
EDITORIAL

SOME ASPECTS OF THE

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE DYNAMIC:

SETTING SCHOOL AUTONOMY

AND EVALUATION IN CONTEXT

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The construction of modern schools and national education systems became possible through the two models of management and educational policy. The first was the ‘community’ model and the second was the ‘nation-State’ model. Both can be found throughout developed countries, sometimes in open conflict, at other times in more or less productive partnership.

The ‘community’ approach was the guiding principle in the Anglo-Saxon world. In England and in the Netherlands, for instance, schools were set up by parish churches in close collaboration with the local community. As municipalities were created, they set up lay establishments in the most prosperous towns of Northern Europe and also in the North of Italy and even France in the sixteenth century, in competition with ecclesiastical institutions. This approach was even more evident in the wave of setting up and expanding education in North America. Adopting modern terminology or professional jargon, we could say that these were based on the ‘bottom-up’ approach.

The ‘nation-State’ model was most popular from the eighteenth century in the major States, first in those of the feudal type or the later ones which benefited from State support for capitalist and industrial modernization, such as the despotic States of Spain and France or the French republics of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Once again adopting the terminology of professional jargon, we may say that these are examples of the ‘top-down’ approach.

The ‘communal’ model was guided by a decision-making process that today we would classify as ‘micro-political’. Schools took an enormous number of decisions concerning what and how to teach. They decided, for example, syllabi and curricula without much interference

from the public authorities. With a large amount of power given to the school, the interactions between the different partners were—and still are—very important. We may even say that they were delegated this power by higher levels of administration. But, in this model, throughout the centuries communities were slowly building a strong civil society which organized different local communities through exchanges, dialogue and debate.

Inspired by the success of the development of the ‘community’ model into strong civil societies with States at their service and—sometimes—also critical remarks about the undesirable effects of the ‘nation-State’ model in limiting teachers’ pedagogical freedom, a large number of thinkers and institutions put forward the idea in the 1980s and 1990s of strengthening the autonomy of the school as a way of overcoming educational problems. This proposal to strengthen the autonomy of the school was accompanied by similar proposals to strengthen the mechanisms for evaluating the outcomes of pupils’ learning. The Open File in this issue of *PROSPECTS* presents a range of experiences in the school autonomy/evaluating-the-outcomes-of-pupil-learning equation.

Probably one of the principal lessons learned from these two decades was that in the search for alternatives it is necessary to combine components of bottom-up management (for example, by strengthening school autonomy) with others from the top-down approach (such as certain types of standardized evaluation, in order to allow different levels of learning to be compared).

Even so, the moment has probably come to avoid falling into the trap of a dialogue or discussion over the advantages between the ‘top-down’ and the ‘bottom-up’ models. In fact, we now have technical means available that allow us to construct a network model taking advantage of new technologies. It should operate by bringing together various levels of management in a much more intense interaction and redefining them as co-operative partners (and not in a hierarchical relationship) in processes through which all existing institutions intervene in an articulated and productive manner. The question that must be asked is what are the competences required to create such relationships, whether the partners have them or not and—if they don’t have them—how do they get them.

In this connection, it is important to take into account the characteristics of each context. The two articles that we are printing in this issue of *PROSPECTS* on education in Afghanistan link its past and its present, and provide evidence that no abstract theory about management models is applicable and pertinent in all situations. There may be general guidelines which direct our thinking at one stage, but they must always be interpreted and revised in each case according to circumstances. How do we begin the educational

reconstruction of Afghanistan? What do we learn from its past, its present, and the efforts to combine autonomy and evaluation in other parts of the world? These and other questions could help those concerned by this situation towards finding the answers they are looking for.

This issue of *PROSPECTS* closes with a profile of Basil Bernstein, who is recognized as a leading sociologist throughout the world. His pioneering work over the past four decades illuminated our understanding of the relationship among political economy, family, language and schooling. While his early works explored the relationships among the social division of labour, the family and the school, and how these differences affected learning, his later works on pedagogic discourse, practice and educational transmissions led to a theory of social and educational codes and their effect on social reproduction.