Global Education: Current Issues Today

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Abstract

This article is based on the findings of a workshop held at the London International Conference in Education, November, 2016, where a group of researchers met to share new and emerging issues in global education and collaborate together. The workshop provided the forum to share personal research or works in progress around emerging issues in education, with a view to identifying the key issues at present in various nations and collaborating together to discuss these. The ultimate aim was to develop a collaborative network for those who work in the area of social justice and human rights in education to examine common trends across various nations in these areas.

1. Introduction

The theme of the London International Conference in Education was New and Emerging Issues in Global Education and keynote speakers addressed a range of areas initially. Areas discussed by keynotes were The Educational Inclusion for children and young people with Special Educational needs: Is it a case of so far and no further? by Professor Michael. Shevlin, of Trinity College, in Dublin, Dickens is Timeless by Jim Nyland, Australian Catholic University, Brisbane and The Human Factor to Profitability: How People-Centered Cultures Fosters Long-Term Organizational Success by Dr Kelly La Venture, Bemidji State University, United States of America.

One of the conference workshops entailed a group of participants meeting to discuss new and emerging issues in global education. The range of participants were from New Zealand, Australia, Canada, UK, Pakistan, Turkey, Peru, Botswana, South Africa, Dominican Republic and Portugal. Eleven nations in total attended the workshop and this was facilitated by Barbara Perry of New Zealand who seconded Bernie Fisher from Canberra to record and plot the findings visually for participants as the session progressed.

2. Background Information

The initial search for literature in the area of new and emerging issues in education prior to the workshop proved extremely challenging, as while there are numerous reports and articles around particular nations and their individual issues, to find information on global issues collectively, was difficult. Many of the reports and articles that are written come from an Aid perspective, with a totally different purpose from the conference workshop, however this information proved useful in providing background information in certain regions across the world.

In 2015, Save the Children [1] commissioned a White paper on Emerging Issues in Global Urban Education which provided recent and relevant data in the identification of global issues.

At present half of the world's population lives in urban areas and access to education is primarily a Social Justice Issue, according to Save the Children [1]. The report surveyed a range of organisations across 17 nations and issues in global education were ranked according to various regions across the world.

The following issues were identified:

1) Middle East: Conflict is the key challenge in this region with students in Syria being described as the "lost generation" due to the impact of possible years of lost schooling. Many of these students are now refugees and have moved to neighbouring countries and other nations. Flexible learning and virtual learning networks were suggested as a way to assist these students, so they could learn wherever they were.

2) Africa: In some parts of Africa, there are the lowest literacy rates in the world and a lack of trained teachers, often having only primary schooling themselves. In South Sudan, little value is placed on the teaching profession as a whole with low salaries and many teachers having to obtain a second job in order to survive financially Bertelsmann, p.6 [2].There is also an issue around violence particularly towards girls and parents do not feel safe sending their children to school.

3) Asia: There is an increasing focus on rural education in Asia with literacy and numeracy rates far lower in these areas. The other area of concern according to UNICEF (2012), was children living in urban slums: '18% of children in slums attended secondary school, 53% of children in Urban areas as a whole attended secondary school and 48% of children in rural areas attended secondary school [3]'. This disparity was also noted in other regions of India, Myanmar and generally throughout the Asian

region. Other concerns were cited by the Asia Foundation [4] who noted that girls drop out from schooling sooner than boys and there is a strong reliance on rote learning as a methodology for teaching.

4) Latin America: Two major issues were identified by Deutsche Well [5] in Latin America, namely the failure of the public education system due to low government expenditure in this area and the fact that for young people, education appears to provide little benefit, due to limited economic opportunities for work upon completion [5]. This 'lack of hope and optimism [6, 9]' often leads to a life of crime as it appears to be a more lucrative option and gang violence is a major issue especially in Central America according to the United Nations [7].

Overall, the Save the Children report [1] and other background literature and recent reports reviewed [2.3.4.5.6], identified key issues as low literacy rates, pressure on teachers and the need for parental involvement along with a failing public school system and growing low cost private schooling emerging as a local solution.

Whilst the Save the Children report [1] identified issues in developing nations, in other nations such as New Zealand, one of the main issues on the educational agenda at present, is that of creating "Modern Learning Environments" and changing teaching pedagogy to fit with these environments which are being built, according to Osborne [7]. There is a change occurring from a traditional factory model of teaching (one size fits all) to a more purpose built flexible and open design of schools and this reflects an international trend (JELPP, 2016) [8] and New Zealand government policy now requires all schools to conform to this change by 2020.

Issues vary in different nations and individual contexts and with this in mind, the conference provided an excellent opportunity for researchers to gather together and explore common concerns collaboratively.

3. Discussion

The workshop began with the facilitator (this author) distributing a handout detailing the current research issues in the New Zealand educational context over the last two years. In New Zealand, there has been a focus on Social Justice in Education and meeting the needs of diverse groups of learners due to increasing multiculturalism. Authentic curriculum integration and creating modern learning environments is another focus on the New Zealand agenda. The various methodologies used in the research and conceptual frameworks underpinning this research from the facilitator, was shared with the group and then each participant introduced themselves and went on to discuss current educational issues within their own context and

country which they wished to highlight or find out more about.

An exercise where issues were categorised as being relevant to all nations, some nations, or only one nation was used to plot the findings of the workshop. Suggestions were offered by other participants as to possible solutions to the issues raised.

1) All participants agreed on the following issues:

- How can flexible curriculum be developed and implemented (two areas here, in terms of both flexible delivery and flexible content)?
- How are teachers and students empowered rather than one or the other?
- The cost of education is becoming prohibitive for students especially international students, should free education be created by paying for it through an increased tax dollar? Education was seen as a basic human right and therefore its provision becomes a social justice issue.

How are the needs of people balanced over profit in education?

- Tensions are prevalent at times between the needs of students versus the requirements of the course/degree? How can these be resolved?

2) Some participants identified the following issues:

- There is a need for a greater number of teachers with disabilities in education and a sharing of strategies to support them in their practice.
- A desire was expressed to teach children views that are divergent (counter cultural) to a particular government's way of thinking, for example, alternative views to those of the state/religious views. This is particularly the case where these views may be traditional/oppressive in regards to the role of women for example. One member of the workshop raised the idea of using global citizenship as a model as a possible solution to this issue through analysing societal values, and teaching children about courage and the power of their voice in creating change.
- How do we strike a balance to ensure the rights of the teachers are recognised as well as student rights? Suggestions were made around developing a Teachers Union, or the creation professional standards.
- How do we cater for diversity in a socially acceptable manner? For example, students whose study has been interrupted by sickness, or who have disabilities? A suggestion was given that students could be offered a longer time to complete their qualification and work on what they can do at present and complete the rest when feeling better/more able to do so, with one step to be taken at a time, and teachers needing to take a longitudinal view of learning.

- How do we decide whether flexible curriculum structure, content and modes of delivery will serve the needs and engage and improve student outcomes? The suggestions made were: use of regular feedback, regular communications, appointing student representatives, student surveys and evaluation to ascertain how students are engaging and understanding course work.

3) One participant raised the following issue:

- How does one create evaluation systems to ensure quality education is offered/monitored, what should be used?
- Is there a system of accreditation in the teaching profession between professional and individual standards?

4. Emerging Issues

This collaboration of current researchers all identified these four issues as emerging in global education:

1. The cost of education both locally and internationally to students which is becoming prohibitive and thus becomes an issue of social justice as everyone should have the right to education;

2. The balancing of peoples' needs over profit in education and the fact that at times, tensions emerge between the needs of students (health, family, other interrupters) versus the requirements of the course/degree and needing to know how to resolve this tension?

3. The need for flexible curriculum delivery (online, anywhere, anytime) as well as flexible curriculum content (student centred, personalised, authentic learning which is differentiated)

4. The need to empower teachers and students both rather than one or the other.

An area of commonality which emerged from the workshop discussion which aligned with the background literature reviewed was that of flexible delivery of curriculum in terms of content and access. This is an emerging area in education enabling students to study anywhere anytime. It will assist in addressing those who travel, move or are affected by conflict and war, such as the "lost generation" described in [1] from Syria.

Most of the other issues from current researchers differed considerably from the reports and background literature reviewed, however most of those present in the workshop collaboration were researchers and teachers located either in Universities, Polytechnics or private training organisations and these findings may reflect this context which is significantly different to Aid organisations. The Aid organisations which are comprised mainly of those working in the field identified their top issues as low literacy rates, pressure on teachers and the need for parental involvement along with a failing public school system and growing low cost private schooling which appeared to be working well and emerging as a local solution to poor performing public schooling. It is of note however, that Aid agencies are often researching with a view to investing in the local situation and so their findings may reflect this fact.

4.1. Benefits and limitations of the research

The benefits of meeting together face to face and having the opportunity to share in a workshop forum are extremely valuable to researchers who are often working on an issue in an isolated way in their own country. The opportunity to establish a collaborative network of researchers keen to pursue this area can lead to developing partnerships across nations and in this particular field of global education networking among nations is essential.

Discussing together in person, provides researchers with the opportunity to clarify what is meant by various statements and to reach agreement on key issues and this was the main advantage of meeting together in a workshop forum, to be able to question, clarify and give others the opportunity to elaborate on their issues thus enabling a depth of understanding that would not occur outside of a group forum. Shared language and definitions are essential when researching as during the course of the workshop while some members of the group were sharing one thing, others could be using the same terms but referring to something totally different and by being in the same room confusion was alleviated.

As a result of this workshop emails were gathered and the findings were distributed to participants, thus creating a networking opportunity for further research. This is where the benefit of email, Skype and other technology can assist us in researching collaboratively.

The limitations of this research are that the findings emerged from one ninety minute session together and that greater time was needed. Time is required not just to discuss the issues but also to develop solutions to these issues, which is what the group began to do towards the end of the workshop. Longer term, a more in depth study is needed across the globe in a range of educational contexts as issues in higher education may be very different from the schooling or early childhood sector. Several key regions were not represented in this workshop, namely Asia, United States of America and Europe and it is important to have as many voices as possible participate in discussions concerning global education, so these nations need representation in any follow up studies.

5. Conclusion

At the end of the day, a considerable level of commonality emerged from participant researchers around what exactly the current issues in education are at the present time. These include the increasing cost of education and the fact that for many students both local and international, this is becoming prohibitive. A need to balance people against profits should be considered in education as it is a basic human right and this is a Social Justice issue. Tensions were identified in balancing student's needs (health, family, other) against the requirements of a qualification and ways of resolving this needed to be developed. The development of flexible curriculum delivery and flexible curriculum content was another emerging issue identified by the researchers as well as in background literature and this is an important finding given the need for schooling for students who find themselves in the midst of conflict or natural disaster. The need to empower both students and teachers in institutions rather than one at the expense of the other was also identified.

A more in depth survey of emerging issues across a greater range of nations is recommended as a follow up to the findings of this workshop. Creating a collaborative network to collate and review the findings of a greater number of nations, along with the inclusion of Asia, Europe and the United States which were not represented in the workshop, would be extremely valuable internationally and several members of this initial collaboration indicated they are keen to be involved or to instigate this process.

6. References

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7. Acknowledgements