – one can judge about the effectiveness of education systems by PISA results. OECD Secretary-General Gurría notes that ‘the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, has become the world’s premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems’ (OECD, 2013, p. 2). Besides effectiveness, according to experts, one should also think about efficiency – effectiveness at the lowest possible cost. These were the two key concepts, which underwent re-configuration in the post-socialist context. In what way? Critique of methodological nature and arguments that PISA is not the only one international students’ achievement study does not work. Nor does the argument that there are many other explanations of effectiveness in education and that this particular approach assumes the economical mission of education and ignores the socio-cultural one. Gurría clearly states: ‘Equipping young people with the skills to achieve their full potential, participate in an increasingly interconnected global economy, and ultimately convert better jobs into better lives is a central preoccupation of policy matters around the world’ (OECD, 2013, p. 2). Effectiveness of educational systems is measured by the extent the skills the young people are equipped with fit the needs of the global economy. Instruments of

measurement, are, of course, provided by the PISA project team. Post-socialist context requires simple answers to complex questions, and PISA eagerly provides them.

Simple answers in their own way suggest simple ways of ‘raising the effectiveness’ of education. Chapman et al. (2016) warn that one of the deficiencies of PISA is the ability of the countries to play with the results by entering data from a limited range of social and geographic areas within them. For example, results of Russian Federation in PISA 2015 survey are not at all impressive. Results in reading, mathematics and science literacy are below the OECD average. In order to play with the results, Russian educational authorities separately calculated results of the best 300 and 100 schools in Moscow and declared that the capital’s education system was one of the six best educational systems in the world on levels of reading and mathematical literacy. According to them, the top 100 schools of Moscow provide education of higher quality than required by the world’s best standards. These schools occupy the first place in the world. Another 300 of the best schools are in first and second places in terms of reading and mathematical literacy (5 Hot News, 2016).

Politicians used the chance to boast of their success: for example, Moscow Mayor told Putin that school education in Moscow remains among the best in the world (Moscow Mayor, 2016). Even if we tend to agree that PISA results in some way show the effectiveness of the system of education, does the exercise of comparing the results of the best Moscow schools with student achievements in other countries (not cities) really prove the effectiveness of education?

China uses a similar way of demonstrating effectiveness. Chapman et al. (2016) observe that China played with PISA 2009 results by limiting the geography of their survey to the Shanghai district. In PISA 2015 China was already presenting the data from four districts – Beijing, Shanghai, Dziangsu and Guangdong. Kazakhstan chose a somewhat different approach: PISA results showed significant improvement since 2009 but were considered unreliable due to an insufficient number of participating students and were not included in the overall country rankings. One can only guess how these students were selected.

Russian Federation was not happy with world higher education rankings as well. Russian universities complained that they were discriminated against and in fact deserve higher places in world rankings. Finally their own world university ranking system was designed – Round University Ranking – with headquarters in Moscow. With the appearance of the new ranking system the dream finally came true – Lomonosov Moscow State University is 38th in the world’s university reputation ranking (Round University Ranking, 2018). No other ranking system but the Moscow-designed one could place two Russian universities (Sankt-Petersburg State University is 97th) on the list of world’s top 100 universities.

Efficiency is usually defined as effectiveness at a lowest possible cost. The efficiency question can be formulated in two distinct ways:

- How to improve outcomes, without increasing costs,
- How to produce the same level of outcomes at lower costs (Sheerens, 2016).

Both options are favoured by post-socialist politicians as cost reductions in education in this case can be explained as seeking for a more efficient management of public services, completely in line with the neoliberal ideology. A combination of

PISA results and *Education at a Glance* can be an especially useful tool for demonstrating the efficiency of post-socialist education. *Education at a Glance* provides cumulative expenditure per student in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education, including both OECD member states and candidates. In Chapter B we can also find a graph illustrating the relationship between cumulative education spending per student and reading performance in PISA (OECD, 2017, p. 173). Judging by the graph, Russian education seems to have the most efficient education system, while Chinese Taipei takes the second place, and Lithuania – the third. The graph shows the countries investing less than USD 50 000 per student. Russia and Lithuania invest almost USD 50 000, Chinese Taipei – about USD 46 000, and the reading performance scores of their students are highest among the less than USD 50 000 countries. *Education at a Glance* observes a positive link between cumulative expenditure per student and PISA reading scores across the countries investing less than USD 50 000 per student. Above USD 50 000 per student, the relationship between performance and cumulative expenditure per student disappears (OECD, 2017).

In other words, Russia, Chinese Taipei and Lithuania have found the most efficient formula of investment, which comes close to USD 50 000 per student. From this point of view educational systems of Switzerland, Austria or Luxembourg should be qualified as highly inefficient, because they invest several times more than Russia, but the level of the reading performance of their students is lower (OECD, 2016). Similar comparisons can be used for praising the achievements of a national education system, and country officials like to exercise in these kinds of activities. However, I have not heard anything about Swiss students trying to get into Russian or Lithuanian schools in order to receive a better education.

A similar exercise can be done with the university rankings. When we compare the budgets of Western and Eastern universities, which are in similar ranking positions, post-socialist higher education institutions will seem highly efficient as they train doctors, engineers and teachers for costs much lower than in the West. When we compare achievements in the field of world culture or research, the situation is different, but most probably for the economically-oriented experts of higher education the academic achievements in arts and science will not be considered as the most important criteria of efficiency.

Conclusion

In the search for answers to our key research question – why similar socialist education systems chose different trajectories of development – we found out that one of the possible explanations is the differences in ways the countries interpret and introduce neoliberal concepts in education. We demonstrated just several examples when, under the influence of neoliberal ideology, post-socialist countries were re-contextualizing the concepts of effectiveness and efficiency and applying it to their specific context. Similar definitions like accountability, result-oriented management or performance-based assessment still have different meanings in the East and in the West. Western-type educational monitoring is usually based on trust, Eastern-type – on control. In post-socialist world we still see the shortage of trust and the abundance of control, and it will take some more time to diminish these differences.

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