

Pluralism in Education Within the 21st Century

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Abstract: In this text an attempt is being made to provide a brief outline of the key features that the educational policy acquired through its development. At first, its initiation is delineated as an aftermath of the establishment of the Welfare State set up at the end of the Second World War (King A., 1983). Education was protected as a free of charge and inalienable social right for all the citizens without any exception. However, it was centrally directed and bore the characteristics of a corporatist model with only a few organizations being consulted in the educational process. In the 1970's, along with the collapse of Keynesianism, the previous educational model exhausted its usefulness, as the rapid diffusion of information and the prevalence of knowledge marked the beginning of a new post-industrialist era. Gradually the state lost its earliest vigor and the arrival into the scene of new pressure groups transformed the educational milieu in a radical manner. The spread of technology and the multicultural character of communication enabled the exchange of ideas among diverse interests and therefore necessitated the incorporation of distinct voices into the educational procedure.

Key words: educational policies, educational system, pluralism, information society

1. The Historical Development of Educational Policy

As the Second World War came to a close, it was realized by the major political forces that the establishment of the welfare state was the only safe mechanism for safeguarding and consolidating democracy, avoiding the evils of the pre-war economic disasters and social crises. The setting up of a universal educational system was seen as part of a bold attempt to eliminate wider inequalities and promote the wellbeing of the whole population at a time when most European economies were attempting a fundamental reconstruction of the institutions of their states. As far as the educational process is concerned, we witness the erection of a solid educational setting and a rapid increase of the amount of expenditure allocated to pedagogical purposes. Due to the galloping expansion of the capitalist production, the demand for experienced labour rose and education had to respond quickly to the newly-emerging needs of the labour market. A new social contract was signed among the various educational actors which paved the way for the forging of a compact alliance among central actors involved in the implementation of innovative educational policies. The corporatist strategies that ensued were characterized by constant bickering, and contradictions that led to controversies in the decisions taken by the key protagonists. In the negotiations and deals that took place, the state intervened in a discreet way in order to ensure peace. The organs of the government of the day strived to imbue to all the citizens a sense of public spirit in an effort to motivate them to take an active part in the discussion about educational matters and to ensure the legitimacy of the

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political system. In the period that followed, the boundaries separating the main groups responsible for the educational policies chosen, were repeatedly re-shaped and the coalitions' options were altered in order to achieve a realignment of interests. The educational reforms that were initiated arose as responses to a wide range of needs and demands coming from specific groups. Soon it was realized that their contribution was vital for the drawing up of effective planning initiatives in the field of education. It gradually dawned on the main participants that a growing politicization of education was vital for the resolution of long-standing issues. The continuation of the stalemate would bring about the collapse of the pedagogical edifice and in an effort to prevent that imminent threat from harming the building of a consensus, the mediation of state officials was judged as more than necessary (Friedman M., 1982). The provision of a large number of social benefits and crucial services that respected the right of everyone to be eligible to the provision of a universal education, was perceived as an inalienable right that would bolster the democratic consolidation of a liberal society.

During the 1950s and 60s the type of educational policy that prevailed aimed at the fulfillment of the needs and desires of the tormented by the war population and was closely linked with the effort for economic prosperity through industrial production. The attempt to rationalize the economic life of western countries didn't leave unaffected the domain of education. A well-conceived educational model imitated the planning initiatives of the economic sector so as to intervene in the labour market and inculcate the required skills and capabilities to the potential labour force. This came as an immediate response to pressures exerted from the fledgling proletariat of the bustling urban centers. Moreover, a whole cluster of social forces, in the course of time were incorporated into the educational system making it more democratic and tolerant of diverse voices and tastes. Expanding masses of the population were entering education for the first time on the principles of equal opportunities and egalitarianism. This vast project was funded by resources which led to a redistribution of wealth towards the lower strata, followed by a legitimization of newly acquired rights that aimed to the faster diffusion of knowledge. The public nature of education was reinforced with the enactment of policies which prolonged the span of compulsory attendance at schools and demolished the barriers that distinguished between different tiers of education. In this way, the interaction of diverse school networks was facilitated, bringing the entire world of learning closer together. At the same time, the upsurge of productivity along with the ongoing amelioration of living standards allowed for the gentle infiltration of the middle classes into the educational procedure. The phenomenal advance of technological breakthroughs and the widespread use of automation encouraged an upsurge in women's employment in various sectors of the economy. These developments were conducive to an increase in the desire of the youngsters to seek a higher level of education in order to improve their professional perspectives and enjoy more fruitful career opportunities. As a corollary, a centrally-directed form of education was preferred where the state had the task of administering the proposed educational strategies. It induced moderation from the opposed sides of participants and was driven by the pursuit of the equitable redistribution of existing resources and the upgrading of the quality of educative end-products. Despite some signs of openness the state played a decisive role in the rational direction and oversight of the educational function without hesitating to instigate and put forward several bold reforms.

Nevertheless, in numerous cases the vested interests had their wishes imposed on the rest and their rising expectations often clashed and seemed unsuited to the guidelines stipulated by the state bureaucracy. For instance, some measures envisaged by a host of organizations like teachers' unions, intellectual clubs and other instructional groups clashed with the desires of state officials but in the end a consensus was reached in an effort to implement urgent policies. Some local authorities took action to carry out their own plans for boosting the cultural traits of

minorities with diverse language skills. However, the success of their campaigns was short-lived as they backed down under the backlash of nationalism that began to rear its head.

2. The Advent of the Information Society

From the 1970s onwards there seems to be a change of climate in educational practices following the economic oil prices. We should also bear in mind the cataclysmic events on May 1968 when the students and workers demonstrations revealed the serious fallacies of the concept of a continuous economic boost and posed profound dilemmas for the political elites to sort out. The welfare state came under attack due to the failure of economic expansion to fund escalating expenditures. The abrupt outburst a newly coined term under the name of “stagflation” meant a series of fiscal stringencies that upset the dominant framework of economic planning. Financial imbalances accompanied by the dire consequences of the impending recession were a grave impediment to the effort to cultivate useful skills and aptitudes to the burgeoning workforce. As a result, the factor of education suffered dismally as a major fraction of resources were diverted in other directions not related to the transmission of knowledge(Gravaris D. & Papadakis N., 2005). It seemed evident that the entrenched educational pattern had to re-orient its course. It turned away from a model based on taxes to a newly-set one favoring consumption. For the first time a concerted campaign was launched with the target of combating the worst excesses of unemployment. A fundamental transition was initiated from the provision of universal services to a focus on more specific needs of particular groups. Internationally, the acquisition of flexibility and the rapid adaptation to a diversity of tasks was praised according to the necessities of the flow of production. The principle of comprehensive education along with an expansion of training programs afforded an atmosphere ideal for the emergence of a multiplicity of professions.

The advent of insightful technological inventions accelerated the metamorphosis of the work process in industry into a multi-dimensional activity where the genesis of a collective worker who performed several functions would appear valuable for economic growth(Ornstein N. J. & Perlman M., 1991).The latter had to be equipped with a rich endowment of capabilities of communication, co-operation and an energetic drive for learning. The unprecedented proliferation of just-in-time methods gave a new impetus to the interconnection of demand and supply and lead to the swift alteration of intertwined tasks. As far as the upper administrative echelons were concerned there was a tendency for the accumulation of supervisory skills into a limited number of individuals. Consequently, the top-scale personnel should command a wealth of knowledge over a wide array of disciplines. All the knowhow and the multiplicity of techniques stored within the minds of the employees were soon replaced by a radical wave of innovative practices which caused a deep rethinking of education. A revival of interest arose in the fields of entrepreneurship and industry and a direct implication of this was the reappraisal of the way pedagogical teaching was conducted. Once more, practical matters came at the centre of attention as empirical studies offered viable solutions to everyday problems. A commitment was established to a life-long education which meant constant re-training in the acquisition of skills and re-evaluation of the capabilities a person possessed. The content of the subjects taught was altered significantly allowing the trainees more leeway in choosing their syllabus. In mainstream education new policies were introduced with the state holding a key position in the allocation of funds to each school. However, the latter assumed the task of managing their resources and specifying the basic outlines of their curricula. They had the chance to place particular emphasis on the subjects that suited their interests. The main difference with the previous rigid type of education was that a

new kind of versatile and flexible school administration had emerged which could inculcate the right incentives to the pupils. As an outcome they would be able to release their energy and enthusiastically pursue their unique talents to the full.

On the other hand, the charismatic children were given the opportunity to graduate earlier by skipping classes whereas the less talented could prolong their studies. As they lagged behind in theoretical aptitudes they were now entitled through the introduction of apprenticeships to receive a more hands-on form of education in an attempt to learn useful skills that would come in handy later on in life. When confronted with the threat of inequality a few reforms were enacted which afforded supplementary education to those mostly affected by poverty. The setting up of all-day schools had as its aim the public enlightenment of youngsters who worked during the day and outdated teaching equipment was soon replaced with more modern facilities. It was realized that our world consisted of a multi-faceted web of nations, sexual orientations and class cleavages represented by a welter of sub-groups striving to express their incongruous demands and sectorized identities within an all-inclusive educational milieu. Education assumed a new multi-dimensional role of respecting the diverse cultures existing within its womb while safeguarding their rights for self-fulfillment. All the prejudices that favored the dominant elite had to be eliminated and the authorities had to work to maintain a climate of social interaction and involvement of every group to the successful completion of the pedagogical effort.

As P. Drucker has aptly remarked we live in a post-capitalist society where the all-pervasive dissemination of knowledge has permeated the productive mechanism of society (Drucker P.F., 1994). Nonetheless, what distinguishes radically the modern era is a glorification of non-material products and services in sharp contrast to the previous domination of material resources. These are located in remote areas of the planet and spread across a wide spectrum of locations throughout the world. While in the past the possession of knowledge used to be associated with the arid accumulation of individualistic experiences and incohesive pieces of information its purpose today has moved into new pathways. Its central aim emanates from an urge for collaboration and a mutual quest for innovation and creative thinking so as to come up with effective solutions to the issues that affect humanity. Another significant parameter that has accompanied the upsurge of the informational revolution was linked with the declaration of Bologna which laid the groundwork for the elimination of distrust and led to a dedication to partnership among distinct disciplines. They adopted a resolution calling for the formulation of a unified curriculum and the key participants opted for the initiation of common research projects. The latter were perceived as beneficial for the future of European integration and it was stressed that the complex nature of education required the inculcation of a spirit of cooperativeness on the part of the scientific community in order to come to a fuller understanding of the surrounding reality.

Therefore, the broad range of subjects taught at different levels had to be approached from various aspects and viewpoints. The students taking part in the secondary and tertiary education should look into a topic via a poly-prismatic lens of cognition and then try to classify the information received into a general taxonomy. It was deemed necessary at that point to assess the nature of a long list of concepts dealing with disparate areas of study such as political sociology, economic anthropology, etc. By adopting this enlightening process they would be able to broaden their intellectual horizons as far as research was concerned in three important ways. Firstly, a real awareness must be gained of the importance of the essence of life and a realization of the rapid transformations that take place around us. Secondly, a willingness for creativity becomes vital for the improvement of our capabilities for making wise judgements and taking the right decisions. Thirdly, we shouldn't forget that within a democracy a considerable amount of decisions are implemented through the active involvement of the majority of

the population. In that sense, a multifarious educational drive would assume the responsibility of imparting to the potential labour-force an abundance of precious knowledge. The selection of the proper educational tools could enhance the development of our democratic institutions and strengthen the representative structure of our societies. Considering that the primary aim of education relates to the protection of the young generation from the looming threat of unemployment the establishment of course of professional orientation seems to be essential. Their provision becomes a stepping stone to a facile entrance into the labour market and paves their way to the choice of a career path appropriate to their inclinations. Moreover, the experience of life-long education enriches the competences and potentialities of individuals and empowers them to absorb information in an autonomous manner. The coining of the nascent, European concept of education has as its major priority the revitalization of knowledge through the utilization of the latest technological advancements. A case in point is the extensive use of appropriate forms of software. Most readily apparent is the availability of distant, open learning facilities and multimedia networks which generate innovative types of teaching. For the first time the local communities are brought into the picture while remote and isolated areas are connected with the resort to programs based on collaborative initiatives.

3. Pluralism as a Modern Political Concept

The pluralist paradigm came to the fore rather belatedly in comparison with other theoretical models of analysis and its appeal seems to gain ground with the passage of time. In the field of education its degree of receptivity has increased dramatically and its basic tenet amounts to a recognition of diverge groups vying for attention within a democratic educational system. According to the leading proponents of the pluralistic school, power isn't constricted to a few dominant actors but represents the voice of the weaker minorities as well. The state intervenes as an unbiased umpire in order to preserve peace and to placate the grievances expressed by those that feel that have been treated unfairly. It needs the direct involvement of the groups concerned so as to conduct in an effective way its planning strategies for the orderly functioning of the economic mechanism. Carrying out solution-generating public policies has as a precondition the building of a wide consensus among the key participants and those affected by them. Therefore the state assumes the role of the mediator between varying interests in order to promote political stability and work toward the consolidation of the democratic procedure (McFarland A.S., 1969). On their part, the abundance of pressure groups should behave in a responsible way and try to exercise some kind of control over radical recalcitrant members with a view to strengthen the democratic principles of society. More specifically, within the sphere of education it would be wiser if we drew a distinguishing line between those organized interests immediately involved in the pedagogical effort and those participating in an indirect manner. In the first category the key protagonists are teachers' unions, parental organizations, administrative staff associations and student groups. These forces need to give their uncompromising devotion to the formulation of the syllabus that would meet the desires of all participants in the educational process. Therefore actions of mutual adjustment are crucial and a sharing of the burdens of responsibility would be of considerable assistance for the absorption of school graduates to the institutions of tertiary education.

However, other interests take part in the field of education implicitly like governmental institutions, international agencies, employers' associations, trade unions etc. They bring into the debate more particular issues touching topics such as professional orientation, the dissemination in schools of the ideal of voluntarism and other

valuable insights. By inference, the prevailing educational policy that is selected is influenced by the exertion of pressure coming from diverse directions. A broad army of forces vie for the fulfilment of their members' demands. As a case in point we can cite some teachers' associations which shape the outcome of the proposed policies. Moreover, certain parental organizations and pedagogic confederations strive for the rise of their salaries and for the upgrading of working conditions. It is more than evident that a varied assortment of reforms approved and enacted by the Ministry of Education bear the signature of the least legitimized interests in order to acquire a more rational and holistic nature. According to the dominant pluralist doctrines the society benefits greatly from the unceasing formation of new groups their horizontal expansion and the constant diffusion of their authorities. In pluralist theory the educational system is characterized by social interaction. The assiduous bargaining, compromise and controversies among a welter of incommensurable forces in the mapping out of the educational endeavor constitutes the key element in a pluralist image of our world. In this outlook the end result of this struggle is a collective agreement that represents contrasting views and perspectives of our wide-ranging world.

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