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## **PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN GLOBAL EDUCATION: An essay review of E. Thomas Ewing and David Hicks, editors, *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History***

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When I was a doctoral student at Ohio State in the 1960s, comparative education was in its heyday. Though it was not a field in which I specialized, I was associated closely with students who did study it and took a few courses in it myself. The popularity of comparative education, however, proved to be short-lived. One of the major reasons for its decline was the identification of comparative education with the imperialist brand of American internationalism that prescribed economic development for the rest of the world, particularly for third world countries, as designed by USAID and other like-minded government agencies. That version of internationalism took a nose dive in subsequent decades, especially during the Reagan administration, as the commitment of the federal government to internationalism, except for military intervention, extinguished itself. The economically oriented neo-colonialism of USAID has recently morphed internationally into a movement for the control of education in developing countries through non-government agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In the developed world, particularly in the USA, the design and management of education has been invaded by “educational policy” specialists, mostly economists, who seek to call the shots in the USA as well as elsewhere with prescriptions that are rather narrowly conceived, to say the least. Non-economists have tried to compete with the economists for influence and control in educational policy, domestic and international, partly through the invocation of the wonderfully elastic term, “global education.” This term simultaneously allows for various proposals calling for one kind or another brand of internationalism in American education and intending to analyze education internationally through lenses broader than the economic.

The essays in the volume under review here, *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), seem to me to be a version of the latter phenomenon. A historian and a social studies educator (with a master’s degree in history) are the editors and the contributors are either historians of various specializations, or educationists with some link to history or social studies in their training. It is the editors, mainly, who provide the explicit discussion of globalism that is the intended novel contribution of the book. The contributors of the case studies, for the

most part, concentrate on elaborating the characteristics of their various analyses. Before returning to the phenomenon of globalism, a brief look at the cases in the volume is in order.

There are thirteen chapters in this volume, in addition to the Introduction and Afterword by the editors. The editors divide the chapters into three groups, moving from an initial four that they see as overtly political, to the next five which they see as examples of “innovative pedagogical approaches” (p. 10), and then to the final five which they see as answers to the question how did Depression conditions prompt innovative pedagogical approaches. These categories seem rather abstract, and not especially helpful as classifications. For example, there are two chapters on artistic representation in education during the Depression, one on murals in various New York City high schools, and another on photographs taken by federally supported photographers of one-room school houses. Oddly, at least to me, the former chapter is included in the overtly political section while the latter appears in the innovative pedagogy section. Because of this, and a few other anomalies, I choose to construct my own classification of the chapters. I would like to consider them in three groups, those dealing with schools in the United States, those dealing with non-US settings, and the ideas of the editors themselves about what is the major message of this collection.

Seven of the chapters have a clearly US focus and five deal with education in other countries. One chapter, by co-editor Thomas Ewing, deals with how American educators conceived the notion of “planning” as a characteristic of Soviet schools worthy of American emulation. I will deal with this chapter when I consider the ideas of the editors.

The seven US chapters begin with John Lyons’s discussion of militant teacher unionism in Chicago during the depression and its relation, or lack of relation, to teacher unionism in other settings. Lyons sees Chicago militancy as related to a strong private sector labor movement in the city, a tradition of teacher unionism that was three decades old, acceptance of labor by school administrators and city political elites, and the greater social freedom that large systems allow, not by design but by default. He goes on to see militancy as a largely big city phenomenon that was not repeated in non-urban regions of the country. Lyons knows more about Chicago teacher unionism in the Depression and after than any other scholar I know, and his conclusions are on target. Yet they don’t really explain why teacher unionism developed differently in Chicago than in other cities such as New York before the Depression, during it, and after it. Further, Lyons is relatively lax in relating union development to the Depression itself as an economic and political phenomenon, the focus of the editors and several other contributors.

Other American-oriented chapters include the already referred to treatment of New York City school murals by Michele Cohen, the election to and career on the school board during the Depression of black Clevelander Mary Martin by Regennia Williams, the educational reaction to the Depression in South Carolina by Edward Janak, the depiction of one-room country schools in Farm Security Association-sponsored photographs by Eugene Provenzo, the rise and almost fall of kindergartens in the Depression by Kristen Nawrotzki, and 1930s curriculum reform in Virginia schools by co-editor David Hicks and Stephanie Van Hover. If there is any common theme in these diverse topical treatments, it is the presence of something

positive in every instance, a positive that, if not caused by the Depression itself, was not thwarted by it. Janak makes the greatest claim for positive results, arguing as follows:

The “accepted wisdom” regarding education during the Great Depression was that of declining opportunity and loss in funding. South Carolina proves that this was not the case. Overall, the effects of the New Deal programs in South Carolina’s educational system were extensive and far-reaching. Schools continued their transformation during this period into a new system of public education. While the improvements were not equitable for white and African-American students, both made positive gains in educational opportunities. (p. 148)

Three other chapters belong in the optimist camp of interpreting the educational impact of the Depression. Cohen’s depiction of school murals in New York city stresses the civilization “motif” of a few of them, arguing that it “promoted a global approach to understanding history and contemporary society” (p. 77). She does not, however, follow up on the issue of murals in subsequent decades to reinforce, qualify, refute, or otherwise deal with her argument. The chapter on Virginia curriculum reform argues that the Depression provided a golden opportunity for successful curriculum change, designed by leading progressive educators and characterized by a commitment to teacher participation in the process. The acknowledgment that teacher contribution was never as evident as designers wanted pushes the authors to reframe their narrative of success in terms of innovative proposals that were effectively “sold” to teachers and others. The ultimate reaction to the reform that stopped its momentum in the next decade is neither related to economic conditions by the authors nor seen as a criticism of reform success. The discussion of blacks in Cleveland depicts the ascension of Mary Martin to the Cleveland school board, her initial cooperation with the NAACP in fighting segregation in the city’s schools, and her eventual split with that body over issues of strengthening black schools versus integrating the entire system. It judges Martin, and the NAACP, positively, indicating that both orientations were necessary and significant.

The two other US contributions are not as enthusiastic about the beneficial effects of, or during, the Depression as those discussed above. These chapters show, rather, how educators managed to overcome the negative impact of the Depression to accomplish something. Examples here include the preservation of the kindergarten in spite of numerous attacks on it on economic grounds described by Kristen Nawrotzki, and the preservation of rural schooling photographically at the same time that the institution in the photographs (the one-room school) was under attack from progressives by Eugene Provenzo. These two contributors seem, to me, to be more in line with the mainstream historical view of education during the Depression. They do not see it as the source of, or the setting for, overwhelming or important change. Rather, they see how educational actors were able to overcome or successfully combat some of the negative aspects of education in the Depression.

The five chapters on non-US settings include discussions of Germany, New Zealand, Turkey, Brazil, and Egypt. The contribution on Germany, by Charles Lansing, shows how economically induced penalties to teachers taken by the government in the early 1930s,



such as reduced wages and benefits and increasingly difficult working conditions, ironically contributed to the lack of success of Nazi campaigns late in the decade to purge the teaching force of social democrats and other undesirables. Teaching had become unattractive to new entrants at the same time that its existing practitioners clung to their positions, both of which occurred at a time of increasing enrollments that meant further pressure to maintain the existing force. The chapter on Turkey, by Barak Salmoni, sees the Depression as the occasion for an intensification of changes in the direction of consciously economic-oriented schooling that began in the previous decade. Similarly, the chapter on Brazil, by Alberto Gawryszewski and Michael Conniff, sees the Depression as presenting a political opportunity to a newly elected government to implement a series of educational changes, sparked by the education of the leading proponent of change at Teachers College, Columbia University. Political cross currents, however, led to a rise of conservatism and the demise of educational progressivism, and the virtual exile of its leader, until two decades later when, again, liberal to radical political reform presented the opportunity for educational reform. In the New Zealand chapter, by Carol Mutch, the Depression is seen as an economic downturn that provided for draconian cuts in educational provision and in teacher benefits and working conditions undertaken by a Conservative government, followed by a reassertion, under a labour government, of a variety of democratic educational reform provisions that built on changes undertaken earlier in the century. The alternating of conservative and labour governments during the Depression and afterwards, coincided with the fall, and resurrection, of progressive educational provisions and pedagogical changes. Finally, the chapter on Egypt, by Amy Johnson, depicts the Depression as a time of severe economic crisis in an agricultural nation struggling under British hegemony. The struggle provoked numerous reform initiatives one of which, developed in a small village, proved to be pedagogically innovative, economically successful in the short run, serviceable as a model for change in other villages, and remarkably successful in maintaining its place in the long term memory of village inhabitants.

Several points need to be made about these chapters. Like the American chapters, they are about education in one geographical setting, though they often are offered to illustrate national trends. This is a bit of a leap, though it is not made naively by the authors. Each is careful to locate her or his local example in a national context that shows both the singularity of the individual case and the ways in which the case intersected with national forces or policies. Second, these chapters seem to deny the ultimate significance of the Depression by showing how the reforms that occurred in that decade either had roots in circumstances of previous decades or played out similarly, or differently, in subsequent decades. What I mean here is that the causal significance of the Depression, as posited by the editors and either argued for, or taken for granted by, contributors is called into question by contributions which show Depression events that are part of a sequence involving similar, or contradictory, currents in previous or subsequent decades. The Depression was not the cause of the educational circumstances described, but rather a set or circumstances that may have intensified, or short-circuited, or otherwise influenced educational trends that began earlier and/or continued or intensified or resurfaced in later decades. In other words, the Depression era, the economic crisis, was not the cause of educational outcomes. Rather, educational events, institutions, and circumstances that existed outside of the depression years were influenced, but not in any sense determined, by those years and

circumstances. In terms of a school/society relationship, ironically, this book which spent a good deal of time trying to show how educational events were the result of socio/economic circumstances turns out, at least to my mind, to have supported the argument that educational change is not determined by extra educational conditions.

I would turn now to the phenomenon of globalization, as discussed mainly by the editors, but also by a few contributors. Recall that earlier I noted that globalization is a term that allows non-economists to compete with economists in explaining international educational events. The chapter by co-editor Thomas Ewing is the most globally conscious effort in the volume. Ewing shows how American educators such as George S. Counts looked favorably at the “virtues of planning” in Soviet schools in the 1930s as a model for development in American education. While many commentators have shown the limited understanding of Soviet schools exhibited by Counts and other Americans, Ewing argues that their endorsement of Soviet education “makes sense more as a response . . . to the crisis of Depression-era American schools than as an effort to investigate, understand, or explain” Soviet schooling (p. 55). Relating this analysis specifically to globalism, Ewing concludes his chapter as follows: “At a critical moment in the histories of two different systems, the ways that American observers looked at the Soviet Union provide a model of how a global perspective can broaden understanding of the problems and the promise of schooling in modern society” (p. 57). This statement argues for studying other nations’ educational systems as a way to increase understanding of one’s own system. The problem with this argument is that what Counts and others saw in Soviet schools was the benefits of a planning approach that they had already valued before their Soviet experience. That is, they saw, in a sense, what they wanted to see. What would be extremely beneficial, and make Ewing’s argument for globalization much more powerful, is an account of the ways that Soviet schools or educational thought altered Counts’s commitment to planning or any other of his educational views. Until we have such analyses, we can only conclude that a global, actually more precisely a comparative perspective, resonated with Counts and other American students of Soviet education during the Depression as a support mainly for their own previously held views of American schools.

An argument for global significance similar to Ewing’s occurs at the end of the chapter on Turkish education. In that chapter, Barak Salmoni notes that a Turkish advocate of a socio-economic oriented reform of schooling that embraced a nationalist anti-individualism as its abiding ideology noted the similarity of this approach to the frontier thinkers in the US (Counts, Dewey, and others) who also criticized individualism and embraced a more “collective” approach to schooling. This comparison allowed Turkish school reformers to “claim that their educational efforts would firmly establish the Republic [of Turkey] as a modern, scientific state paralleling Western advances” (p. 206). Here what the author does not comment on is the significant difference in degree of the nationalist aspect of the two settings, with the Turks much more committed to the “nation” as the explicit focus and central orienting body of their innovations than their American counterparts. The Brazilian chapter also concludes with an invocation of international significance. Noting the renaissance of the reform commitments of its Depression era progressives in the 1950s and 1960s in Brazil, the authors add that this reform approach also “had an enormous influence among educators throughout the western world.” They then conclude that

“the creative forces unleashed in Brazil during the economic and political crisis of the 1930s continue to inform modern debates about the relationship between schools and society” (p. 260). This is indeed the case. Educational progressivism was an ideology and a commitment to school reform that preceded the Depression, flourished in many settings in that decade, and continued after it to wax and wane in various nations’ schools. A genuinely global account of educational progressivism, however, would have to link the waxing and waning in various nations both to their respective national histories and to developments within the ideology or practice of educational progressivism internationally. This is one tall order and to say that Ewing and his contributors barely scratch the surface of this task is not necessarily to diminish what they have accomplished.

One might add that globalization in this volume suffers from the same elasticity of definition, and application, that it does in most educational discourse. Global education has become a sort of cliché, invoked often to comment on the shortcomings of American schooling at the same time that it purports to be a cure for those shortcomings. The problem is that globalization is so elastic as a concept that it cannot serve as a prescription for, or an antidote to, educational policies and practices. Ewing’s idea of comparing two nations, the USA and the Soviet Union, seems to me to be preferable to clichéd references to globalization. Comparisons need not involve only two nations; they can be expanded to other national contexts. What is important is that the focus of the comparison be specific enough that some sort of judgment can be made about the phenomenon under study in how ever many nations involved that leads to a more general judgment about that phenomenon. While this is a long way from the virtues of globalization, as trumpeted by their educational advocates, it seems to be something that is doable, and worthy of being done, for the sake both of educational practice and the study of that practice. In short, I would hope for a renaissance of genuinely comparative educational studies as the best possible scholarly and practical outcome of the current fad of global education.

The curricula that show up in the various chapters of this volume seem worthy of at least brief discussion. There is a general association of some version of progressive education with reform during the Depression in most, though not all, of these chapters. Yet, what is meant by progressivism varies substantially. Nawrotzki sees it as child development theory that leads to kindergarten and other early childhood educational approaches, Salmoni sees it as education that is consciously related to changes in the economy and preparation of individuals for those changes, co-editor Hicks and his co-author see it as a statewide approach to pedagogical change that involves teachers, and several other contributors see it as an emphasis on educational planning which comprises also a stress on the collective as opposed to the individual. This is a variety of definitions. I am not disturbed by this variety, however. One has only to turn to Lawrence Cremin’s now classic account of American educational progressivism, *The Transformation of the School*, to see a dazzling variety of educational changes woven into a (questionably) coherent narrative of their success and failure. Rather than seek a narrowing of definition, I would advocate studies that compare the American developed notions of educational progressivism with the studies of “new education” that have been developed by European and Latin American scholars. Again, this type of comparative study seems to me to be preferable to the rather easy, but also often empty, invocation of the virtues of global education. Genuinely comparative education, it



seems to me, is the best way to accomplish some of the objectives of educational internationalism, and educational progressivism, that are at best partially realized in the volume under review here.

The February, 2006 issue of the international journal *Paedagogica Historica*, is a welcome example of what I see as a productive, international lens on progressive education. The journal contains fifteen articles, chosen from over two hundred papers written for the 2005 meeting of International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE), in Geneva, Switzerland. The theme of the conference, and the journal issue, is “New Education: Genesis and Metamorphoses.” The journal [and ISCHE] is multilingual, with five of the fifteen articles and the introduction written in French, and one in German. This raises the issue of language proficiency for American scholars, most of whom, like me, probably like some of the contributors to *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History*, and like many if not most readers of this review, are woefully incompetent in any language other than English. Yet we blithely go along in our narrow linguistic universe, ignoring the work of serious scholars in languages other than our own, and not taking the trouble to learn what that work is about. If we are to generate genuinely global perspectives about progressive education, or any other educational topic, how can we do it without acknowledging and addressing the ignorance of important work caused by our own language deficiencies?

One article in the special issue of *Paedagogica Historica* on the New Education raises another important question about progressive education, one which those of us in the curriculum field, or in foundations of education, need to take seriously. The article is entitled “Progressivism, Control, and Correction: Local Education Authorities and Educational Policy in Twentieth-century England,” and is written by two historians from the University of Birmingham, Ian Grosvenor and Kevin Myers. The abstract of the article, printed on its beginning page, gives a précis of the argument and suggests its importance. It discusses “the development of a progressive education policy in late nineteenth- and early twentieth century Birmingham, UK. This policy extended access to schooling, attempted to ameliorate the effects of poverty and ill health and made important innovations in school curricula, architecture, and administration. These were real and important achievements, but they were in many respects ambiguous ones. These ambiguities can be read in the vast set of records created that the innovators were both responsible for and dependent on. For the knowledge created and stored as a result of educational progressivism was also used as a means of surveillance and as a method for monitoring and disciplining urban populations” (p. 225). While the issue of record keeping may not translate readily to a US context, the matter of ambiguities in progressive education clearly does. Discussions by historians of education of administrative progressivism in the US raise comparable questions about the social benefits of progressive education that mark the phenomenon as equally ambiguous in the US. Yet, many of us in professional education circles accept the doctrines of progressive education uncritically.

Similarly, when those of us who work in schools, departments, or colleges of education advance some contemporary version of progressive education, usually some form of student-centeredness, as a critique of the narrow subject matter approach of the traditional curriculum, we ignore the argument that all students deserve to study that subject matter, just as the best students do so. Instead, we abet a

tendency in professional education, and in public education to a lesser extent, to shy away from subject matter in preference to chasing the latest fad in interdisciplinary study, or in some sort of vocationally oriented curricula, or in the latest version of multicultural education, and leave the traditional studies for the elite students. Clarence Karier once wrote that educational progressivism was not necessarily an ally of political progressivism, and suggested that the two in fact were largely in opposition. Concentrating on progressive curricular and pedagogical changes provides a welcome substitute for the much more difficult job of pursuing progressive social and political changes. It was this understanding that animated the best progressive in the 1930s, who understood that educational change was counterproductive unless it was accompanied by, or embedded in, social and political change.

While I may seem to have drifted from the topics covered in Education and the Great Depression, I believe that I have raised two issues that need to be considered by all of us in the fields of educational studies, including several of the contributors to that volume. It is long past the time to accept progressive education uncritically as the all purpose answer to educational, and social, problems, domestically and/or internationally. It is time to subject the beliefs of those of us who work in professional education to the same critique that we apply to those who don't.