JEP | EJOURNAL OF EDUCATION POLICY ESTABLISHED 2000

Turning Challenges into Opportunities for Educational Leaders

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Spring 2013

The main objective of this paper is to put forward the idea that the bipolar challenges that educational leaders are confronted with can be addressed instead as complementary opportunities.

The research paradigm employed in this study is qualitative and the research approach consists mainly of literature review from books, journals and mass media, triangulated with experiential learning from my service in education over 35 years. Data analysis is carried out through contents and discourse analysis.

Globalisation is usually blamed for undermining national autonomy by local authorities, who are either incapable or unwilling to address local challenges instead of utilising them as opportunities for exploration; tradition and modernity should not be viewed as a bipolar, but as a natural progression; short- term planning, being the breakdown of long-term planning should be faced as an intertwined process, while competition might take a positive perspective if it were viewed as a goal of reaching one's optimal expectations. Finally, spirituality and materialism may coexist when a happy medium is struck in how these are pursued through education.

So, how could the challenge of globalisation be turned into opportunity? For instance, the ongoing global debt crisis, over at least the last five years, has driven local governments to reflect on the need for revising their economic philosophies and reforming their educational systems, with a view to addressing the mounting problem of unemployment, especially among young people. Thus, the promotion of innovation, entrepreneurship, employability, competitiveness and mobility has become the objective of the current agenda. These objectives resound some of the main European Programme 2020 goals (Vassiliou 2012), whereby 35% of vacancies in Europe will have as a precondition tertiary education, with a view to addressing the great demand for technical professions and the wider needs of the markets.

More particularly, the **strategic framework** for European cooperation in education and training up until 2020 (2009) aims to respond to the challenges for creating a knowledge-based Europe and making lifelong learning a reality by providing the means for all citizens to realise their potentials, as well as ensure sustainable economic prosperity and employability. The framework should take into consideration the whole spectrum of education and training systems from a lifelong learning perspective, covering all levels and contexts, including nonformal and informal learning. Therefore, the challenge of the globalised economic crisis according to the strategic framework 2020 can be turned into opportunity by:

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training

- Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
- Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training

Turning to another formidable challenge, we establish that the exponential explosion of ICT has embarrassed educators with complex technicalities and confused learners with the multitude of information. So, can this challenge be turned into an opportunity and how? Not easily, since this revolution in the domain of information technology has, apart from driving educators in the perceptible uncomfortable state whereby they often find themselves lagging behind their students in technical knowhow, at the same time created the demand for managing the massive daily amount of electronic and other information that reaches them through various means. So, what do we do? Do we just bear up with the situation?

Being perplexed, I feel that there is not much one could do to address this challenge, apart from perhaps resorting to the factor of how one manages one's time. Talking from experience, this could be done in two opposite directions. The first one being spending more time on mastering electronic technicalities and the second consuming less time on reviewing and archiving material which is not directly related to one's academic area. This of course may lead to extreme specialism but that is another story.

And as if the challenge of the explosion of ICT were not enough to generate a whirlwind of confusion, educators are at the same time vying for attention with all the providers of direct and indirect formal, non-formal and/or informal cognitive knowledge and values, such as private tuition at organised institutes or individual suppliers, the internet, mass media, politicians and sometimes the church. Underlying this competition among the providers of education lies the question of the importance and the role of the contemporary teacher.

How important then is a teacher today and what should his/her role be? There is no doubt that most of us would agree that this challenge could be seen as an opportunity if as educators we think of ourselves as facilitators of learning and learners at the same time. According to Ayers (2011),the roles of teacher-learner should apart from being acted side by side with respect for each other, may operate interchangeably, as we must not forget that students and teachers are both learning from each other.

Turning away from the challenge that educators face as individuals in terms of their contested roles, we can now focus on the wider problems that educational leaders have to address in their daily routines. Counselling; pastoral care and delinquency; inclusive and intercultural education; moral values and personal, social and health education; needy children; in-service training and European programmes, are some of the most recognisable concerns. In times of economic affluence, one could suggest that at least some of the above challenges might be addressed at a satisfactory degree with effective strategic planning. In the present economic hardships, any planning is becoming problematic as, apart from the unforeseen events that necessitate the adoption of emergency measures, the resulting financial cuts imposed do not exclude education thus making challenges harder to address.

However, since the hypothesis of this policy paper is that challenges could be turned into opportunities, I would suggest that the opportunity here would be for decision makers to work towards reforming educational systems with a view to creating a new leadership both at

the level of the school unit and at the level of the educational authorities that would be able to implement the objectives of a new educational system.

And this brings us to another conundrum in terms of the main aims and objectives of our educational systems: spirituality versus materialism. I have been listening to this rhetoric throughout my life, and every time educational reforms have been attempted it has been reaffirmed, at least in theory, that spirituality is a main if not the only one aim of our educational system. But, if this were the case would we have so much delinquency, hooliganism, bulling, racism, drug addiction, truancy and dropping out of school to name but a few of the challenges that our educational systems, especially the public ones, face nowadays around the world?

And would our youth be so uncritical about social, political and partisan practices so as to be driven into indifference and apathy for public life instead of reinforcing the movement of civic society? So, should this ascertainment lead us to the conclusion that the aim of spirituality in education is only a catchphrase without any practical value, and what we actually have as a long-term main approach in our educational systems is the utilitarian service of the markets through the pursuing of our personal materialistic goals?

Probably, judging by the relentless economic hardships we are going through nowadays, that is exactly what is happening. And this probably explains the fact that today's debt crisis is not a problem easily addressed and the frightening unemployment rate in southern Europe especially that of young people, is not manageable. So where does this lead us? Is it too much of the one and absence of the other, is it absence of both or an absence of clear mind as to what we really need and where we need to go in our educational systems? So, if neither spirituality nor materialism can provide for the daily needs of society, should we perhaps seek a new model for our educational systems, which would be able to strike a balance between the two polar points?

The implementation of this idea presupposes the undertaking of major changes in the educational system with a view to producing active citizens with critical thinking and increased opportunities for employability. This may be attempted through what today is termed as global education (originally known as development education and lately termed as sustainable education). The suggested changes should be developed in the areas of learning, delivery of curriculum, and management.

In terms of learning, the cognitive domain should be promoted through a trans-disciplinary approach, away from the test/examination centred practice and based on the development of the triptych knowledge, skills and practices as learning outcomes. According to Oxfam GB (2008), education for global citizenship and sustainable development is an active and participatory learning process that aims to:

- Enable people to understand the links between their own lives and those of people throughout the world and between people and planet.
- Increase understanding of the economic, social, political and environmental forces that shape our lives.
- Develop skills, attitudes and values that enable people to work together to bring about change and take control of their own lives.

• Contribute to the development of a more just and sustainable world, in which power and resources are more equitably shared and environmental limits recognised

What is important now is to investigate how the above objectives may be promoted, and perhaps the first area we should look at is the delivery of curricula. And the question raised, is whether a nationally detailed curriculum could serve this purpose. Having in mind that top-down policies more often than not fail, I would suggest that national curricula should consist only of core principles, whereas educators should be given the autonomy to shape their own syllabi and teaching materials, adopt the teaching methods and learning approaches that match the needs of their learners and be offered support in the area of training and learning resources.

One of the core curriculum principles should be that of the creation of citizens with critical thinking. But who is the citizen who thinks critically? There are many definitions. I will refer to the most recent one, to which I have come across at a conference titled "Democratic Education for a Democratic State" organised by the Cypriot Ministry of Education & Culture. According to Kazamias (2012), who was the keynote speaker, somebody who thinks critically is the democratic active citizen who possesses:

- a. the necessary "political literacy", i.e. the required knowledge and understanding for the nature and the function of the contemporary democratic regime, as well as for his/her responsibilities and rights
- b. the skills (i.e. the critical mind), the civic virtues, attitudes and dispositions, and the values of justice, solidarity, tolerance, cooperation, sensitivity, prudence and according to Aristotle friendship (p.2).

The creation of the democratic and active citizen presupposes the existence and development of a very robust personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme, (Psaltis, 2007), which could be promoted through extracurricular activities integrated into the syllabi, and/or accommodated into the school timetable. Within the framework of PSHE, students could take part in workshops, seminars and lectures or they could visit places of environmental, archaeological, historical, religious and artistic interest. They could also participate in European programmes and competitions and in sports functions. They could watch quality film, musical and theatrical productions

The delivery of such a groundbreaking educational system presumes the existence of a far-sighted senior management team and committed teachers at the school unit and an imaginative leadership at the level of the decision makers. Can this condition be met? My firm belief is that it can definitely be met, given that, at least in Cyprus, we have an incredible number of qualified appointee and practising teachers, from whom we can recruit the best for instruction and the most gifted ones for management. Thus the challenge for the need of reforming the educational system could give us the opportunity to implement the appropriate legislature revisions to the laws in place, so that the recruitment, the appraisal and training systems of educators become instrumental to the new curricula, with a view to transforming educational institutions into open learning communities for the wider society (Ψάλτης (Psaltis) 2006). In terms of practising teachers these approaches could be imparted

onto them through the appropriate training but for student-teachers this concept should be incorporated into a uniform initial teacher training for all sectors.

Perhaps the biggest and most comprehensive challenge we have to tackle as educators is to deny, or at least challenge the assertion of Ball (1998) that educational reforms are a catchphrase, by which politicians dismiss previous policies and make proposals which cannot be implemented within the limited time they are in office. More particularly, Ball maintains that reforms:

- Distance the reformer from the outcomes, while blame and responsibility are devolved or contracted out.
- New policies feed off and gain legitimacy from the deriding and demolition of previous policies (Ball 1990), which are thus rendered "unthinkable". The "new" are marked out by and gain credence from their qualities of difference and contrast.
- In education, the blame and responsibility of malfunctioning situations may be personified on the "incompetent teacher" and the "failing school" so the system … must be reformed (p.125).

Therefore, if the ideas that I have put forward before sound as an idealistic missionary pedagogical approach, perhaps the successful example of educational reforms in Finland, which are considered by many as some of the most effective ones in Europe, could incentivise us for at least attempting some of these changes in our educational systems, despite the fact that Lanas (2012), a Finnish academic, cautions that stories of educational success offer no recipe. Nevertheless, at least the basic principles below, upon which the successful Finnish educational foundation is built, could be utilised as areas for exploration and development in our mission for educational reform.

- Collaboration between educational policies and other policies is in the society. There is commitment to and systematic analysis of a very consistent long-term educational common policy
- **Absence of ability tracking or institutional differentiation.** Personalised help or individual guidance within schools. Guidance and counselling are considered important to support students' individual learning processes.
- **Professional development,** which is characterised by high level of initial teacher training and continuing professional development both for the teachers and the management personnel.
- **Teacher's autonomy and professional trust**. All traditional forms of control over the teacher's work were abandoned in 1990 (Lanas 2012 pp. 2, 5).

Policy Recommendations

As to the question of how we can use research to shape and influence public policies that pursue educational quality while supporting and promoting local and regional innovation, I suggest that we look at two directions. First I suggest we look at the main aim and objectives of what we want to investigate, and second decide upon the methodology we are going to employ for implementing this. In terms of the main aim and objectives I feel that what we have to research is the relationship between the factors that impact on educational outcomes

and see whether these are instrumental in generating added value to our educational systems. More particularly, how do the variables that follow relate to the quality of education? Initial and in-service training, teacher recruitment systems, appraisal systems, autonomy in defining curricula, instructional and assessment methods, pedagogical approaches, spending per student etc.

The results of such an investigation might of course not be identical between countries, given the different context. For instance, according to the Guardian (2012) in 2009 the UK ranked as 8th in the table for spending per pupil, but had a 23rd position average overall in the OECD Programme for International Study Assessment (PISA) (2009), while Finland, with a more moderate budget, is one western country that has excelled in PISA ratings consistently over the years and is highly regarded across the globe as a leading education nation.

Therefore, the Guardian (2012) is justified in maintaining that "an explanation cannot be plucked out of their model in isolation, as each element is interdependent and inherently contingent on various other tacit and inconspicuous aspects that ultimately play a significant role within the mechanics of the model". Thus, each country will have to study the findings of such an inquiry very carefully with a view to deciding upon the educational policies which will best support and promote local and regional innovation.

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