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Guest editor's introduction

## The “problem” of minority education in an international perspective

The chapters in this issue originated in the Comparative and International Education seminar given each year at the Pennsylvania State University and reflect nearly two years of ongoing work analyzing minority educational policy from a cross-national perspective. There are three goals of this special issue. The first is to provide readers with case studies of the impact of national educational policies on minorities in the US and in other nations. The second is to analyze the degree to which cross-national factors appear to drive nations to institute such policies. The third is to derive preliminary hypotheses that can be further elaborated and subjected to empirical analysis.

There are a wide variety of factors involved in the education of minority groups around the globe. Some of these factors, when first examined, appear to be nation-specific. On closer examination, however, there are parallels in other nations. For example, when Akiba's work on Koreans in Japan (Chapter 3) is compared with Menendez, Astiz, and Beltran's investigation of Hispanics in the US (Chapter 7), it is clear that both nations have continued to enact laws or policies that utilize a vague or diffuse definition of the minority group in question. Both nations appear to be pursuing a policy of “agglomeration” that makes it difficult for both groups to achieve parity in terms of educational opportunity. Furthermore, this type of diffuse, agglomerative strategy appears to be available only to “core” nations that can act relatively independently of pressure from international agencies. The study of several specific cases of minority educational policy thus leads to more universal theorizing about what factors affect the formation of national educational policies for minority groups.

### 1. Who is a minority?

Dealing with case studies also helps to clarify the basic nature of the phenomena in question. While there are many specific studies about minority groups in various countries, there has been little attempt to clearly define what factors determine minority status in modern nations. “What is a minority?” is a deceptively simple question, but one that defies ready answers.

Take, for example, the issue of numerical size. Simply being a numerical minority does not mean that many of the other factors of minority status apply. Numerically small but highly powerful groups may create educational policies that effectively lock

the numerical majority of a nation into schools and educational pathways that create “minority educational problems.” The so-called “Bantu education” of the former South African regime is one case. So too, small, marginalized groups may be perceived as threatening “minorities” whose educational practices challenge dominant group beliefs and, hence, may be the target of intense state coercion: witness the Amish and Hutterites in the US.

To address how minority educational policy is generated, we must first come up with a useful working definition of “minority.” As mentioned earlier, such a seemingly simple question proved to be quite vexatious.<sup>1</sup> In the end, drawing on the cases presented, as well as our own professional experience in a wide variety of nations, we identified 16 factors that are involved in defining minority groups in various nations. They are (1) number; (2) indigenous/aboriginal status; (3) ethnic background; (4) linguistic background; (5) social class; (6) religious identity; (7) economic situation; (8) political situation/affiliation; (9) sexual orientation; (10) color; (11) immigrant status; (12) place of birth/regional; (13) ability; (14) age; (15) citizenship; and (16) gender.

As this list shows, there are a wide variety of factors, none of which alone constitute sufficient conditions for “minority status.” Some factors are relatively un-emphasized (both socially and legally) in certain countries. For example, class differences are rarely a topic of concern in the general educational debates that take place in the US, and there is no legislation identifying “working class” youth as a disadvantaged minority, despite strong empirical evidence to the contrary (MacLeod, 1987; Eckert, 1989; McDonough, 1997).

We also rejected the definition used for many years in anthropological discussions of minorities as “... an ethnic group occupying a subordinate position in a multiethnic society, suffering from the disabilities of prejudice and discrimination, and maintain[ing] a separate group identity” (Gibson, 1997, p. 318). From our experience, this definition begs several questions, the most important of which is that “ethnicity” or “difference” is constructed in culturally different ways in different nations. Furthermore, this construction is often tied to other important social conventions (i.e. citizenship). Finally, such constructions impact educational policy making which may in turn institutionalize perceptions of minority/majority differences in a given society.

Also, “subordinate position” assumes that social power is unidimensional or that all sources of social power can be controlled in the same manner. The Chinese in Malaysia held, and continue to hold, significant economic power. The educational policies enacted by the Malaysian government, policies enacted by a numerical majority that had political power, would thus not be considered under the current anthropological theory. Yet the policies instituted in Malaysia look very similar to policies instituted in other countries to increase access to educational opportunity for a targeted group.

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<sup>1</sup> See Gibson (1997, p. 323). In the United Kingdom, ethnic minority has come to be equated with color minority; in the Netherlands, the term is used to refer to an ethnic group that has occupied a low social position over a long period of time. In Israel, when used, minority refers exclusively to the non-Jewish population.... And in France, the terms minority and ethnic minority are simply not used.”

The question of religious groups is also left unanswered by most definitions of minority status. Working in central Pennsylvania, we were keenly aware of the contradictions posed by the Amish in US society. Are the Amish in a subordinate position? If so, how are they able to (following the case of *Yoder vs. Wisconsin*) exert such control over the course of schooling for their own children?

Finally, we found that “discrimination” and “prejudice” were equally difficult to operationalize. What about individual Japanese or Korean ancestry who might wish to assimilate, but are kept “separate” and “minority” by laws that make assimilation difficult? Is this an example of prejudice? With regard to indigenous, native, or autochthonous peoples, this may include groups who have maintained significant cultural and or linguistic separation, as well as groups that have been largely assimilated. An example is the range of Native-American experiences in the US.

In the cases presented any of the aforementioned factors can be used to define a group as a minority. What is a critically ignored variable is how nations choose to define or not define certain groups in formal legislation or educational policy. The boundaries of class, racial, ethnic, and even linguistic groups can be quite fluid in the absence of state-imposed definitions that create a category of “minority”. Nations can thus pursue strategies that recognize and define minority groups, giving them specific legal access. Or, they can choose to not recognize such groups, pursuing policies that ignore group differences and/or place many groups into a diffuse category. The recognition of sub-groups within a nation-state is thus a necessary but not sufficient condition for giving rise to minority educational policies.

In today's world, nations are under increasing pressures to recognize such groups. The promotion of human rights on a global basis has created both an international culture and set of legal sanctions that can create the conditions whereby groups can assert their claims to better treatment or access to core public services such as education. Nations — at least those that desire to take part in the standard forms of international commerce — come under increasing pressure to recognize the rights of groups within the nation that have historically been differentiated. How specific educational policies are then enacted is a process buffeted by the twin forces of international factors pushing for more egalitarian societies and nation-specific factors that define privilege and power within a given nation.

## **2. Why study minority educational policies?**

Minority education is usually linked with “problems” in most nations around the world. The fact that minorities pose a “problem” in terms of educational pathways is an idea that many anthropologists have critically examined (McDermott, 1987; Trueba, Spindler, & Spindler, 1989). While the specific role of schools in cultural transmission is still debated in anthropological circles, comparative study of cross-cultural educational processes has widely documented the success of a remarkable range of cultural groups to form educational systems that appear to transmit their cultural values from generation to generation (Spindler & Spindler, 1987). Setting aside the academic debate as to whether or not educational rites, rituals, and

institutions transmit culture, groups around the globe have developed systems of education that work well, and essentially work without creating massive problems of educational failure (Trueba et al., 1989). The same cannot be said for modern systems of education where educational failure (both among majority and minority students) is a ubiquitous topic of concern.

This point is ontologically significant in ways that have been ignored in most studies of cross-national schooling. Simply put, the vast body of anthropological and psychological literature on pre-technological societies document a vast array of problems (e.g., kinship conflicts, warfare, cultural disintegration in the face of foreign colonization), with the exception of educational failure. Traditional systems of education in pre-technological societies do not support a category of “failure” or “dropouts” (Trueba et al., 1989). Similarly, pre-industrial systems of education in nations like Japan attained higher levels of literacy than are currently attained in some developing nations (see Dore, 1965; Rubinger, 1982). The causal origin of minority “problems” in modern educational systems must then arise in substantial part from the creation of a modern system of education.

Our discussions led us to hypothesize that the creation of explicit policies for minority groups within multicultural nations might in fact create the very conditions they were designed to ameliorate. Our studies and experiences in several different nations, working with different minority groups, moved us to consider how unintended consequences of the formulation of such policies (often times explicitly created to “improve” minority performance) might foster continuing differential educational performance. At the same time, our experience made us keenly aware that political factors within nations also drive the creation of separate educational policies that were ostensibly designed to “help” minority groups, but in fact systematically denied targeted groups access to educational opportunity and advancement. Examples include the assimilationist Indian Schools in the US or Canadian history and the “Bantu” educational policies formally used in South Africa.

The strong emphasis on “minority problems” in cross-national educational literature is striking and raises a fundamental question: who is best served by such a focus? Many minority groups are remarkably successful (both economically and educationally) in their countries of residence. The case of Jewish-Americans in the US is one example and illustrative of the complexity of unraveling the stated and actual purposes of educational policy. As Karabel (1984) and Karen (1990) have shown, the success of Jewish students in the late 1800s and early 1900s in entering Ivy league colleges was perceived by elite groups as a “problem.” Indeed, the “Jewish problem” at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton led to the abandonment of old Latin and Greek exams and the creation of modern “portfolio” entrance assessments that have been widely adopted in higher education around the US (Karabel, 1984; Karen, 1990). Such studies led us to analyze national policies with a careful consideration of what groups were actually benefiting from the policy.

The study of minority educational policies is also important in understanding how governments respond to groups who pose little or no economic or political threat, yet are perceived as culturally or religiously threatening. The legal persecution of quietist groups in the US and other nations (in particular the jailing and subsequent death in

jail of Hutterite conscientious objectors in World War I) suggests that even small, economically marginalized, pacifistic groups can be perceived as highly threatening to dominant groups in modern nations (Hostetler, 1987). Minority educational policies, then, continue to generate (or at least fail to adequately address) problems in modern nations and may even be the sources of significant problems.

Finally, the tragic continuance of regional wars and displaced persons means that in the foreseeable future many nations will have to deal with the education (and sometimes resettlement and possible assimilation) of diverse peoples. Both in Africa and in Eastern Europe, large numbers of people have sought asylum in countries where they are “minorities”. They often have multiple factors of minority status. The education of such populations can potentially be directed toward peaceful resettlement and integration or it can be directed toward reinforcing existing differences and continued conflict. And, as in the case of Tibetans in India or the Hutterites in Canada, the desire to preserve language and culture in a new homeland may make minority groups unlikely to enter public schooling, even in the face of progressive national policies.

Theoretically, few studies of minority education that seek to isolate universal factors that predict school failure (e.g., Ogbu’s immigrant vs. caste minority division) have withstood the test of time. As van Zanten (1997) has written: “The relationship between immigrant groups and educational systems should include an analysis of the dynamic interaction between national ideologies as they are embodied in education laws ... and the way each group will perceive and respond to these ideologies” (p. 369). However, rather than assuming that the historical and social context of each country will create unique situations that cannot be compared, our prior experience leads to the hypothesis that there are cross-national factors that do affect the adoption and implementation of educational policies in ways that affect “minority problems” in school. To that end we have tried to devise new hypotheses about minority educational policy that can be tested in future studies.

Drawing on the work of Meyer and others (Meyer, 1977; Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992) it is assumed that the concept of minority educational policy is tied to Western models of the nation-state, where the concept of individual citizenship is the central organizing principal underlying the state and the rise of compulsory education. Various types of policy or non-policy around the world (e.g., affirmative action in the US or educational advancement policies for ethnic majorities like the Bumiputra in Malaysia) reflect national attempts to balance national and international demands in the creation of minority educational policy. However, while international pressures (coercive or mimetic isomorphism) clearly affect nations like China in its development and presentation of minority educational policy, this can be contrasted with Japanese policies that stand in direct opposition to the institution of individualism and modern citizenship identified by neo-institutionalist theorists (Ramirez & Boli, 1987; Boli, Ramirez, & Meyer, 1985; Boli & Meyer, 1987; Boli & Ramirez, 1990).

Furthermore, there are strong core-periphery differences in the formulation of minority educational policy. While the US, at least since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, has been widely perceived as a major innovator in minority

educational policy, educational policies regarding religious minorities (Muslim) and cultural-linguistic minorities (Hispanics and Native Americans) do not utilize the ideals of individual rights suggested by proponents of a world-systems theory of educational expansion. Rather, US educational policy appears, in relation to these groups, to violate some of the most basic tenets that are hypothesized to undergird modern forms of participatory democracy and individual rights.

Nations are not isolated from each other. As Ramirez, Meyer and others (e.g., Meyer et al., 1992) have shown, there has been an international trend toward isomorphism in the public schools systems of virtually every country in the world. From Zimbabwe to Nepal to Canada, classrooms look much the same, curriculums are highly similar, and even teacher–student interactions are fairly standard, at least compared to the diversity recorded in the educational situations of pre-literate societies.

### **3. Comparison and reflection**

That national policies might increase educational problems is certainly not a new idea, but the fact that national educational policies may be impacted by cross-national trends offers a new way to begin addressing the “problems” faced in many nations. The logic of cross-national comparison identifies pertinent characteristics in each country as well as global trends and patterns. In the following case studies questions such as the following are addressed:

- To what extent are “minority” educational problems part of a historio-cultural context?
- Can the meaning of “minority” be reexamined or redefined in light of current national educational policies?
- Do national educational policies around the world exhibit the core vs. periphery differences predicted by world systems theory?

If the “problems” in the education of minority groups lie not in any of the factors enumerated earlier, but in the ways that educational policies channel political, economic, religious, and cultural conflicts between and among groups, this may open up new ways to conceive of these “problems”. While the authors of the chapters in this issue make no attempt to offer immediate “solutions”, they recognize that common problems exist, and that these problems may be linked to factors that push national policies. This, then, is a breakthrough in hypothesizing about the “problem of minority education”.

Previous comparative work on the effects of modernization in the US and Germany (Spindler & Spindler, 1974) as well as comparative studies of US and Japanese schools (Shimahara & Sakai, 1995; LeTendre, 1999) have generated significant insight into how global forces and national or regional forces impact modern life. By looking at national policies as emerging in the interplay between nation-specific forces and global forces, new hypotheses can be generated and new avenues for research

identified that have the potential to determine how educational problems are created as well as possible new solutions.

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