



Global competence, decolonization, and Asian educational philosophies

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Editorial Introduction

In the day-to-day routines of education, teachers may often be left with the impression that the challenges they face are permanent and universal, yet a remarkable *diversity* of contexts and approaches is among the most common findings to consistently arise from studies in international-comparative education. This is certainly true for comparative research on curriculum, policy, and pedagogies, but variation seen in these subfields is often shaped by profound differences in underlying *philosophies* of education. Indeed, the impetus for specific pedagogical actions often arises directly from teachers' basic assumptions and working theories regarding the fundamental nature, value, and aims of education. It follows that careful reflection on the philosophy of education can be tremendously beneficial for teachers of all kinds—especially those who seek a global understanding of humanity—since this promises to expand creative imagination and stimulate one's pedagogical development in a multitude of ways:

For educators seeking a sense of purpose and meaning to their efforts, philosophy can offer various resources, ranging from conceptual tools to explore and clarify the underlying assumptions of competing value frameworks; to skills for critically reflecting on conventional views and assessing their worth; to proposals of positive, constructive, alternate frameworks; and, finally, to visions of radically different possibilities that can stretch the imagination and expand the spirit (Burbules & Warnick, 2006, p. 501).

Clearly, educational philosophy matters. Nevertheless, there have been relatively few attempts to offer an international-comparative perspective into the *philosophy of education*, and many teachers—in Europe and elsewhere—tend to know rather little about traditions of educational thought associated with other continents. This often remains true even while they may have a general sense of differing tendencies at the surface level when it comes to contrasting features of curricular structures, instructional content, or assessment practices. As Timothy Reagan (2018) has explained, “The idea that there might be valuable insights to be gained from a serious examination of non-western educational traditions themselves, indeed that these traditions might be fully comparable to the western tradition in their richness and diversity, is one that

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has been rarely voiced” (p. 1). It may generally be assumed that because so many students from other continents currently seek learning opportunities in Europe, North America, and Oceania, educational quality in the latter continents is evidently superior, and little is to be gained from careful study of non-western philosophies of education. However, as we will demonstrate, with increasing recognition of global interdependence has come to a stronger awareness of the need to understand other parts of the world, leading to the promotion of such concepts as “global competence” and “decolonization” in education.

Global competence is defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development as having “the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development” (OECD, 2018, p. 25). While essential arts, humanities, and social studies subjects have arguably been marginalized in some school systems due to a tendency to “teach to the test” (particularly in response to the OECD’s own emphasis on literacy and numeracy in its popular PISA evaluation), the organization’s four assessable aspects of *global competence* now promises to offer a helpful counterbalance as they are adopted into local policies:

- (1) The capacity to evaluate information, formulate arguments, and explain complex situations and problems by using and connecting evidence, identifying biases and gaps in information and managing conflicting arguments.
- (2) The capacity to identify and analyse multiple perspectives and world views, positioning and connecting their own and others’ perspectives on the world.
- (3) The capacity to understand differences in communication, recognising the importance of socially-appropriate communication conventions, and adapting communication to the demands of diverse cultural contexts.
- (4) The capacity to evaluate actions and consequences by identifying and comparing different courses of action and weighing these actions against one another on the basis of short- and long-term consequences (OECD, 2018).

The global competence concept promises to improve awareness of the importance of promoting international understanding in schools and provides a platform from which to generate a response from universities, particularly in the field of teacher education.

Decolonization is a related concept that is rapidly gaining currency in higher education (Connell, 2018; 2019). With roots in multiculturalism, culturally responsive teaching, and similar movements, decolonization shifts the focus to how curriculum often fails to meaningfully represent the ideas of formerly colonized peoples, and is thereby incomplete and unbalanced, calling for a correction. Decolonization extends on issues raised through postcolonial critiques of western epistemologies (Go, 2016), which even have inadvertently shaped the field of international-comparative education (Takayama et al., 2017). Partly for such reasons, we have developed this special issue devoted to *New Perspectives on Asian Philosophies*, but our impetus also comes from a recognition that Asian philosophy can offer timeless intellectual stimulation and inspiration irrespective of one’s identity or sociopolitical concerns in any given context.

Despite a great diversity of educational systems, the philosophy of education worldwide is unified to the extent that everywhere it aims to bring meaning and direction to the efforts of

teachers. It seeks to determine how we might better understand our objectives and make sense of competing claims regarding what most matters in our work. It serves as a fundamental basis for decision making regarding educational policy and curriculum, and even pedagogical approaches among individual teachers. Indeed, elsewhere I have advocated that “Comparative research should be more carefully based on recent concerns in the philosophy of education” (Hebert, 2012, p. 26), so it is a pleasure to see the fruits of our efforts in the culmination of this special issue that aims to enable meaningful comparison of Asian educational philosophies. This special issue ultimately arose from the first offering of an international Ph.D. course entitled “Non-western Educational Philosophy and Policy” which began by challenging the very notions of East and West, as students reflected on why a course of this kind was even necessary in the year 2020 (Sethurupan, 2020). Indeed, the Eurasian landmass has been historically understood as divided between the Occident and Orient, or Europe and Asia, but recent generations of historians have taken great interest in processes of intellectual exchange that transcended the landmass during different eras. For many centuries, the Silk Road enabled not only trade but also knowledge to be shared across Eurasia, and newer studies of such topics as Viking voyages (eighth through eleventh centuries), the travels of Chinese explorer Zheng He (1371-c.1433), and the Graeco-Arabic-Latin translation movements (mid-eighth to twelfth centuries), have enabled rediscovery of how much the early development of science in Europe actually owed to Asian thinkers. Moreover, even today despite the lingering impacts of colonization, the aforementioned international examination movement has produced a corpus of results across decades that consistently suggest schools in many Asian nations are performing very well when it comes to testable knowledge. Perhaps Europe has always had something to learn from Asia, and vice versa, but considerable gaps in knowledge have nevertheless persisted. For generations, a major challenge has been the meaningful translation of complex argumentation between different socio-cultural contexts that often lack equivalent concepts (Hebert, 2018). Philosophical writings can be uniquely dense and challenging even in their original cultural and historical settings, and especially in an important professional field such as education. Sensitive interpreters are needed who can effectively bridge the gap between radically different epistemologies and point to what others may learn in terms of practical applications.

While it is difficult to deny that educational philosophy, as known in Europe, has traditionally taken a rather ethnocentric approach to its theorization (albeit improving over the past decade, as seen in *Educational Theory and Philosophy* and other journals), one may also argue that the field of comparative education has tended to take approaches that usually fail to deeply explore contrasting philosophical traditions. Writing on the field of educational philosophy, Nicholas Burbules (2000) noted that “exclusion of people, groups, and their perspectives, *must* be taken into account if a field is not to become increasingly hermetic and self-rationalizing – to say nothing of the possible effects of personal or professional harm upon those persons and groups by excluding them” (p. 15). The field of international-comparative education is most often concerned with describing the actual policies and practices in schools rather than offering a detailed analysis of underlying philosophies. On the other hand, the philosophy of education often proceeds with a Eurocentric orientation that does not fully take into account the diverse array of philosophical thought concerning education that can be identified worldwide. We seek *synergy* in this special issue, to unify these fields.

In a major reference work, *Oxford Handbook of Educational Philosophy*, only one contributor—Martha Nussbaum—offered a significant discussion of a non-western philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore. Based on her decidedly international orientation, Nussbaum warns against educating for “Nations of technically trained people who don’t know how to criticize authority, useful profit-makers with obtuse imaginations” (p. 62). Moreover, Nussbaum (2009) identifies three essential abilities in education as “crucial to the health of any democracy internally and to the creation of a decent world culture” (p. 55), which she sees as recently disappearing from technocratic public education: “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (p. 55). The first of these abilities may be understood as “self-criticism and critical thought about one’s own traditions,” and the second leads to “flexible citizens who can adapt their thought to the nature of the current reality,” while the third ability may also be described as “narrative imagination” (p. 55-57). Nussbaum thereby demonstrates how a discussion of the ideas of an Asian philosopher can bring unique insights for rethinking the problems of education in western countries, as well as how solutions may be envisioned. In this way, Nussbaum’s argument is also consistent with the concerns of global competence and decolonization.

A recent special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education* was devoted to the theme of decolonization and featured articles on the Nordic countries as well as Canada, Argentina, and Australia (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020). Its editors noted that their inclusion of contributions from beyond the Nordic countries “remind us how we can learn from each other and think collectively, and how the conversation on decoloniality must be at once local and global” (p. 1-2). The articles in this special issue on “New Perspectives on Asian Philosophies” are similarly inspired by the theme of decoloniality, and represent even more culturally distant parts of the world, but with the perennial objective of explaining the educational philosophies of notable Asian thinkers who tend to be little recognized in Europe. Arguments associated with decolonization offer one timely and important rationale for any who might doubt the relevance of Asian philosophies for educators in the Nordic countries or elsewhere (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020), but our purpose with this special issue is not so much about convincing readers that change is necessary, but rather to offer specific resources for diversification of higher education curricula. We assume that as years pass, educators will increasingly seek to know more about educational thought from across the world, as global integration—recovering from the recent hiccups of a global pandemic in 2020-2021, as well as Brexit and the Trump administration—will most likely again intensify.

To attain cohesion and engender a comparative perspective, each of the authors in this special issue connects in some way with the contemporary European notion of *Bildung* within their articles. The *Bildung* concept is commonly understood as serving as the foundations for education in contemporary Germany and the Nordic countries, so much so that it may often be taken for granted (Bruford, 2010; Herdt, 2019; Horlacher, 2017). It is therefore quite relevant for educators in these nations to reflect on the extent to which *Bildung* may be socio-culturally constructed or “culture-bound”, how this notion looks today to educators from other parts of the world, and how it might come to be perceived by educators only a few generations into the future.

Overview of Articles

We begin with Miwa Chiba’s article, “Comparison of self-reflection in Humboldtian *Bildung* and the Kyoto School: Educational implications in light of OECD frameworks.” This article discusses ways in which notable 20th century Japanese philosophers conceptualized the goals of education, and how these views compare and contrast with the *Bildung* concept prevalent in much of Europe as well as recent models advanced by the OECD. Next is an article by Czarecah Tuppil Oropilla and Jean Guadana, “Intergenerational learning and programming: Perspectives from the Philippines,” which examines how the ideas of Filipino educationist Virgilio Enriquez may be especially useful toward recognizing ways of facilitating learning through direct interaction between different generations. This is followed by Adam Switala’s “The Self-Orientalization of Polish Music Education,” which shows how the ideas of renowned Asian postcolonial thinkers, who also both happened to be musicians—Edward Said (from Palestine) and Rabindranath Tagore (from India)—can be useful toward understanding how music education in Eastern Europe may be decolonized in the aftermath of the USSR. Switala’s interpretation is striking, and the article makes a clarion call for new approaches in Poland. Each of these first three articles is explicitly comparative between specific European and Asian educational perspectives or practices.

The remaining two articles in this special issue focus on 20th century educational thought in various parts of Asia but make reference to *Bildung* as a way of enabling comparison with models that are likely to be more familiar to many *NJCIE* readers. First is Ning Luo’s “Cai Yuanpei’s vision of aesthetic education and its heritage in contemporary China,” which deeply explores the ideas of one of the most influential 20th century Chinese educationists whose ideas continue to shape educational practices today. This issue concludes with an article from Southeast Asia, a region that has hitherto received scant international attention in the philosophy of education. Dorothy Ferary’s “On Ki Hadjar Dewantara’s philosophy of education” offers a fascinating description of the life and ideas of Indonesia’s most prominent educational philosopher.

There is certainly much to learn from this collection of original articles. The first three explicitly demonstrate how particular theories from Asia—Kyoto School views of self-reflection, Enriquez’s *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, and Said and Tagore’s postcolonial critique—enable critical insights into specific educational concepts and practices in Europe and elsewhere. These are respectively applied to *Bildung* and OECD-endorsed notions of reflection, models of intergenerational learning, and efforts to decolonize music education in Eastern Europe. In much of Europe and some other parts of the world, surprisingly little is widely known about Rabindranath Tagore and Cai Yuanpei—some of the most influential educational philosophers to emerge from the world’s most populous countries during the past century—and the articles by Adam Switala and Luna Luo offer stimulating comparative insights into how their contributions may be understood. The article by Dorothy Ferary introduces readers to Dewantara, who is also a household name (at least among teachers) in Indonesia, the world’s fourth most populous country which also has the world’s largest Muslim population. Each of these authors has distinguished significant gaps in knowledge, making considerable progress toward the identification of solutions to educational problems with commendable argumentation that deserves an audience.

Before proceeding to the contributed articles, it is useful to reflect on how tolerance of diverse views and a genuine openness to debate are essential prerequisites for the development of robust philosophical thought. Intellectual freedom remains a challenge in many parts of the world, and it is notable that the first author to have an article accepted for this special issue ultimately withdrew it from publication due to safety concerns in an Asian country torn by ongoing military conflict. It is truly regrettable that even in the 21st century intolerance toward differing views can interfere in such ways with the sharing of vital knowledge. Recall for a moment how through discussion of Rabindranath Tagore, Martha Nussbaum demonstrates the unique insights to be gained from respectfully considering how the work of *both* Asian and western philosophers may be applied to challenges facing universities today (Nussbaum, 2009). To proceed in such a way is to be organically inclusive, not out of academic fashion or tokenism, but rather in genuine recognition of the inherent value of global intellectual contributions. Indeed, diversity and inclusion can be much more than mere slogans pragmatically used to define a university as “international” and therefore deserving of a higher position in ranking tables (Guzman-Valenzuela, 2019, p.140). Rather, these notions apply to real people, entire fields of study, and specific theories, signifying—both in times of war and peace—the inherent attitude of openness associated with robust intellectual inquiry. To be of high quality, and to remain relevant in the world today, it is indisputable that higher education must be increasingly *international* in its purview, which necessarily entails a willingness to explore, accept, and learn from our differences. Deepening awareness of diversity is the very rationale for the field of international-comparative education.

Nussbaum’s writings also demonstrate that timeless studies in the humanities retain their universal value even in times of great economic strain, and that humanities fields increasingly accommodate diversity (Nussbaum, 2009). The same can certainly be said of studies in the *arts*, which uniquely nurture one’s ability to directly produce objects of expression and beauty that transcend the ordinary, mechanical, and mundane, ultimately giving meaning to life (Hebert, 2016). At all levels of education, the arts can be taught in ways that are responsive to the concerns of global competence and decolonization (Coppola et al., 2020). Even as educational systems worldwide are lured toward STEM models and technocratic orientations, technology CEOs themselves (such as Jack Ma and Steve Jobs) often ironically tend to defend the importance of arts in schools. With greater attention to Asian approaches, we may also anticipate renewed appreciation for marginalized arts and humanities subjects that merit recognition for their profound and timeless value irrespective of how bureaucrats may perceive the immediate needs of national economies. Studies of Asian educational philosophers promise to enrich our collective imagination as a profession, which deeply matters as we consider the vast array of possible approaches to educating the next generation.

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