

Standardization, Assessment, and Globalization

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of globalization in standardized education, specifically assessment and curriculum. Additionally, it discusses the ways that domestic educational policy fits into a global context. This information is organized into three sections: International Organizations, Outcomes-Driven Policy, and Privatization. The United States does not exist in isolation; the influence of foreign affairs permeates every facet of our lives, which is precisely why it is necessary for American educators to become aware of their role in a globalized world.

Keywords: *educational globalization, educational standardization, educational assessment, privatization in education*

Introduction

The turn toward testing for accountability in recent years is not strictly limited to the United States. There has been a global transformation in not only types of assessments but in both quality and outcomes. Traditionally, the high-stakes attached to exams determined students' academic and career paths (Smith, 2014, p. 5). It could be argued that the outcomes remain quite similar today. With federal legislation that mandates standardized assessments, and the harsh consequences attached, the stakes are high for children, teachers, administrators, and public education systems in the United States. While such policies are specific to the US, they foundationally reflect global trends and phenomena.

Globalization, as defined by Waks (2006) is:

The process whereby market exchange relationships and multi-media telecommunications capabilities spread from the core of economically and technologically developed nations to other regions of the world, facilitating the flow of goods, services, and people across national borders, this process being stimulated by, while in turn reinforcing, an image of the world as a unified whole and humanity, despite its cultural diversity and continuing differentiation, as a single global society, while also generating resistance and violent opposition from those excluded from this imagined global society. (p. 414)

As these processes continue to advance and permeate life, it becomes urgent for educators to understand their roles in globalization. The economic, political, and cultural interconnectedness of people and places is more pervasive than ever before (Zhao, 2009, p. 101). The United States does not function as an entity in isolation; issues within and between countries around the world profound effect global life.

As Stiglitz (2003) points out, “globalization itself is neither good nor bad” (p. 20). However, the effects of this phenomenon have brought environmental, political, and financial crisis for some while breaking down barriers, reducing debt, and improving health conditions for others (Stiglitz, 2003, p. 8-10). The ways in which international organizations and regimes of power have enacted and implemented policies indicate who will benefit and who will suffer. Groups such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank are significant economic contributors to globalization. To most educators in the United States, these institutions may seem distant and unconnected to their practice. However, the political and economic actions taken by nations around the world have domestic ramifications for teachers through the corporatization of public schools and mandated reforms.

This paper will explore the role of globalization in standardized education, specifically assessment and curriculum. Additionally, I will discuss the ways that domestic educational policy fits into a global context. To organize this information, I created three overlapping yet distinct sections: International Organizations, Outcomes-Driven Policy, and Privatization followed by brief closing ideas.

International Organizations

The parallels between global regimes of power and domestic policies and practices are remarkable. The functions of policies enacted by organizations like the IMF and The World Bank hold a striking resemblance to the United States Federal Legislation Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which is the most recent reauthorization of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA was enacted as part of the Johnson Administration’s War on Poverty campaign. “The law’s original goal, which remains today, was to improve educational equity for students from lower income families by providing funds to school districts serving poor students” (Atlas, 2015, p. 1). According to Stiglitz (2003) the IMF is a public institution established with taxpayers’ money; it was founded on such beliefs as: (1) international pressure is necessary for countries to have more expansionary economic policies, (2) collective action at the global level is needed to ensure economic stability, and (3) markets do not work well (p. 12). The originating principles of both the IMF and ESEA have transformed from humanitarian to neoliberal in nature.

Another promotion of globalization is through the international agreement Education for All (EFA), which was launched by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This program resembles the many reauthorizations of ESEA. To begin, EFA initially set six goals encouraging all countries to adopt policies resulting in basic educational standards (Goldstein, 2004, p. 7). The current legislation, ESSA is built upon the Obama administration’s six principles for reform and it also affirms previous No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will continue to guide learning in America’s classrooms (Executive Office of the President, 2015, p. 8-10). Next, EFA has set up targets for achieving goals by certain dates, which is reminiscent of Clinton’s Goals 2000 (Goldstein, 2004, p. 7). Additionally, the EFA achievement of targets is linked to financial aid. The World Bank established a ‘Fast Track Initiative’ for selected ‘high-risk’ countries to receive aid in return for achieving specific policy reforms (Goldstein, 2004, p. 12). Similarly, in 2009 the Common Core initiative, which is a set of math and English/Language Arts standards and aligned standardized tests, was adopted fully by 46 states and three US territories through US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s Race to the Top (RTTP). The following quote is Dunkin’s promotion of RTTP

to the National Governors Association (NGA):

More than \$4 billion of this money has been reserved for the competitive Race to the Top grants, which present the nation's governors with an extraordinary opportunity to make bold reforms in education. In a budget year when most states are struggling just to keep education funding stable, the Race to the Top funds provide governors who are ready to push for innovative education reform with much-needed funding. (Schneider, 2015, p. 165)

States found themselves with no choice other than to commit to the criteria stipulated by the RTTT competition; CCSS and corresponding assessments were developed and administered by one of two approved consortia (Schneider, 2015, p. 164). The two multi-state consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), won federal startup grants (respectively, \$160 and \$170 million) to develop Common Core tests that meet this requirement. Likewise, the EFA concerns both curriculum change and intensive assessment. Goldstein (2004) explains, "curriculum development bodies, testing and examination bodies and textbook publishers are all likely players and these almost inevitably will be those with the most international experience" (p. 12). Furthermore, the great technical expertise that will be necessary to create curriculum materials and assessments are expected to reflect the global interests of such corporations (Goldstein, 2004, p. 12).

Another comparison between global and domestic groups involves whose voices are heard. Stiglitz (2003) notes that the representatives at the IMF are finance ministers and central bank governors; these individuals are usually closely linked to the financial community (p. 19). "The policies of the international economic institutions are all too often closely aligned with the commercial and financial interests of the advanced industrial countries" (Stiglitz, 2003, p. 20). Similarly, the NGA established a "national nonprofit organization allied with states and business interests that could serve as a clearing house for information and research on standards and assessment tests" (Schneider, 2015, p. 21). This organization became known as Achieve Inc. and eventually was responsible for the idea of the CCSS.

In 2008, the NGA and Achieve produced the report "Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education." Through a neoliberal lens, this report clearly identified the need for a single set of K-12 standards. Schneider (2015) writes,

The primary gist of the report is the now-too-familiar panic line that American education needs a test-driven overhaul in order to keep up globally. The underlying message is: "We need to see what other nations are doing because we think we can isolate what causes them to score higher than us on international tests. Then, we can pay attention to select issues, the ones that the experts named in this report perceive as those that produce higher test scores and graduation rates. By emulating select qualities, we are trying to beat other nations in the international tests, which will prove our superiority and therefore translate into national economic security." (p. 71)

The neoliberal, competitiveness-driven reform agenda of ESSA serves business interests with little regard for whom the policy was intended. Policy makers and politicians draw strong connections between the competitive standing of a nation in the global marketplace and its educational system (Valverde, 2014, p. 576). To that end, educational systems need to be measured and judged for quality of outcomes.

Outcomes-Driven Policy

Stiglitz (2003) cites the mantra of the IMF as “accountability and judgment by results” (p.30). This sentiment is echoed throughout education reform initiatives around the world. Valverde (2014) names the many domestic and global agencies, as well as international regimes, as “radical advocates of education,” that advocate for schools to accept internationally created definitions of educational quality, and making those definitions a leading focus of policy (p. 576). As such regimes continue to expand and infiltrate educational systems worldwide. It becomes essential for teachers to understand not only the prevalence of such regimes, but also the reasons the ways, and reasons why, they enact these policies. Smith (2014) reports, “that between the years 1995 and 2006 the number of countries worldwide that participated in an annual national testing programs more than doubled from 28 to 67. As of 2006, 81% of developed countries and 51% of developing countries have conducted at least one national test” (p. 4).

Rapid adoption and implementation of standardized assessments is problematic in terms of social responsibility. Just as Stiglitz (2003) highlights the importance of considering the political, social, and historical context of a country, when executing an economic program, the same acknowledgement should be given to educational assessment (p. 186). Standardization attempts to remove individuality and diversity while concurrently promoting a dominant ideology. Goldstein (2004) addresses one of the most concerning issues with international testing and comparisons as problems of translation and cultural specificity. Some items on such assessments are culturally or educationally specific and exact translations are impossible, therefore the usefulness of the testing instrument is brought into question (p. 9).

Eferakorho (2006) cites three types of reform: competitiveness, finance, and equity-driven as responses from the education sector to changes in the world economy. (1) Competitiveness-driven reforms whereby quality is measured mainly by student achievement; (2) Finance-driven reforms mostly driven by international organizations and regional alliances, like the IMF and The World Bank; and, (3) Equity-driven reforms are designed to promote equality of educational opportunities typically through economic opportunities. Eferakorho (2006) posits NCLB as an equity-driven reform in theory, and competitiveness-driven, as well as finance-driven reform, in practice (p. 255-256). Competition is a dominant theme in standardization and assessment ideology as “knowledge is the most valued commodity in the global economy” (Eferakorho, 2006, p. 260).

In many fields, economic and education policy to name two, ideology has replaced science (Stiglitz, 2003, p. 230). “Ideology provides a lens through which one sees the world, a set of beliefs that are held so firmly that one hardly needs empirical confirmation. Evidence that contradicts those beliefs is summarily dismissed” (Stiglitz, 2003, p. 222). This notion is precisely why, despite educational improvement especially for marginalized groups, standardization and high-stakes testing persist 33 years after *A Nation at Risk*. Commitment to a testing and accountability ideology too often requires dismissal of practical knowledge and evidence to the contrary. Smith (2014) speaks to this idea in a somewhat different and perhaps conflicting manner through his discussion of ‘Faith in Science’ as an element of the emerging world culture to provide justification for testing for accountability systems. Smith (2014) posits science as an inevitable position, which increases the value placed upon education systems that use test scores to objectively and correctly measure student knowledge. Further, “the swelling of science production is often called for by policymakers and practitioners who believe science to be an objective arbiter of truth” (p. 13). Whether

standardization and assessment are viewed through Stiglitz's or Smith's perspectives the fundamental ideas are the same. Believing in the principles of the global education reform movement as absolute truths in the face of opposition is both naïve and ignorant.

Data is easily manipulated to meet the needs of those whose interests are served. Stiglitz (2003) proposes this type of data negotiation to serve particular interests occurs within the IMF (p. 232). Valverde (2014) refers to "data inspired speculation" as the ways in which international programmers collect data, identify positive trends, and infer "lessons" to be promoted as policy paradigms (p. 586). This universal application is taken out of context and applied without regard for the groups and individuals affected. Again, environmental and cultural characteristics vary greatly, without such consideration assessment practices are invalid and unreliable.

The shift toward testing for accountability through quality of outcomes is a global phenomenon. When educational systems do not meet set standards, goals, or targets, enforcing agents invoke strict consequences. These ramifications come in several forms, including revoking assistance and/or aid, heavy sanctions, and privatization.

Privatization

The massive expansion of globalization accompanied the spread of neoliberalism under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, in the United Kingdom, and Ronald Reagan, in the United States. Both shifted policy goals from welfare protections and full employment to low inflation and economic growth when approaching the challenges of globalization. Additionally, Thatcher and Reagan wanted to "introduce market efficiencies by encouraging entrepreneurship, privatizing or deregulating firms, and contracting out or privatizing government services" (Waks, 2006, p. 417). Certainly, the privatization of public education in the United States was influenced by the Reagan administration. In 1983 the National Commission on Education issued the report, *A Nation at Risk*. In this study it was argued that in comparison to other industrialized countries, schools in the United States were performing unsatisfactorily, and the United States was in danger of losing its global superiority. The agency recommended that states develop higher standards and conduct assessments to hold schools accountable for reaching those standards. These accountability measures became known as high-stakes tests (Amrein & Berliner, 2002, p. 1).

Stiglitz (2003) argues that competing private industries and firms can function more efficiently than the government as long as critical requirements are met prior to privatization (p. 54). In American public education privatization is taking the form of charter programs and school choice. Schools, and an abundance of social programs, are outsourced to private corporations and businesses based upon the belief that they will work more proficiently. Smith (2014) explores this idea,

The long-term societal effect of treating education as a market, concerned primarily with private returns, is a reduction in public spending on social services, such as education and health. These reductions may be partially ameliorated by increased private support, accelerating the movement toward privatization. (p. 20)

Students have been commodified and used as pawns in the game of business and privatizing public education specifically through the implementation of standardized curriculum and corresponding high-stakes exams.

The international education powerhouse—Pearson—began as a construction company in 1844 and evolved into an acquisition company focusing on publishing, international media, and education. Between 2009 and 2011 Pearson Charitable Foundation paid one of the owners of the CCSS, the Council of Chief State School Officers, \$540,000. As one of two CCSS assessment consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers awarded Pearson the contract (\$240 million per year) to develop the PARCC test, despite their well-established history of testing errors. As developers of this test, they inevitably gained the credibility to design curriculum and professional development that align to the test (Schneider, 2015, p. 175-189). Stiglitz (2003) discusses privatized monopolies, like Pearson, in opposing terms: (1) privatized monopolies, without regulation, exploit consumers, and (2) privatization with regulation, corporate restructuring, and governance generates growth (p. 220). While Pearson would likely claim it is regulated by governmental control, the company arguably exploits the schools and districts that have adopted the CCSS and PARCC as an assessment tool.

George Bush’s NCLB “became the first national framework linking standards, assessment, and accountability” (Smith, 2014, p. 9). Schools were to be evaluated on their ability to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as shown through the use of student scores on standardized tests. Those schools that did not meet AYP for three consecutive years were subject to sanctions, restructuring, and further reform efforts (Schneider, 2015, p. 16-19). The threat of sanctions and withheld aid is reflective of the IMF liberalization practice (Stiglitz, 2003, p. 62). Just as schools in low-income areas find it necessary to adopt private-interest federal reforms to obtain financial assistance, so do countries in crisis feel they have no choice but to accept the terms established by the IMF.

Looking Ahead

“Testing for accountability is viewed as a common solution to educational problems around the world, and an important part in the global education compact, or ‘global education reform movement’” (Smith, 2014, p. 10). Standardized testing measures, like the PARCC, are not only arbitrary and biased, but are also inaccurate and unreliable for a variety of reasons. As assessment for accountability becomes more prevalent, the narrowing of curriculum through standardization is inevitable. These types of reform efforts are enacted through coercive policies and legislation. Whether these reforms are generated by a governmental body or private enterprise, they are undoubtedly conceived through a neoliberal perception of free market ideology.

As I have explored the role of globalization in standardized education and assessment practices, I have drawn upon the prevalent themes of outcomes-driven policy and the promotion of privatization. For educators who feel distanced from the notion of globalization, I hope that the ways in which domestic policies and practices fit into a global context is clear. There are unquestionable parallels between groups responsible for the promotion of globalization, such as the IMF and The World Bank, and American policies and legislation such as NCLB, ESSA, and RTTP.

As members of a global society, educators must understand their roles in globalization. We are responsible for educating our youth within systems that are often unjust, unrealistic, and bias. The information I have presented here, should give teachers the opportunity to reflect upon their own practice and institutions. Specifically, teachers need to explore the foundations of national and local policies and reforms that mandate standardization and assessment, as these are a major part of the corporatization of public education, which is an aspect of globalization. While I

cannot tell educators what they could or should do with this knowledge, I can share my personal and professional growth as a result.

To begin, as I researched global regimes of power the similarities to domestic policy were striking. Understanding the current reforms that I have been working with as a public school teacher as the global phenomena they are, helped me formulate my opinions regarding what globalization is and how my school, my students, and I are affected. Additionally, studying the corporatization of public education as a global interest was important for me to reflect upon. As teachers, having the ability to recognize corporatization as a product of globalization, allows us to accept or resist such practices that reflect this business ideology. Furthermore, viewing the global movement and foundations of standards and their assessments in the United States, helped my personal teaching philosophy evolve.

The most important ideas I have taken away from my research of globalization relate to my students. Over the years, I have seen my students suffer through mandated standards, curriculum, and tests, as they have been commodified in the public education system. I need to work diligently to counteract punitive and biased reforms in my own classroom. Some of the ways I do this are through:

- (1) Personal Reflection: I am constantly thinking about my role as an educator, my practice, and the needs of my students.
- (2) Research: Every federal, state, or local reform and initiative that I am required to participate in is questioned and researched until I fully comprehend and can make my own judgment for my students and myself.
- (3) Student Choice: My elementary classroom allows ample opportunity for students to make choices in their learning; from center activities to reading material, to writing prompts. I understand and appreciate the individuality of every learner and choice helps my students build their autonomy as active participants in the classroom.
- (4) Student Voice: I want students in my classroom to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions with their peers and myself. We take time to share, listen, and offer feedback to each other daily, even (especially) when we have opposing views. I believe the practice of choice promotes community as well as both student agency and confidence.

The information presented is intended to help educators both gain a better understanding of globalization and also understand how and why global phenomena should be important to them. As I continue to develop as a teacher, I must work more assiduously to assist my students in adopting a global perspective in their thinking and developing a sense of global citizenship.

As citizens of the globe, they need to be aware of the global nature of societal issues, to care about people in distant places, to understand the nature of global economic integration, to appreciate the interconnectedness and interdependence of peoples, to respect and protect cultural diversity, to fight for social justice for all, and to protect planet Earth—home for all human beings. (Zhao, 2009, p. 113)

The US does not exist in isolation; the influence of foreign affairs permeates every facet of our lives, which is precisely why it is necessary for educators to become aware of their role in a globalized world.

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