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## The History of UNESCO's Lifelong Learning Policy Discourses: A Enduring Social Democratic Liberalist Project of Global Educational Development

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# **The History of UNESCO's Lifelong Learning Policy Discourses: An Enduring Social Democratic Liberalist Project of Global Educational Development**

Keywords: UNESCO, Lifelong Learning, Policy Discourse, Social Democratic Liberalism, Historical Evolution.

## **Abstract**

This article exposes precisely what ideological influences have been situated as authoritative and as marginal within UNESCO's lifelong learning policy discourses over time, periodizing those discourses in terms of their political-economic contexts. As such, analysis reveals UNESCO's continuous commitment to extending social democratic liberalist lifelong learning discourses of global educational development in the interest of global justice. Implications for realizing good policy and global justice, distorted by the current neoliberal capitalism, are discussed in-depth.

## **The Rise of International Organizations in Global Educational Development**

Over the last half century, the fast-growing number of international organizations addressing various global problems has been a salient global phenomenon (Union of International Associations, 2005). The field of global educational development is no exception. Specifically, among many of international bodies, four particular international agencies have been key players in the organizational field of global educational development: the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU) and the World Bank. These organizations have had considerable impact on educational discourses through international discussions and policy initiatives. This impact has promoted two visions of human freedom—one, the freedom of the independent individual to earn by accepting the unrestrained rule of capital and its imposed goals for daily being, and two, the freedom of the community member and others to purposefully grow in pursuit of their own goals by promoting popular rule. Unfortunately, most of these international organizations (i.e., the OECD, the EU, and the World Bank) have worked in favor of the former, thereby strengthening the global hegemony of the developed North over the comparatively underdeveloped South.

UNESCO, the international organization of primary interest in this article, has paved an ideological route towards global educational development different from the aforementioned Northern-centered organizations, supporters of the new globalized political economy of education—i.e. neoliberal educational governance. Founded in 1945, UNESCO has served as an equitable engine of representative democracy and the support for human rights within global educational development. UNESCO, as we will show in this article, has historically sought to resist the unrestrained rule of capital and the redefinition of education as a private good that have reinforced the world-wide dominance of neoliberal ideology. That is, we argue that UNESCO's policy discourse has lent support to popular, global efforts to bring about more democratic educational conditions for all.

However, while UNESCO has been an important agency in the field of global educational development, UNESCO's policy influences on the field have been often estimated as more normative than substantive. This is partly because of UNESCO's lack of legal authority to initiate particular educational programs in its member states, compared to the legal force of the

EU over its member states' education and training policies. Another reason for UNESCO's normative policy stances on global educational development is its restricted financial capacity relative to that enjoyed by other, similar international agencies (e.g., the World Bank). At the same time, however, its normatively-driven policy discourses (e.g., those promoting international peace guided by humanistic and scientific approaches) seem to preserve its organizational legitimacy, reflecting a stronger moral grounding than that enjoyed by other international agencies. We argue that this is one of the reasons why UNESCO survived the so-called "UNESCO crisis" (Jones, 2005, p. 66), which will be discussed later. Based on our investigation of UNESCO's organizational history in general and lifelong learning policy discourses in particular, it seems UNESCO's normatively-driven policy discourses—primarily pursuing social democratic liberalist policy discourses of global educational development as they did—were the *way of* as well as the *reason for* UNESCO's existence.

Therefore, we believe that inquiring into the history of UNESCO's efforts is important for realizing good policy and resting global justice from today's dominant ideology of neoliberal capitalism. We focus particularly on an ideological analysis of UNESCO's policy discourses as a means of unmasking how the current discourses of lifelong learning advanced by other Northern-based organizations are trapped in perverse, neoliberal capitalist discourses. To this end, we employ policy-as-discourse as our analytical framework. Additionally, we use historical periodization as a way for discerning authoritative and subordinate ideologies embodied in the two most historically important policy texts issued by UNESCO: the Faure and Delors Reports.

### **Theoretical Framework: Policy as Discourse**

We accept that policy is discourse because each is "a politically, socially and historically contextualized practice or set of practices" (Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004, p. 3). Thus contextualized, policy does not neutrally express information and ideas as a means of establishing a "correct interpretation" (p. 60), often functioning as a "technology of control" (p. 14). At the same time, because it is contextualized politically, socially, and historically, policy can let us "see relations between [an] individual policy text and wider relations of the social structure and political system" (p. 71). As discourse, policy is a social practice embodying a particular political and ideological stance. At the same time, policy is an intertextual, unstable means for creating social change because it is materially tied to lived reality through the processes of production, interpretation and distribution. For policy analysts who adopt a discourse perspective, the view of lived social reality as flexible, distributed, and contested makes highly suspect the conventional practices of providing specific policy recommendations or advocating particular policies on the basis of measurable policy effects on various populations. The primary purpose of policy-as-discourse analysts, then, is to study the language of policy texts to reveal "the values, assumptions and ideologies underpinning the policy process" (Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004, p. 72). In doing this, policy-as-discourse analysis also focuses on exploring "the material conditions within which such [policy] texts are produced" and "the institutional practices which they are used to defend" (p. 72).

Therefore, in using policy-as-discourse, we commit to revealing the discursive constructions of actors within UNESCO, in association with particular politico-economic conditions, through investigating the agency's principal lifelong learning policy discourses. Furthermore, we link policy discourses to particular ideologies since ideology directs who we are and what we do, although we retain the capacity to revise our identities, the institutions and discourses they inhabit and extend. Therefore, by uncovering what kind of ideology has been

embedded in educational policy discourses in general and lifelong learning discourses in particular, we can reveal lifelong learning discourse's assumptions in the interest of realizing good policy and supporting social justice. In our analysis, we pay attention to four dominant, modern Western ideologies influencing UNESCO's lifelong learning policy discourse: classical liberalism, neoliberalism, social democratic liberalism, and (neo) Marxism.

### **The Periodization of UNESCO's Lifelong Learning Policy Discourses**

The first period of UNESCO's lifelong learning discourse (late 1960s to early 1990s) ideologically blended classical liberalism, radical democrats' ideas derived from Marxism, and social democratic liberalism. Since the concept of lifelong learning articulated by UNESCO inherently reflects the zeitgeist of modern Western European society, the historical development of UNESCO's lifelong learning policy discourses internalized European liberalist ideas. In particular, the Faure Report was partly but inherently grounded in classical liberalism, highlighting a commitment to individuals' full realization of their potential and interests through lifelong education. The Faure Report emphasized individuals' self-learning supported by more flexible and diversified educational systems: "there is no real *freedom of choice* unless the *individual* is able to follow *any path* leading to *his goals without being hindered* by formalised criteria" (UNESCO, 1972, p. 188, italics ours). In addition to being influenced by classical liberalist ideas, and consistent with the political climate of the late 1960s, lifelong learning discourse was also influenced by radical social democrats (e.g., Freire and Illich) and the so-called "maximalists" (e.g., Faure, Lengrand, Dave, Suchodolski, and Gelpi) who viewed "learning throughout life" as a master concept describing the ideal, overall process of building a learning society. In terms of the ideological spectrum of education, the radical social democrats were politically positioned to and somewhat silenced on the left, while maximalists were under the heading of social democratic liberalism. However, the ideological foundation of these two groups was commonly rooted in universal or "profound humanism."<sup>1</sup> Because of this commonality, both radical social democrats and maximalists criticized the authoritarian, uniform, monolithic, and unequal design of most education systems in pursuing new pedagogical ideas. Inspired by radical social democrats such as Freire and Illich, the Faure Report detailed the pedagogical meanings of de-schooling and de-institutionalization (UNESCO, 1972, pp. 14, 20, 233) in its critique of conventional educational systems. That is, while the Faure Report included maximalist positions promoting de-formalized and diversified models of educational systems (p. 233), it also incorporated de-schooling and de-institutionalization discourses. However, during the first period UNESCO consistently produced lifelong learning discourse primarily informed by the maximalists' social democratic liberalism. The maximalist concept of lifelong learning influential at the time has "large-scale social implications" (as cited in Aspin & Chapman, 2000, p. 7) for issues of human rights (Lengrand), enhancement of individuals and society (Dave as cited in Field, 2001), and emancipatory education against neocapitalist politico-economy (Gelpi as cited in Griffin, 2003). In this sense, the maximalist ideological stance on lifelong learning appears to be a far cry from classical liberalism (which sees individuals as largely self-interest maximizers exhibiting a universal egoism) and neoliberalism (which sees individuals as competitive, autonomous choosers motivated by self-interest). Rather, the maximalist position highlights lifelong learning as large-scale social scaffolding for global democracy through self-fulfillment that is ideologically camped in social democratic liberalism. Notably, this recontextualization of the concept of the self-fulfillment of individuals through lifelong learning was already suggested in the Faure Report in the name of creating "'complete men' who will

*consciously seek their individual and collective emancipation, it may greatly contribute to changing and humanizing societies”* (p. 56, original italics and gender specific language). In this sense, the Faure Report indexes how social democratic liberalism became more salient in the arena of UNESCO’s lifelong learning policy during the late 1960s and early 1970s through the document’s humanistic vision and holistic approach to lifelong learning.

Compared to the 1970s, there were seemingly few international discussions on lifelong learning during much of the 1980s. Notably, UNESCO’s influential status in international education discourse including lifelong learning lessened during this period because of the membership withdrawal of the U.S. and the U.K., the so-called UNESCO crisis, mainly because of M’Bow’s (UNESCO’s director-general at the time) politically-driven management style (Jones, 2005). In this sense, the period between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s is sometimes described as the “valley of decreasing interest” in lifelong learning (Dehmel, 2006, p. 51). This, however, is only partly correct. Some existing literature suggests that this period was instead an important formative period for a neoliberal discourse on lifelong learning incubated in the European Commission’s training policy called Education-Training-Employment and the need to compete and build wealth within a single European Market (Lee, Thayer, & Madyun, forthcoming). Even more important, amidst the period’s neoliberal pressure, UNESCO’s institutional practices of lifelong learning were defended through a series of global discursive events (i.e., International Conference on Adult Education).

The second period of UNESCO’s lifelong learning discourse (early 1990s to now) retained social democratic liberalism as its key ideological mast despite the persistent challenge from neoliberalist winds formed outside UNESCO. However, since the so-called UNESCO crisis in 1984, with UNESCO’s role in global development projects including education then dwindling, UNESCO’s primary concern had been, therefore, to restore its organizational legitimacy and technical capacity. One important event through which UNESCO somewhat restored its legitimacy was the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), which was co-sponsored by the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNDP. Although WCEFA’s top priority (i.e. Educational for All) was the promotion of universal primary education, an emphasis reflective of the World Bank’s logic of the rate of return, UNESCO obtained an opportunity to restore its organizational legitimacy by taking on the role of a watch dog, coordinator, or clearing house for monitoring the progress of Education for All once WCEFA had concluded. Notably, UNESCO maintained its social democratic liberalist discourse within the Education for All movement by emphasizing the need for a just educational system that meets the basic learning needs of all people throughout their lives, both in and out of school.

Another conventional but proven way by which Mayor, UNESCO director-general at the time, went about restoring UNESCO’s legitimacy was to re-envision the future of education on a global scale, as the Faure Report had in the early 1970s. Much as Maheu (the UNESCO director-general from 1962 to 1974) had done when recruiting Faure, the former French prime minister, Mayor asked Delors, the former president of European Commission and one of the most influential French politicians in the 1990s, to draw a blue print for the future of education. That is, UNESCO primarily commissioned another major report to reassert its “lead agency status” in global educational development, to be a “more general catalytic influence” on the world education scene (Jones, 2005, pp. 83-85). Subsequently, the International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century, chaired by Delors in 1993, proposed UNESCO’s next world-wide study. The result of this research, published in 1996, came to be known as the Delors Report. The Delors Report in large part resurrected the educational ethos of the 1972 Faure

Report, primarily camped as it was in social democratic liberalism. Notably, the Delors Report tended to entrench its position against neoliberalism by disapproving of market forces-dominated educational policy and calling for the state to promote social equity through education: "...education is a community asset which cannot be regulated by market forces alone...Governments have a huge responsibility to act as the brokers of this compact [through education system]" (UNESCO, 1996, pp. 176, 223). At the same time, however, the Delors Report partially acknowledged the impact of rapid labor market change and globalized economies on education, the specific material conditions within which the Delors Report was produced that distinguish that historical moment from the socio-economic milieu of the 1970s; that is to say, while its discourse was social democratic at heart and resistant to neoliberalism, the Delors Report was partly compatible with a world where the ideology of neoliberalism prevailed. As it reads, "[a] key to the twenty-century, learning throughout life will be essential for adapting to the evolving requirements of the labour market and for better mastery of the changing time-frames and rhythms of individual existence" (UNESCO, 1996, p. 100). In acknowledging needed global changes in education, the Delors Commission omitted such concepts as de-schooling and de-institutionalizing—radicalist ideas that had traced the Faure Report. Rather, by discursively U-turning to pro-schooling discourses, the Delors Report advocated for the indispensability of the traditional education system and the conventional practice of institutionalized education. This discursive U-turn to schooling from de-schooling discourse mostly reflected the influence of social democratic liberalism in the Delors Report. The remaining question is why and how the Delors Report could have partial neoliberal tints, which are incompatible with its major ideological stance. One reason for this neoliberal influence within the Delors Commission is certain globally influential forces and events (i.e. the collapse of the Berlin Wall, socio-economic globalization, and the emergence of knowledge economies) of the time (see, UNESCO, 1996, 16-18). Additionally, it should be recalled that Delors was a former president of the EU. In fact, the Delors EU Commission prioritized lifelong learning within the context of growing interest in the knowledge economy through its 1993 White Paper entitled *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment*, which explicitly represented lifelong learning in the context of neoliberalist concerns about the European economy. Therefore, while it is true that the Delors Report was like the Faure Report ideologically rooted in social democratic liberalism, ironically, the Delors UNESCO commission may have managed to import social democratic liberalism into UNESCO's lifelong learning policy discourse by resistantly drawing on the Delors EU Commission's ideologically neoliberal policy texts. That is, as Fairclough points out, "[policy] texts always draw upon and transform other contemporary and historically prior texts" (1992, pp. 39-40). In conclusion, it is evident that the Delors Report principally reaffirmed social democratic liberalism based on the Faure Commission's humanistic and utopian ethos of learning throughout life. Although the Delors Report was not an ideologically homogenous entity of social democratic liberalism, the Delors Report embraced and advanced social democratic lifelong learning discourse.

### **Conclusion**

Taking a closer look at the history of UNESCO's lifelong learning policy discourses reveals a significant problem in current lifelong learning as dominated by neoliberal ideology: a distorting individualization of human learning waged by a global, capitalist empire over and against the vast bulk of humanity's freedom to be. Equipped with its seemingly progressive semantics of self-regulation, ownership, or entrepreneurship of learning, this individualization is

the fruit of a kind of capitalist totalitarianism—i.e., lifelong learning enforced to yield a society duped into exchanging its own freedom to be, forever upgrading its work-related skills or vocational qualifications, to extend a global order intent and reliant on that society’s exploitation. Furthermore, classical liberalist and neoliberalist discourses of individualizing learning are ironically exploited by discourses that highlight individuals’ efforts to secure learning opportunities and thereby attribute the failure to learn to self-responsibility. If this is lifelong learning, then learning cannot liberate our lives from ignorance, oppression, prejudice, and discrimination. It cannot enrich our lives at all, although we may survive through lifelong-dependency to given learning packages shaped by capitalist social rules antipathetic to social justice. Because lifelong learning is not just a concept but a “fact of our lives,” current neoliberal lifelong learning risks distorting the free, just lived experience that is our right. It threatens to weaken our aspiration to learn to live well together. It threatens to efface our need to learn to “create” change, not just to adapt to changes promoted by the neoliberal capitalist agenda. Lifelong learning could, however, promote a truly democratic, possible future if we would critically advance UNESCO’s original concept of learning throughout life as a guide for policy development, thereby displacing the current neoliberal agenda. In this sense, the history of UNESCO’s lifelong learning discourses reveals a possibly democratic, future course for lifelong learning.

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### Note

1. We borrowed the term “profound humanism” from John Field (2001). In his comprehensive literature review on the historical development of lifelong education, he pointed out that UNESCO’s lifelong education “was surely subordinated to a profound humanism” during the 1970s (p. 13).