Improving Education for a More Equitable World: Comparative and International Perspectives

All improvement requires change, but not every change is improvement. *The Improvement Guide* (Gerald Langley et al., 2009)

To many, education remains a dream of equal opportunities for all learners, regardless of their backgrounds and contexts. Confucius advocated 2,500 years ago for education without discrimination (有教无类), a dream of education for all. This evolving vision was renewed right after WWII by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stipulating that everyone has the right to education. Although pioneers, like minority woman leader Patsy Mink, have long envisioned equal education with persevering efforts for the United States, the realities in the country and worldwide do not reflect this dream.

Educational reforms abound around the globe, but limited improvements have been made to actualize educational equity, as is reported again and again by the UNESCO in Global Education Monitoring Reports (2021) and more recently in Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education (2022). There are many interrelated factors, often working in tandem, attributing to these limited improvements. These factors include power disparity, income, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, language, ability, culture, religion, geo-politics, and neocolonialism, among others. It is important to note the context within which these factors exist. We are facing a global emergency of climate change, in an uncertain era post-Covid. However, the people and communities most impacted by these crises are already vulnerable and the situation will only worsen if drastic changes are not made immediately; these factors will only expand existing inequalities, and in particular, further widen...
the existing gaps of learning access and success. We must then ask ourselves an urgent and crucial question: What responsibilities, agendas, and solutions can properly address these alarming, coalescing challenges?

Educational improvement is not merely a technical term, evidenced by the emerging, fast-growing, and interdisciplinary field of educational improvement studies (Li, 2023). It constitutes a powerful approach and a dynamic process to advance education, through which reality and uncertainty are examined and problems are tackled. It varies across educational levels, forms, and contexts, including but not limited to equity, inclusion, diversity, quality, effectiveness, and sustainability. Each deserves stronger policy actions and more integrated theories and applications, requiring capacity- and community-building, a systemic approach, and multi-perspective inquiries.

Comparative and international perspectives are essential to fulfilling the dream of educational equity. How should we critically look at and meet desired outcomes across time and space? In what ways may micro, meso and/or macro educational strategies, structures, and processes be improved along with their environments? How do we know through rigorous methods that we are making progress responsively? What changes can bring about responsible and sustainable advancement in learning, teaching, and schooling? What implications may these changes have on individual systems, contexts, and the already vulnerable planet? And how may our endeavors help redefine comparative and international education in a way that reconnects it with contextualized educational policy and practice?

The 67th Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society (cies) was held successfully online and in Washington, D. C., on February 14–22, 2023, promoting the cies 2023 Theme “Improving Education for a More Equitable World” with close to 4,000 global participants from various fields of education. To encourage wider cies 2023 participation, cies President Elect Jun Li called in April 2022 for Written Responses to the cies 2023 Theme and the call remained open until the last conference date on February 22 2023. After the annual gathering, an overwhelming number of submissions of these Written Responses were received from all over the world. Additionally, the UNESCO Video Responses to the cies 2023 Theme were supported by various UNESCO centers and units, such as UNESCO Futures of Learning and Innovation, and by UNESCO Chairs across the globe.

To further disseminate these Written Responses to the cies 2023 Theme “Improving Education for a More Equitable World,” Beijing International Review of Education (Brill) supported by Beijing Normal University; ECNU Review of Education (Sage) by East China Normal University; Future in Educational Research (Wiley) by Southwest University; and International Journal of Chinese
Education (Sage) by Tsinghua University (journals in alphabetical order) agreed to make concerted efforts in publishing them as a special issue or collection, together with four special papers based on the Kneller Lecture and Keynote Speeches delivered at CIES 2023.

The publication initiative is the first of its kind with joint endeavors of different journals for the global CIES community and wider readership, thanks to the strong support by Xudong Zhu and Michael Peters, Shuangye Chen, Shengquan Luo and Hongbiao Yin, and Jinghuan Shi, the four journals’ editors-in-chief, respectively, and by CIES President Jun Li, a professor at Western University in Canada who also serves as President of the Chinese Society of Education. The four Special Collection and Special Issues were grouped into the following themes by the four journals:

1. Improving Education for a More Equitable World: Comparative and International Perspectives by Beijing International Review of Education
2. Improving Education for a More Equitable World: Social Justice Perspectives by ECNU Review of Education
3. Improving Education for a More Equitable World: Futurist Perspectives by Future in Educational Research
4. Improving Education for a More Equitable World: Chinese and East Asian Perspectives by International Journal of Chinese Education

This editorial reflects the common introduction in the first half, shared by all four journals with their individual permission, while the second half introduces individual articles published exclusively by Beijing International Review of Education after its blind review process. The Special Issue presented here to our readers covers the theme “Improving Education for a More Equitable World: Comparative and International Perspectives.” It includes six written responses and the Kneller Lecture by David Reynolds for us to explore how education may be improved for a more equitable world, total of seven articles as responses to the CIES 2023 Theme.

David Reynolds, in the paper based on his Kneller Lecture titled “Education without Failure: Some Practical Proposals for Educational Change”, discusses multiple factors that make the school system effective, such as consistency, a positive school climate, and involvement of parents, to name but a few. Focusing on the school system of the United States, the author draws upon its shortcomings despite all the research done for decades. A powerful point Reynolds makes is that it is not enough to simply know what makes practice good and what does not; this knowledge is simply futile unless it is put into use. Dr. Reynolds emphasizes the importance of reliable education throughout his paper and concludes that we need this kind of failure-free education to achieve effective education. Giving examples of societies that have been transformed
through their effective school systems, Reynolds states that with failure-free education we have the power to turn many things that can only be imagined into reality. One of such things could be ending colonialism.

Ratna Ghosh’s article, “Improving Education for a More Equitable World”, focuses on the ways in which COVID-19 has affected the education system. This topic is crucial in the field of education since the pandemic was a pivotal long-lasting event all around the globe that uncovered many a problem, some of which the world was previously oblivious of. One of such issues was the unequal access to education that was exacerbated by the invasion of education by technology, which is inaccessible to countless students from low-income backgrounds. Despite all the unequal access to education which also can be of different degrees of quality, Ghosh is hopeful that educators can still turn the situation around and make education the “great equalizer”. However, certain changes are required to achieve this, such as making education more inclusive, improved teacher training, and last but not least, creating better educational systems where non-meritocratic elements are considered just as important as the meritocratic ones. In other words, it is important to consider the needs of other students in society rather than merely focusing on those who are already privileged. To some extent, this might be helpful in creating a more democratic and equal society.

Mark Ginsburg’s paper, “Realities and Perspectives: Improving Education for a More Equitable World” highlights four main issues that should be addressed for the sake of educational improvement. The first two of them include unequal access to education, especially the lack of it for millions of talented students, and the disagreement upon what quality education means in various contexts and from various points of view. A disappointing, but not surprising, point pertaining to the first issue is the fact that 258 million children and youth were recorded to be out of school around the world, and this number only represents the situation before the COVID-19 pandemic. This way, Ginsburg’s and Ghosh’s articles can be considered to complement each other. The third issue is the widespread belief that equity and equality are one and the same when they can be complete opposites in certain contexts; in fact, equity mostly requires unequal distribution of resources based on needs, hence redistributive justice. It is not clear, however, how much inequality is needed and is sufficient to reach the goal of equity, which is the fourth issue the author presents.

In “Global Governance of Improving Education for a More Equitable World”, Kazuo Kuroda emphasizes what an important role globalization has been playing in the field of education. By studying education as a major part of global governance, the author identifies four approaches to global governance
in education: traditional approach (through formulation of principles via international laws), traditional and contemporary approach (through development and proposition of internationally influential concepts), contemporary approach (consensus-building on international policy goals), and emerging approach (through the establishment of international indicators, standards, and monitoring). Kuroda argues that mainly developing countries should employ these approaches so that the national policymaking and implementation processes can be more effective.

Supporting some of Ghosh’s ideas, Regis Malet informs the readers on the part that democratic and humanistic education plays globally in the paper titled “Educating for Sustainable and Cohesive Societies”. What the article emphasizes is the role of education in creating democratic, open, and sustainable societies through instilling values of solidarity and cooperation should be at the forefront rather than simply promoting individualism and capitalism. The author views educational capitalism as the disenchantment of the democratic ideal and suggests that more importance be given to the quest for the common good in order to achieve the democratic ideal.

Jose Cossa discusses the salience of education in the process of fighting colonialism in “Comparative and International Education: Reflecting on Extractivismo, Epistemic Genocide, and Theoretical Colonialism”. Specifically, the author targets epistemic genocide that may manifest itself as theoretical colonialism. Focusing on Africa, Cossa argues that even though the continent has been studied extensively in terms of its education, more often than not it has been done by Western scholars, whereby they have benefitted from claiming to be experts on it, in some instances without ever having been on the continent. With this, the author demonstrates how theoretical colonialism still continues despite the fact that the continent is now in its post-colonial era, and calls this process “extractivismo”. Thus, the article notes that if we, as scholars, do not change our ways, the field will keep colonizing, extracting, and appropriating rather than acknowledging, respecting, and learning from the formerly colonized about their ways of educational improvement. To quote the author, we should “re-problematize, re-historicize, redefine, and engage non-modernistic theories and methods to study education globally”.

Writing along similar lines, in their article entitled “Addressing Ethical Issues in Contemporary International Education & Development”, Sakil Malik and Jessi Hanson-DeFusco touch upon the issue of access to education by examining how the constant issues linked to neocolonialism have influenced the international education policy. They point out the fact that the United States has been in the center of the Western World, which has played a major
role in international education policy and the process of neocolonialism. By looking at the issue from the perspective of the Global South academics, researchers, decision makers, and practitioners, the authors identify two major phases in the policy cycle: Ex-Ante and Ex-Post phases. A strong suggestion they finish their paper with is that the Western World should work for the improvement of education in collaboration with the Global South if we truly want to achieve such effective, efficient, and sustainable development.

While the papers collected in this Special Issue have been written from comparative and international perspectives, they all aim to contribute to the improvement of education locally and globally. Together with the series published by other three journals, they are of great potential in improving education for a better future for us all.

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