

TEACHERS AS CITIZENS IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY AND GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the necessity of putting global issues at the center of school curricula. I am building this claim on the assumption that schools have the potential to transform reality. Students need a global context as early as possible in order to be able to operate in a globalized world. Today globalization is present in schools, mainly due to global competition and comparisons. I postulate that accountability should be a moral more than a statistical endeavor. In order for teachers to be able to nurture it, they should be involved in building professional capital in three domains: as critical intellectuals, educational activists, and cooperating professionals.

I want to see a better world every day and every year. I want to be a part of humankind that successfully improves the environment, improves societies and strengthens individuals, all through hard work. I want to experience an education focused on important tasks, and development leading into a brighter future. I believe I am not the only one. Here I will discuss approaches that are useful in teachers' struggles with contemporary challenges, and also to point out contemporary, critical elements in the process of becoming a teacher..

One of the mistakes we make as educators is thinking about our expertise, knowledge, competencies or experience as complete. Every time we as teachers decide with confidence that we do not need to learn anymore or we do not need to work on something any longer, reality proves us wrong. I believe the best state of mind is to remain convinced that we still need to develop, to search, to learn – that we are not “done.” We need to work more, explore deeper, learn longer. Perhaps an appropriate metaphor for our work is “strolling.” When we are strolling, we do not own and carry too much, and we are aware of our surroundings; we carefully look and feel.

It would be significant if we teachers practiced that *flâneur*¹ skill of reflecting as a daily activity. I expect that for each teacher, the process of becoming a teacher is grounded in *flâneur* mindset and is a life-long process. One of conditions of teaching is an acceptance of being “under construction,” because helping others in development includes also helping ourselves.

¹ Flâneur from the French noun *flâneur*, means “stroller”, “lounger”. Flânerie refers to the act of strolling, with all of its accompanying associations. The man of leisure, the urban explorer, the connoisseur of the street, the observer-participant. The flâneur concept is not limited to someone committing the physical act of a peripatetic stroll, but can also include a “complete philosophical way of living and thinking”.

Similarly, we should assume that an open and work-in-progress approach, also improves education as a whole. It is worth it to be aware that every time we choose one of the potential ways of solving educational problems and naïvely announce that we have found the best way or the ideal method, we have a good chance of being wrong.

Trends in global educational policies all over the world today affirm accountability and economic reasoning. Under the influence of neoliberal ideology, we have become convinced (judging based on international educational policies) that the functional understanding of school through a focus on effectiveness and test results is the only solution and will heal education. This is a contemporary illusion that is not changing education in the way we hope—what Linda Darling-Hammond calls “a double-edged sword increasing a gap between more and less affluent students” (2010, p. 67).

Neoliberal language is a global phenomenon, and nations use education both to gain advantage in global economic competition and to demonstrate superiority. I was deeply concerned and surprised at a recent during the opening of an international gathering of educator, where an official statement of the U.S. Department of Education was distributed. It described U.S. education as a tool by which U.S. society will become the most competitive economy in the world, and that our meeting should serve the improvement of education to this end. I was wondering, coming from Poland, if it was a warning or an invitation for sharing. Should I help in this competition, framed as if the Cold War never ended?

I propose here the need to change the paradigm in which we live so that we may start to see the world as connected, not only geographically and technologically, but also in politically and ideologically. We need flexibility, openness and togetherness to help develop the community of global citizens. That means we need teacher-citizens who understand their role. I am suggesting three areas of growth for us as teachers, expertise in which will allow us to face daily local and global challenges.

School, Community, and Globalization

Do we really need global perspectives in schools? Do we need to talk about global challenges? Are poverty, ecological disasters, aging societies, global warming, pollution, technological changes, terrorism, killing rare animals, children’s labor inequality, rape, hunger, political revolution on other continents, scarcity of resources, economic crises and much more even possible to solve in schools? We have no choice. Globalization is not a phenomenon. It is not just some passing trend. Today it is the overarching international system shaping the domestic politics and foreign relations of virtually every country (Jarvis, 2007). What I want to stress is the meaning globalization as a change factor and specific “eye opener:” people noticing others--their cultures, life styles, successes and failures.

School has a critical role to fulfill—to fight inequality and help every student overcome conditions to which one was born. Education cannot be “provided” based on a contract between an individual and school. Education is, instead, a common endeavor serving communities to support individual and social development. Education has power to transform social reality.

Zygmunt Bauman (2008) announced the death of the community at large. He claims that in the liquid reality, with thousands of voices heard, it is extremely difficult to build and maintain the

type of community we used to experience. Traditionally, that community provided its members with security and a sense of life based on a common understanding of the world. Today, because of the diverse perspectives in a globalized world, it is nearly impossible to reach that common understanding. Among thousands of voices we are not able to find that one theme to ground us and help to build community.

Public school is one of the last institutions that may serve as an integration platform and an inspiration for dialogue about the future. Teachers need specific skills that help us enter authentic dialogue in a global community that demands readiness to finish the conversation in a place that was never planned or expected. Dialogue needs openness and love (Freire, 1996), things societies and schools are lacking today.

Accountability: Ugly, dirty and bad?

Agreeing that the main role of education is to build community involved in dialogue about the future makes it easy to notice that the focus of decision makers is instead to find an answer for and demonstrate proof of the question: “who is the best?” while at the same time decreasing financial support for education.

The climate of competition and dominance in a culture of efficiency have impacted every educational reform. For example, two decades of decentralization and increased school autonomy in Europe have exacerbated differences between “good” and “bad” schools more than ever before. The expected “democratization effect” helped those who knew how to use their freedom accelerate their improvement. Those who did not race forward were still left behind, despite more freedom and autonomy (Ball, 2007).

Similarly, we might think about the idea of data-driven decision-making. Collecting data, reflecting, and self-reflecting on data in order to make decisions is certainly necessary for good, honest work. We have mastered the skill of collecting data, although, we seem to have yet to develop the skill of interpretation and implementation of findings.

One of the examples of “magical mirrors” by which educators may evaluate their work is the *Programme for International Student Assessment*, the famous PISA. The recognition gained by this initiative is a result of increased interest in accountability and the continuation of a tradition of comparisons and rivalries. PISA is a main engine in the global accountability juggernaut, which measures, classifies, and ranks students, educators, school systems, and nations, using the same standardized benchmarks. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) began assuming this new institutional role as arbiter of global education governance, simultaneously acting as diagnostician, judge and policy advisor to the world’s school systems (Meyer & Benavot, 2013). Again because of the sensation of competition, we have lost a chance to use PISA data and results, rather, focusing our social energy on comparison instead reflection and growth.

Another problem arising from the neoliberal approach to education is a significant shift in control of education from governments to markets and international organizations. Those organizations use a coherent collection of policies, including decentralization, choice, privatization, expanded use of market mechanisms, centralization of goal setting, and curriculum development. This philosophy is driven by economic demands and labor markets instead of

communities that convene citizens and nurture social solidarity (Meyer, Benavot, 2013). It leads to three deficits: decreasing loyalty towards institutions, weakening ties based on trust between people and employees, and also decreasing institutional knowledge (Sennet, 2006, p. 52). As a consequence, governments and societies became obsessed with school rankings, tables, statistics, and test results—though not with an education itself that should focus on trusting relationships, solidarity and responsibility.

The desire to be accountable and to have accountable schools and teachers is understandable. However, that demand came from the business community. In education, issues are more complicated. Schools hold multiple essential aims, and they must promote both the growth of individual and the health of democracy (Noddings, 2012). Too often, the desire to hold schools accountable for their performance and their effectiveness leads us towards bureaucracy and false aims of education. We need more diverse and more open approaches toward accountability. Accountability is immanently connected to responsibility — a powerful force for supporting good work and deciding about professional capital.

Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012) claim that nobody can give professional capital to anyone. They see professional capital as an investment, not a donation or gift. Professional capital must be acquired, spread, and reinvested by teachers themselves, both individually and together (responsible and in community). The term responsibility includes response: response to the context, response to needs, response to expectations, and response to the values of education. Responding is a dynamic process relying on reflection, thinking and feeling. So, accountability is a moral action, not something arising from statistics and formulas.

Teachers as Global Citizens

The most crucial elements of educational accountability are teachers themselves. In order to implement moral accountability and to be able to understand their obligations, to design the professional environment, and to take responsibility for their actions, they need to develop in different domains addressed in many educational discourses. We as teachers should grow as critical intellectuals, educational activists, and cooperating professionals.

Teachers as critical intellectuals. The first domain is connected to the teachers' understanding of the world and their intellectual ability to work in certain social and political contexts. It is impossible to influence reality and students' lives without a critical understanding of the world and mechanisms shaping conditions of living. Learning is an active, socially constructed process situated in a broad socio-economic and historical context, in local cultural practices and perspectives.

This is why we need to be equipped with skills helping with interpretation of reality and understanding what societies really want from schools. Is our work protecting an unfair status quo, "improving" reality as it is or, creating conditions for radical transformation, questioning the situation, and showing the direction of action that would lead toward equality and solidarity? If teachers are to take an active role in raising serious questions about what they teach and how they teach, they must take a more critical and political role in defining the nature of their work (Aronowitz, Giroux, 1991).

What is it like to be a teacher today, in a culture lacking stable points of orientation, characterized by increasing expectations from the outside world (authorities, employers, parents, and others)? Teachers need to be citizens of the world who share responsibility for it with all co-citizens. Teachers are not experts knowing all answers, but citizens who, commonly with others, interpret the experience of life in order to build a safe environment for everyone. A responsible teacher – a critical intellectual – understands that the reality, society, and school are all products of contradictory forces.

Teachers as educational activists. The second domain stresses that teachers need to be activists: educational activists and active citizens. The domain arises from thinking about civil society and also from experiences of environmental activists. In the process of social development we need to be aware of the political side of it but also of the ecological consequences. Teachers–citizens are responsible for the sustainable development of democratic societies. The educational activists’ approach to reality is characterized by readiness for interaction with the social world and involvement in the important processes in their communities and students’ lives. When one is involved and participates in social life, it is possible for this person to influence and transform it.

Teachers as citizens of civil society do not have to suffer the agony of constant bureaucratic reforms, because being a citizen means being actively involved in improving the current situation. We do not need another democratic school reform; we need democracy, and that will never appear without citizens. Through the years, there have been many efforts to stop teachers from being citizens and from acting as citizens, mainly through taking autonomy and independence away from them (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Teachers themselves must fight against this.

Teachers as cooperating professionals. The third domain is the universe of teaching and learning. The term professionalism means constant reflection, dialogue, and development, which leads to strengthening the self-regulating profession. Professional teachers are able to build their professional knowledge, conduct research, publish articles, and hold discussions because it is them who know best and see most in this area. In uncertain situations, professionals make use of their independent judgment rather than routine habits or regulations (Mazurkiewicz, 2012).

Who will save us?

I have tried to explain my point of view that stresses the necessity of a flexible approach to the world and to knowledge about this, of an ability to understand context and consequences of our approaches towards educational reforms, and also the necessity of an awareness of teachers’ skills needed in the ambitious effort of building the educational system of our dreams.

I understand that theorizing about “liquid reality” (Bauman, 2008) and teachers’ responsibility in the globalized world might sound awkward for someone without experience of meeting “the other,” travelling abroad, or working with international partners. However, I am driving through Central Europe from Krakow to the Austrian Alps while I am finishing this paper. I have passed a symbolic place where (and it was like yesterday) two giant political systems were meeting on the border of the Czech Republic and Austria. I have driven next to the battlefield of Austerlitz

(today in the Czech Republic near the city of Brno) where thousands of soldiers were forced to fight against each other during Bonaparte's campaign, in the name of three powers. I have seen the outskirts of Vienna, the capital city of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, which in the past covered vast areas of Europe.

My thoughts turned to the absurdity of history. Has development always been tied to suffering? How fast can we change the world? Twenty-five years ago I could not have made that trip. In Communist Poland, I did not have the right to travel abroad, I did not have a passport, and I did not know the world outside of Poland. The world has changed dramatically, but is it a better world? I believe it is, but we have no right to give up on our efforts to improve it.

I will repeat after Henry Giroux that we need a new language that might reinvigorate the relationship among democracy, ethics, and political agency by expanding the meaning of the pedagogical as political practice. The time is nigh for teachers as global citizens, who are critical intellectuals, educational activists, and cooperative professionals. Educators should raise questions such as: what is the relationship between social justice and the distribution of public resources and goods? (Giroux, 2011). Democracy cannot be reduced to the metaphor of "free" market. The challenge is constructing a new location of struggle that allows people to think about what it might mean to transform existing relations of subordination and oppression (Giroux, 2011).

It is us, as human beings and as educators, who may make the world a better place, and education is a mechanism of that change. The struggle with challenges will be easier when we accept that teaching is an impossible vocation within the meaning that we have defined for education here. For teachers, education aims are impossible to fulfill, but we do not have a moral right to resign from our commitment to these goals because of the challenge they impose. Our environment, societies and selves will be better for it.

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