

Classroom Discipline: Another example of world-system convergence?

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Abstract

In the broad field of comparative and international education, substantive lines of research have developed in recent decades that describe and explain similarities in educational systems' structures, policies and practices globally. In this paper, I begin with an overview of what are described as 'world culture' and 'world-systems' approaches, as explanatory frameworks for convergence in educational systems. Immanuel Wallerstein's work is elaborated in some detail for two primary reasons: 1) it's long-standing focus on both the transition of the capitalist world-system toward an uncertain but potentially more just, democratic and equal future, and 2) the potential for education to positively contribute to this transition via the reconceptualisation of knowledge and preparation of citizens for this task. I then examine some limited comparative literature on national case-studies to illustrate points of general convergence with respect to the concept of student discipline in general, and the capacity for local agency within world-system level constraints. This global-local dialectic provides space for human agency to influence the transition of our current world-system, raising questions about how school and classroom discipline policy in particular might contribute to such projects.

World culture accounts of (national and local) educational phenomena

In the field of comparative and international education a major line of research developed from the 1970s that, in its comparative analyses, focuses on explanatory accounts of educational phenomena beyond the local / national level. Empirical and theoretical work describing a universal or 'world culture' of education, recently articulated by Jones (2007) as the "global architecture of education" (p. 325), has been dominant in the field. The focus here is on how educational structures and ideas are diffused, adopted, transferred to nation-states across a the globe. Baker and LeTendre (2005) stress that the concept of a world culture is inherently and unavoidably dynamic, bound up in the concept of schooling as a global institution across multiple contexts. While local, regional and national factors will almost inevitably shape its manifestation; they argue that "the basic image of a school – what it is and what it should do – is commonly defined in the same way globally" (p. 9).

Baker and LeTendre (2005) offer a concise review the work of the so-called neo-institutionalists, associated with Stanford University. Their research documents the movement in systems of mass education, over time, toward a universal or standardised approach to the organisation of schooling, curriculum design and content, and teaching, learning and assessment (see for example Boli, Ramirez, & Meyer, 1985; Boli & Ramirez, 1986; Meyer, 1980, 1994; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997; Meyer & Hannan, 1979; Ramirez & Boli, 1987). An important feature of this approach is that it locates causation for the spread of "homogenous mass education [systems]" (Boli, et al., 1985, p. 151) across national boundaries, within vastly different socioeconomic and political contexts, in the realms of a world culture. This world culture is said to be diffused, in part, through nation-states participation in international governmental and non-governmental organisations. For example, focusing on the general process and aspects of modern state formation within the world-system, Meyer et al. (1997) note that "functional justifications of schooling are

rarely questioned,” regardless of evidence contradicting them (p. 149). A world culture perspective views the spread of mass school education as a part of the global spread of modern state forms and state institutions, based on global cultural assumptions about these institutions including a core function of creating members of the modern state.

Contemporary research focusing on the further spread of mass education globally, particularly that either achieved or aspired to under the banner of Education for All (EFA), linked to the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, has drawn heavily on this general approach. Chabot (2003) for example documents the emergence and spread of the EFA agenda itself via international organisations and sponsored EFA conferences. Critical work like that of King (2007) has examined the nature and content of what is envisaged as ‘education for all’, its development through various international bodies and conferences, and the resultant ways in which its achievement is to be measured. In both cases, the focus is on how an identifiable world culture can account for the take up of mass education (for all) by diverse nation-states across the globe, to a significant extent through their participation in a range of international organisations.

World-systems accounts of (national and local) educational phenomena

An alternative world-systems approach to national educational reform has been advanced by scholars like Ginsburg et al. (1990) who underscored the importance of the location of the nation-state within the hierarchy of the capitalist world-economy. Their approach highlighted the associated conflict between and within states involved in the unequal form of capitalist socioeconomic organisation. This might involve a conditioning or constraining influence on the content and enactment of educational policy and reform linked to the political economy of capitalism. For example, conflict emerges from peripheral states’ exploitation by the centre or core, with direct implications for a State’s national production and economic development. This in turn has consequences for internal or national conflict and struggle. In this sense, the point of distinction with respect to the issue of conflict is closely tied to the role given to world economic conditions, processes and constraints. Attention is also given here to the influence of international non-governmental organisations and other international agencies over national systems and policy. A world-systems approach, however, is more likely to highlight the political and economic interests represented by international organisations like the World Bank, IMF, multinational corporations and other United Nations bodies (see especially Boli & Thomas, 1997; and Ginsburg, et al., 1990, pp. 486-89). At the extreme level, this extends to analyses of the direct imposition of policy via international agencies, as a condition of loans.

A key point of distinction between these broad approaches then is on the question of primary causation at the world or global level. This is well illustrated in the assertion of Boli and Thomas (1997) that the world culture perpetuates the idea that “Mass schooling is necessary for national [social and economic] development; therefore, Malaysia and Paraguay must have schools” (p. 173). Work like this cites the impact of a shared concept of mass schooling as a pre-requisite for national development, linked to the dominance of human capital theory globally, and its influence of a range of social policies. The spread and take up of such concepts, however, is attributed primarily to a world culture, rather than the economic interests implicit within such conceptions. Ginsburg et al. (1990), on the other hand, affirm that such institutions carry “economic, political, and military power”, and that while educational reform is not simply an automatic, “functional response to the needs of economic elites or of the world capitalist system”, these interests do condition and shape national reform in a dialectical fashion (p. 488).

Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis: The capitalist world-system in transition

Wallerstein's world-systems analysis elaborates the historical development of a single, capitalist world-economy, with a single division of labour across core, peripheral and semi-peripheral states as multiple polities interacting via an inter-state system (e.g. Wallerstein, 1994, 1995). Distinctively for Wallerstein (1995), this world-systems perspective identifies key features of a universal ideology of liberalism, that it is argued encompassed both capitalist and 'real existing socialist' states, and included things like a belief in the universal validity of scientific knowledge underpinning endless linear progress everywhere, led by rational policy makers in strong states. As Wallerstein (1995) notes:

The possibility of the (economic) development of all countries came to be a universal faith, shared alike by conservatives, liberals, and Marxists. The formulas each put forward to achieve such development were fiercely debated, but the possibility itself was not. In this sense, the concept of development became a basic element of the geocultural underpinning of the world-system (p.163).

From this point of view, Wallerstein's theorising provides a case against globalisation accounts of contemporary world conditions that cite unprecedented declines in national sovereignty and autonomy. Such accounts, he argues, are a "gigantic misreading of current reality" (Wallerstein, 2003, p. 45), positing that the processes ascribed to the phenomenon of globalisation are not at all new.

For Wallerstein and other world-systems theorists (e.g Chase-Dunn, 1989; Chase-Dunn & Hall, 1997), the important timeline in a world-systems account is not the rise of globalisation in the late twentieth century (particularly in the post-Soviet period). Rather, it is what Wallerstein describes as the "world revolution of 1968" which involved both opposition to the United States and Soviet hegemony (e.g. popular movements and uprisings in France, Mexico and Czechoslovakia), and "disillusionment with the Old Left in all its forms" (Wallerstein, 2003, p. 50). This marked a crisis in the ideological underpinning of the world-system, the end of the communisms in 1989 being another marker of this secular trend, and so further evidence of the crisis of capitalism as a world-system, rather than its triumph. It is made clear in his work that:

The year 1989 represented the agonizing end of an era. The so called defeat of antisystemic forces was in fact a great liberation. It removed the liberal-socialist justification of the capitalist world-economy and thus represented the collapse of the dominant liberal ideology (Wallerstein, 1995, pp. 250-51).

Thus Wallerstein argues that the 1968-1989 period has seen the decline of liberalism as the common ideological or 'geocultural' underpinning of the capitalist world-system, both reflecting and contributing to the intensification of three secular trends within the system that he argues cannot be resolved without its substantive transformation (Wallerstein, 1998, 2003). These three trends, approaching their limits, are identified as: 1) the tension between historical rises in real wages over the long *durée*, placing pressure on profits while sites for the potential relocation of capital to secure cheap wage labour diminish; 2) pressure on States to simultaneously reduce taxes and increase spending on social spending and on infrastructure; and 3) the pressures associated with environmental costs of production, traditionally externalised by industry, in tension with increasing moves to internalise environmental costs of production back to capital, adding to pressures on the State in taxation, and the profits of capital.

World-systems analysis and the potential for local agency

The critical point here is the political edge in this work, not only locating primary causation for phenomena like mass education within the historical development of a single capitalist world-economy, but raising the potential to impact on its transition toward a more democratic, just and equal alternative system. On the question of agency, this aligns with a broad consensus in the comparative educational literature on the notion of relative autonomy for national systems, schools, and actors within them (e.g. Arnove & Torres, 2003). Writing at the time from a Marxist position, citing world capitalist economic pressures as shaping national educational responses, Dale (1994) for example argued that these world-system level influences were a “matter of constraints and limits rather than determination” (p. 19). Indeed, he cited Andy Green’s (1990) work in support of a perspective with an “emphasis on national specificities (within constraining and limiting parameters over which individual nation-states have little control)” (Dale 1994, p. 22). The point made by Ginsburg et al. (1990) and Dale (1994), was that explanations of national education reform require a world-system level approach that accommodates relatively autonomous local or national level determinants of policy and / or action, situating these specific responses of the nation-state as conditioned or constrained by, and so mediating, the processes and influences of the world-system. Tharp and Dalton (2007) encapsulate this in their conclusion that “the central aspect of universalism is that the best education is culturally realized and thus to a degree localized” (p 65).

World-systems, comparative education and classroom discipline.

There is consideration comparative educational research that that directly addresses, or acknowledges, global convergence in pedagogical practices. A notable example is work documenting the move to student-centred pedagogy. A recent study by Carney (2008), for example, makes a fine-grained analysis of the enactment of learner-centred practice in Chinese governed Tibet. His work highlights the ways in which

Chinese policy-makers and their partners responsible for implementing reforms in regions, counties and classrooms, utilise the international language of progressive pedagogy in ways that fit their particular, localised, culturally-grounded circumstances” (p. 41).

More generally, Grigorenko (2007) attempts to set out a typology for the adoption and adaption of western approaches to education by non-western cultures, describing the take up of western educational paradigms through “triggering by the west” and “reinforcing by the west” (p. 168). Grigorenko’s work is premised on the claim that “it is difficult to find a widespread educational practice that is radically different from the dominant secular educational paradigm of the west” (p.165).

Comparative work dealing directly with the question of classroom discipline, however, is very limited, highlighting the need for further theorising and comparative analysis of the phenomenon. Tabulawa (2003) positions trends toward global educational policy as a disguised form of Westernisation of education imposed on developing countries. This work connects with Tikly (2004) who argues that universal approaches to classroom discipline are part of a “new imperialism”, replacing formerly imposed and “illiberal” forms of control over colonial populations with western knowledge and discipline. Tikly (2004) draws on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality to argue that universal concepts of “development”, and associated knowledge and practices of education to support national development, work against nations’ capacity to authentically set their own educational agenda. In another almost incidental example, Simola (2005) offers an alternative critique of so-called democratic approaches to pedagogical practice. He cites

the conservatism of Finnish teachers and their authoritarian approach to “pedagogical discipline and order” (p. 462) as a potential contributing factor to Finland’s leading performance on international comparative testing regimes like PISA and TIMSS.

Some other critical work can also be found that reasserts the culturally specific character of instruction / pedagogical and assessment practices generally, and their capacity to discipline students in ways that work against non-dominant cultures (e.g. Sternberg, 2007). Irwin, Anamuah-Mensah, Aboagye and Addison (2005) similarly argue through a recent study of Ghana that official and enacted classroom discipline policies are culturally biased, such that local variations to the dominant, universal western approach are needed. What we see here are good examples of national cases identifying and reacting against identified general trends in pedagogical and assessment practice, including the question of classroom discipline. Its potential to function in support of existing unequal relationships between and within nation-states, highlights the potential and call for local action that makes this work for alternative outcomes.

Of particular interest here are studies of educational reform and practice in the former Soviet Union and allied Eastern Bloc countries. This work offers some substantive insight with respect to the question of a world-system level approach to classroom discipline. Mintrop (1996) for example examines the transition from authoritarian socialism to liberal-democratic capitalism in eight schools within the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany). He finds predictable perceptions of declining authority amongst educators who cite increased parental and student authority, and an associated deterioration of student behaviour and discipline. Mintrop’s (1996) shows how teachers failed to fully acknowledge their enhanced authority and autonomy as central State directives and prescriptions were reduced. Most critically, he suggests that despite the democratic transition of society, an official move to student-centred pedagogy, and the associated greater freedoms for students within and outside school, East German teachers demonstrated a consistent concern about student (mis)behaviour, their perceived lack of discipline and an associated lack of teacher control. A common perception of former GDR teachers was that students had “misunderstood the new freedom” undermining their former authority as teachers and educators (Mintrop, 1996, p. 373).

A more recent study by Elliott and Tudge (2007) focused on Russian teachers’ practices in the post-Soviet period, similarly identifies the persistence of their established pedagogical practices in the context of the social and economic transition following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They also document similar concerns amongst teachers about declining social values in the post-Soviet context, with increased individualism, competition, and “the erosion of young people’s morality” (p. 106). These types of concerns would not be out of place at all amongst their counterparts in long-standing liberal-capitalist States. Concerns about student discipline, teacher authority, and misplaced understandings of individual freedoms and rights, are arguably a universal educational phenomenon, albeit with local variations tied to very different national histories and trajectories.

Studies like these document the difficulty of changing teachers’ everyday practice in contexts undergoing substantial social, economic and political change. They also highlight shared concerns about students, and perceptions about student behaviour, morality, social responsibility, individualism, etcetera, that have their direct parallel in non-transitional contexts. In so doing, they contribute to a world-systems reading that identifies some fundamental convergence in policy and practice. The relative ease in which Soviet and GDR teachers continued in their roles, albeit with increasingly frequent references to a nostalgic past and concern about the associated loss of particular values and standards, says something about what Baker and LaTendre (2005) call the basic image of the school globally.

Unthinking classroom discipline?

Wallerstein's work has consistently focused on the long period of transition of the current world-system, and the heightened potential agency in such periods to influence the direction of this transition towards an outcome that is more equal, democratic, and just than current arrangements. As part of this activist critique of capitalism, Wallerstein has written extensively on the structures and development of knowledge within the capitalist world-system. In particular, this work provides a detailed historical account of the development of the two cultures or epistemologies associated with science (nomothetic) and philosophy or humanities (idiographic) (e.g. Wallerstein, 2004, 2006), with particular attention on the development of the social sciences within and across this division (e.g. Wallerstein, 1996). Here Wallerstein makes the repeated case for the opening, rethinking or "unthinking" of the social sciences (Wallerstein, 1996, 1998, 2001), and movement toward the construction of "historical social sciences" with a unified epistemology and accompanying new categories for its analysis.

Wallerstein (2006) draws on Braudel's work to argue for an approach to knowledge that incorporates universal, long-term, and particular, short-term, analyses in a "constant dialectical exchange, which allows us to find new syntheses that are then of course instantly called into question" (p. 49). Rejecting absolute relativist positions towards knowledge, while simultaneously acknowledging the critiques of the construction and function of universal knowledge, Wallerstein describes a unified epistemology as one in which we "universalise our particulars and particularise our universals simultaneously" (p. 49). He thus acknowledges the inherent tension between these articulations of knowledge, but sets out a normative political agenda of generating new, albeit tentative and transient, universals that might contribute to the contemporary transition of the current world-system toward a more equal, just and democratic alternative.

Wallerstein's politicised world-systems analysis, as an approach to comparative work on educational phenomena like classroom discipline raises critical questions for educators committed to such a normative agenda. To what extent can national and local approaches to pedagogical practices, including classroom discipline and associated understandings of democracy and power, contribute to an alternative world-system / world-economy, and its accompanying cultural underpinnings? Can we really promote a more democratic participation by people in systems of governance, for more equal and just distributions of social and economic goods globally, in and through systems of mass education? Can classroom discipline and behaviour management overcome the almost inevitable tension of operating to construct and/or reinforce conceptions of 'others' as just another way of justifying the unequal, but purportedly meritocratic distribution of outcomes and credentials, with major implications for subsequent social and economic life?

A world-systems approach demands a better understanding of social reality (Wallerstein, 2004), but always with an eye on using this knowledge to shape its evolution. The focus is the historical development and operation of the world-system as the primary unit of analysis, but with the capacity for local action / agency to influence the shape of the future world-system in our analyses of and action in our education systems. This work demands our critical analysis of classroom discipline policy and practice, and some unthinking of the knowledge underpinning dominant approaches found in common across the globe. Our disciplining of students will be a crucial factor in the processes of knowledge creation and citizen formation, and so will play a critical role in the historical transition of our world-system.

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