



## Education and Culture Crises in the Early Twenty-First Century World

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 05 June 2017 Revised: 21 October 2017 Accepted: 25 October 2017 online: 22 May 2019</p>	<p>The thesis of this paper is that while culture as it appears in the world of the early twenty-first century, is radically different than was the case in all earlier centuries; schools and education systems worldwide still reflect the templates upon which they were built in eras past, and are not aligned with the realities and exigencies of the contemporary world as regards culture. The paper traces the beginning of schools in the ancient world, and how, according to the Cohen hypothesis, schools began to foist down a uniform, dominant culture. After the creation of mass systems of public schooling, school systems have still been serving as agents of cultural hegemony. However current demographic and social trends have coincided to create increasingly diverse societies; and current political, economic and life-philosophical contextual imperatives ask for an appreciation of diversity, and in such a context, inherited school systems appear to be more and more an anachronism. How education should be reformed in view of the new exigencies, form the concluding section of the paper.</p>
<p><b>KEYWORDS</b></p> <p>Comparative and International Education Culture Education Societal trends Twenty-first century</p>	

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## **Introduction**

Throughout history, culture has always been a potent force in society and also in education. The thesis of this paper is that while culture as it appears in the world of the early twenty-first century, is radically different than was the case in all earlier centuries; schools and education systems worldwide still reflect the templates upon which they were built in eras past, and are not aligned with the realities and exigencies of the contemporary world as regards culture. The paper commences with an explanation as to how and why schools were created in the ancient world, and how culture was a pivotal determinant in this process (Cohen hypothesis and the theory of Gray) and how culture was similarly a key shaping force in the creation of systems of mass public schooling as from the nineteenth century. In the next section the momentous changes regarding culture in contemporary society are depicted. How education should be reformed, in view of changes in culture in the world, is the topic of the concluding part of the paper.

## **The first schools**

According to the best available evidence schools appeared for the first time in Egypt and Mesopotamia by about 3000 BC, for the training of scribes, shortly after the invention of writing (Bowen, 1982: 8). Archaeological excavations produced a large number of school clay tablets, dating from around 2500 BC (i.e. also in the middle of the third millennium BC). The earliest probable school classroom excavated dates from about 2000 BC. This classroom was located in a palace at Mari, nearby the river Euphrates: in two rooms many rows of desks made by raw bricks were discovered, each of them apt to host from one to four pupils (Roaf, 1995). During the third millennium BC education was the prerogative of priests, and of scribes of the priests and scribes of the palace.

## **Explanation for the first schools: The Cohen hypothesis**

Up to now few researchers have attempted to document and to explain the origins of the first schools, but if impact statistics are anything to go by, the two explanations on the origin of schools enjoying the largest following are that of Cohen and of Gray. According to the theory of anthropologist Yehudi Cohen (1970), schools emerged for the first time in human history in what he calls "civilization states"; which he describes as states formed by the amalgamation of

smaller political entities. In such states, such as ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and ancient Athens it was necessary to train a tiny elite and accompanying bureaucracy to keep the state running. Among these elite groups local loyalties towards smaller political, geographical and social units had to be suppressed and be replaced by loyalties towards the new, overarching state. For this purpose schools were called into being.

Cohen (1970) views the creation of public national systems of mass (primary) education since the nineteenth century (first in Western Europe and North America; later followed in the rest of the world) as stemming from the same rationale as what happened in the ancient civilization states. Rulers of the newly formed nation-states, created from the myriad of smaller feudal entities, had to nurture a loyalty towards the new state and a common culture, and schools came to be seen as the means thereto. As this Western European school model was exported to the rest of the world, in the form of colonial education, it too served the purpose of stifling indigenous cultures and of foisting down the culture of the colonial masters, i.e. of the metropolis in Europe (e.g. *cf.* Haldane, 2012).

The role of the school, i.e. an institution of universal, compulsory education, as one of the means which the state employ to accomplish objectives regarded by it as desirable can be found tight down to modern day literature (e.g. Hartshorne, 1989: 103) and cultural rationalization (which puts forth this explanation for the existence of schools) is one of the main paradigms in Comparative Education (e.g. Welch, 1991).

In recent decades progressive scholarship began to take a negative view of the role of schools and public education systems in foisting down cultural hegemony in diverse societies, central to this was certainly the theory of cultural reproduction, of which the trailblazer publication was that of Bourdieu and Passeron (1970).

Whereas Cohen (1970) identifies a political motive for the emergence of schools as institutions, Gray (2013) tables an economic rationale for schools. According to him the centuries after the agricultural revolution have called for a new kind of person. In a hunting and gathering economy the individual could hunt and gather at his/her own time. An agricultural economy, however, requires a disciplined worker and, accordingly, schools have been called into existence in order to suppress the own volition and freedom instinct, and to replace these with a submissive, externally controlled and driven worker who subjects him/her to the prescriptions of society and its power and authority structures.

Both Cohen and Gray portray the emergence of schools as institutions that serve as instruments to foist down a dominant culture or style of life. To whichever of these explanations credence is lend to, (probably both contains some part of the whole truth of the reason for the creation of schools), in the early twenty-first century, a number of forceful societal trends, creating a totally picture of culture in the world, call into question this role of school and in fact asks for a radical reconceptualization of schools and of education. It is to these trends that the second part of the paper will turn to. First, however, the concept of culture needs to be clarified.

### **Culture: Conceptual clarification**

It is difficult to define the concept culture in one line or even in one sentence. Furthermore no universally accepted definition of the term culture exists. A survey and critical interrogation of the galaxy of definitions in circulation is beyond the scope of this paper. As a working definition, the following will be taken, synthesized from the various definitions given by Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2017):

Culture refers to an [integrated](#) pattern of human knowledge, belief, social forms, material traits and behavior shared by a group of people that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.

It should be noted that the element of a *group* in the definition is becoming increasingly problematic, in view of the strong contemporary societal trend of individualization, to be expatiated upon later in this paper. It is today not unthinkable to attach a particular culture to just one individual. Even more so, mainline leading scholars in Comparative Education, such as Paulston (1999) distinguish a paradigm called “radical alterity”, holding that in cyber society, one individual switching from one network and communication mode to the other, can be host of a multitude of cultural identities, assuming at different times different cultural identities.

Secondly, mindful of the controversy the way the use of the term “culture” in the social sciences in general and in Anthropology in particular, has generated, it should be pointed out that in this article the term culture is used as defined by Scholtz (2006), as referring to something any person, out of own volition, could associate or disassociate with.

### **Culture in the new world unfolding in the twenty-first century**

The following is a survey of salient trends visible in the world of the early twenty-first century, appearing to have a major impact on the manifestation of cultural patterns in the world.

#### *The population explosion*

Friedman (2008) makes a case that the three biggest challenges facing humankind are the population explosion, the environmental crisis, and the information and communications revolution. During the second half of the twentieth century the world has been characterized by a population explosion. Since 1950 the global population has almost tripled, from 2 525 149 312 in 1950 to 7 515 284 153 by (mid-) 2017 (Population Pyramids, 2017). While the growth rate is decelerating, e.g. it went down from 1.2 percent per year during the decade 2000-2010, to an estimated 1.0 percent per year for the decade 2010-2020 (World Bank, 2012: 44), 89 795 313 people are still being added each year to the earth's population (Population Reference Bureau, 2016). Ninety eight percent of this increase takes place in the developing countries: 88 661 107 people are annually added to the population of the developing world, against a mere 1 134 242 in the developed world (*Ibid.*). Large differences exist in the rate of population growth in the various regions of the world: from 0.3 percent per year in Europe and Central Asia (where some countries already have a negative rate of population growth, for example, Georgia - 1.2 percent per year, Hungary - 0.2 percent per year, and Bulgaria -0.9 percent per year) to Sub-Saharan Africa's swift rate of expansion of 2.7 percent per year (World Bank, 2017). The rate of population growth in the various parts of the world are presented in table 1

**Table 1 Rate of Population Growth in Various world Regions**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Annual Growth Rate (percentage)</b>
Europe and Central Asia	0.3
East Asia-Pacific Arc	0.7
North America	0.9
Latin America and the Caribbean	1.2
South Asia	1.5
Middle East-North Africa	2.0
Sub-Saharan Africa	2.7

World Bank, 2017

This differential growth means a change in the numeric strength of the various cultural realms within the world

Although slowing down, the world's population growth still has some way to go before it will stabilize. According to World Bank projections the earth's population will stabilize between ten and eleven billion, somewhere during the second half of the twenty-first century.

*The changing age-pyramid: an ageing (developed countries) and maturing (developing countries) profile*

At the end of the twentieth century the average ages of the population of the various world-regions were as follows: Europe 37.1 years, North-America 35.1 years, Oceania 30.7 years, Asia 25.6 years, Latin America 23.9 years and Africa 18.3 years.

As the population of all countries undergo rapid demographic transition, the average population will rise everywhere. The estimated average age of the global population of 2050 will be 40 years. The developing countries will experience the biggest surge in population numbers in the mature sector (15-65 years of age), while the developed countries will find their biggest rise in the 65-plus years group. . In the year 2050, the estimated percentages of the population 65 years and older of the various world regions will be as follows: (2000 figures in brackets): Europe 28 percent (13 percent), North America 20 percent (12 percent), Oceania 19.9 percent (10 percent), Asia 18 percent (5 percent), Latin America 18 percent (5

percent), Middle-East North Africa 12 percent (3 percent) and Sub-Saharan Africa 3 percent (2 percent).

#### *The Northern and Western Migration to the Developed World*

One out of 33 people in the world today is an international migrant (International Organisation for Migration, 2012), compared to one out of 35 in the year 2000 (Steyn & Wolhuter, 2008: 16). The number of international migrants in the world rose from 79 million in 1960 to 175 million in 2000 (Steyn & Wolhuter, 2008: 16) to 214 million in 2012 (International Organisation for Migration, 2012). The population explosion and abject poverty in large parts of the Global South explain why two major vectors of this international migration are the flow from the South (Africa, Latin America) to the North (Western-Europe and North-America) and from the East (Turkey, Eastern Europe, Asia) to the West (Western Europe and North-America).

#### *Mobility*

Twenty first century population is a more mobile population, and not only in terms of relatively permanent movement (the two main vectors of which have been highlighted by the preceding section). The increasing mobility of people constituting modern society has been the theme of research and a series of publications by University of Lancaster (United Kingdom) Sociologist, John Urry. The following example could be used to illustrate the increasing mobility of humans in contemporary society. In 1800, people in the United States of America travelled on average 50 meters per day, they now travel 50 kilometers per day (Urry, 2007: 3-4).

#### *Communications-, information and knowledge technology revolution*

Currently an instant 24-hour planetary information network is rapidly taking shape, due to free access to and widespread use of the computer, internet, fax machine and mobile telephone. There are currently more mobile phones than people in the world: in 2013 the global population stood at 7.2 billion, at that stage there were 7.3 billion mobile phones in the world (Pelser, 2013:2). With just short of 900 million facebookers, more than 500 million twitterati and 2.3 billion internet users, a global digital culture has emerged (Joubert, 2012-1:

3). It took Twitter a mere five months to go from 10 billion to 20 billion tweeds, after it took four years to reach the first 10 billion (Anon., 2010: 4).

The information- and communication technology revolution has radical implications for knowledge (for the purposes of this chapter, information refers to data that has been fitted into categories and classification schemes or other patterns. Knowledge refers to information that that have been further refined into general patterns and interpreted in an edifice or structure of other existing knowledge). The stock of knowledge is multiplying at an ever increasing rate. Where the stock of knowledge even as late as the beginning of the last century grew at a snail's pace to double every 100 years, the current doubling time is every two and a half years (Joubert, 2012-2: 9).

#### *The rise of multiculturalism and minority interest groups*

The sustained stream of immigrants from the Southern Countries pouring into the developed countries, the modern day Creed of Human Rights (to be discussed below), and the erosion of the power of centralized nation-states (to be discussed below) all contribute towards the replacement of the long standing idea of the melting-pot policy — the foisting down by the state of one centralized, state-sanctioned culture, and the suppression of the cultures of minority groups, because these cultures are deemed to be a threat to the power of the state — by multiculturalism, i.e. giving positive recognition to diversity. The same applies to minority interest groups, such as Women Rights, Eco-conscious groups and other single issue lobbies.

#### *The Social revolution*

The domination of the primary social grouping, that is the family, is diminishing. This applies to both roles and style of living. Economically the family has been for a long time no longer an economic production unit, and even as consumption unit it is busy crumbling. The core family, consisting of a husband, wife and two children, are no longer the modus/norm to the extent that it used to be. This is graphically illustrated in the 2010 Pew Report, *The Decline of Marriage and the Rise of New Families* in the United States of America. For example, in 1960, 70 percent of adult Americans were married, now only half are (Luscombe, 2010: 36). Eight times as many children in the United States of America as in 1960 are now born out of the wedlock (*Ibid.*).



The secondary social grouping, the workplace, is declining in importance too. With the decline in the percentage of people who have a “job for a lifetime”, and the rise of contract work, temporary work, people working from home and the rise of the informal economic sector and self-employment, the workplace is bound to decline in importance.

Tertiary social groupings (that is functional interest groups) on the other hand, is rising in importance, due to trends such as the empowerment of interest groups by the communication and information technology revolutions.

#### *Economic Internationalism*

The world economy is getting more and more integrated, i.a. under the influence of the communication revolution, the fading of the nation state (to be discussed below) and the role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Multinational companies are becoming increasingly prominent, and an enormous international financial market, which operates 24/7, is evolving.

#### *Economic liberalization and privatization*

By the end of the 1970s, the welfare state became unsustainable as governments became trapped in popular entitlement programmes (health services, public transport services, etc.) it could not pay for. By the early 1980s it became clear that the welfare state was overextending itself; for example, by 1990 the US public budget deficit was US\$200 billion, and while the Gross Domestic Product was growing at a rate of 8 percent per year, government debt was expanding 11 percent annually (Davidson & Rees-Mogg, 1992: 394). In the Third World, the predicament of national governments was even more serious, as national debt levels rise, and after 1990, Third World governments lost their trump-card in playing off the powers of the West and the Eastern Bloc against each other for securing financial aids. The unsustainability of and the resultant implosion of the nation state, especially one claiming control of a centrally, command economy, have resulted in a worldwide process, which started in the 1980s in North America and Western Europe and which spread since 1990 to the countries of the East and the South. This process entails the contraction of the role of the state in the national economy, and giving the forces of the free market freedom of reign.

*The rise of knowledge economies*

In the histories of (national) economies the following phases are distinguished: a phase of hunting and gathering, a phase of agriculture (and/or other extractive industries such as mining, fishing or forestry for trade and profit), a phase of (manufacturing industries), a phase of services (that is where services constitute the majority of economic activities), and now a phase of a knowledge economy; that is, where the production and consumption of new knowledge has become the driving force of national economies (Pang, 2013: 19). In this regard Florida (2002) has written about the emergence of a creative class in modern society, i.e. a category of people earning a living from creativity, from being creative.

*The demise of the once omnipotent nation state*

The above discussed information and communication revolutions, the globalization of economies, and the downscaling of the activities of the state, all contribute towards the erosion of the power of the state.

At the same time, many Third World countries face the imperative for improving the efficiency of the state by means of building capacity to perform those core functions that are assigned to the state, such as dealing with terrorism, corruption, and drug trafficking, and providing security to its citizens. Particularly in the developing world, weak, incompetent and nonexistent governments are the source of severe problems (*cf.* Fukuyama, 2004).

Amidst the crumbling of the power of the nation state, the locus of power is shifting from the nation state into two opposite directions: upward toward supranational and international structures, and downward to sub-national structures and to the level of the individual.

*Decentralisation and localization*

The information and communication revolution, as well as the weakening of the grip of the nation state on civil society, create, on the other hand, intranational (regional, provincial and local) groupings and minorities opportunities for self-assertion and self-determination.

### *Individualisation*

Customer-tailored manufacturing, individual access to a variety of information, the breakdown of state controls and the rise of the creed of Human Rights, are all conducive to individualization (raising the importance of the individual). How business through the advertising industry contribute towards this feeling of self-importance by individuals was masterfully related in the much spoken 2002 BBC documentary, "The Century of the Self", which was watched by millions all over the globe. During the last decades, the explosion of CDs, walkmans, videos, customization, the internet, facebook and the like all contributed to a growing self-centredness, because each individual can make his/her own choices without consulting others.

### *The Creed of Human Rights*

Since the middle of the twentieth century the idea of governments or rulers or even a democratic majority having sovereign powers has been steadily replaced by the Creed of Human Rights, i.e. each individual human has inalienable human rights, beyond the reach of any ruler or government or democratic majority.

### *Democratisation*

The empowerment of the individual, the loss of control by the state, and the current wave of economic liberalization have also ignited a process of democratisation that first (in the 1990s) swept conspicuously through the countries of the erstwhile East Bloc, followed by the countries of the Southern Continents, and is currently sweeping through the Arab world. The information and communications revolution too has been playing its role in democratizing the world, and democratizing the influence of the individual. Wael Ghonim's plaintive posts on facebook have helped to spark the Egyptian revolution (Stengel, 2011: 6). Fathi Terbil's detention helped to ignite the revolt in Libya, Katsumobu Sakurai denounced the lethargy of Japanese authorities in helping earthquake victims, and the artist Ai Weiwei became the conscience of China (*Ibid.*). What is happening is the democratisation of influence.

People at grassroots level demand participation in decision-making in all forms of political and social life, including the school, the workplace and local government. Knowledge which is

available to everybody is fuelling the movement toward democratisation. Toffler (1990: 4) provides the following example: whereas a generation ago a medical practitioner was an unquestionable figure of authority, “a god in a white coat”, the information revolution has broken up the monopoly the medical profession once had on medical knowledge. Today that knowledge is available to everybody.

Dalin and Rust (1996: 57) remark that the most obvious symbol of the new age is the obsolescence of the notion of simple majority rule which blurs variety, openness and diversity. An updated operation of democratic governance, in tandem with the new, diverse social structure and in line with the new technology (which guarantees choices, which allows instant and mass participation in decision making) will have to be engineered.

#### *The persistent but new and more complex presence of religion*

Despite frequently made claims that the modern age is a post-religious secular age, religion persists as an important factor in individual lives and in social dynamics. A recent survey in 230 countries found that 84 percent of the global population still regard themselves as belonging to some religious affiliation (Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, 2012).

Three aspects complicate matters further. Firstly the existence of multi-religious societies (part of the multi-cultural make-up of modern societies explained above). Secondly many of the 16 percent of the global population who do not regard themselves as part of any formal religious structure (e.g. church domination) are not atheistic or agnostic — e.g. 68 percent of people in the United States of America who belongs to no religious association believe in the existence of a God (Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, 2012, *cf.* also Butler-Bass, 2012). Thirdly, in an age of individualism people no longer always neatly fit into neat categories such as “Christian” or “Catholic” but an infinitely more rich and complex tapestry of individualized religious convictions are taking shape (*cf.* Van der Walt *et al.*, 2010).

The increasing individualism, the rise of minority interest groups and prolific mass media of contemporary society, compounded by increasing population mobility and democratisation and rampant individualism, are sparking a diversity of value systems that are replacing the traditional, homogeneous societies that were previously characterised by specific, uniform value systems.

However, Dalin and Rust (1996: 65) caution that there will have to be some limits to, and reconciliation between the plurality of value systems, in order to ensure peaceful co-existence. As no model currently exists, the task of the future is to develop a master plan for maximum diversity between the extremes of uniformity and irreconcilable diversity. In this regard, Fukuyama (1999) writes about “social capital”. He defines the concept as “a set of informal values or norms adhered to by a group that permits cooperation among them” (Fukuyama, 1999: 16).

### **New cultural mosaic and resultant education crisis: No cultural crisis but an education crisis in the contemporary world calling scholars of Education to task**

The outcome of the above trends, is a proliferation in the number of cultures in the world. In this new world culture has been individualized (each individual is to decide upon and put together his own configuration of culture which he/she will exhibit) and deterritorialized: societies are no longer characterized by homogenous, uniform cultures. Moreover, diversity is valued by the modern society and economy. An education system where the dominant motive is the foisting down of a dominant and uniform hegemony/culture appear to be increasingly at odds with the world and what society wants and needs. Hence it is at the point of schools and education systems where the crises are currently located, not on the side of culture. What is imperative is a total reconceptualization of schools and education systems, aligning such education systems with the reality and requirements of the contemporary world. The last part of the paper will offer a number of guidelines for the construction of such a new education system, aligned to world of the twenty-first century.

### **Conclusion**

In rebuilding the edifice of education institutions and systems around the world, in line with the new societal imperatives of the twenty-first century, a new mission is dawning for the field of Comparative and International Education. No unanimity exists as to the definition of Comparative Education (for the range of definitions of Comparative Education, the interest reader is referred to Manzon, 2011: 153-183). Comparative Education can be define a as having a –three in one perspective on education (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2015).

□ an education *system* perspective

- a contextual perspective
- comparative perspective

This can schematically be presented as in figure 1.

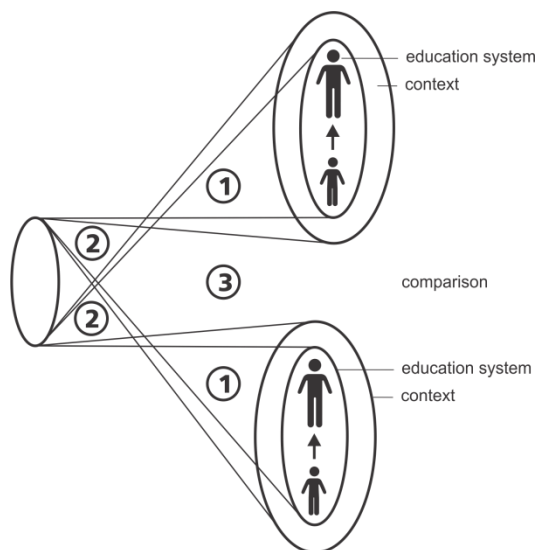


Figure 1: The Three-in-One Perspective of Comparative Education:

1. Education System Perspective, 2. Contextual Perspective, 3. Comparative Perspective

The particular instance of education, of an adult/education educating/teaching a child/education and – being of interest to other scholarly fields of Education, such as Educational Psychology – normally lies beyond the resolution power of Comparative Education. Comparative Education focuses on the education system. The focus of Comparative Education is broader than just the education system *per se*. The education system is studied within its societal context, and is regarded as being shaped by, or as being the outcome of societal forces (geographic, demographic, social, economic, cultural, political and religious). Conversely, Comparative Education also studies the effect of education on society, i.e. the societal outcomes of education, e.g. the effect of education on economic growth. Finally, Comparative Education does not contend with studying one education system in its societal context in isolation. Various education systems, shaped by their societal contexts, are compared; hence the comparative perspective.

In view of trends in both the worlds of scholarship and in education, there is in recent times a belief that the name of the field should change to Comparative and International Education. The term International Education has a long history and has taken on many meanings (and for a survey of this diversity of meanings the interested reader is referred to Wilson, 1994 and to Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014: 53-71). However, here International Education is used as explained by Phillips & Schweisfurth (2014: 60), namely that International Education refers to scholarship studying education through a lens bringing an international perspective. As far as scholarship is concerned, the trailblaser of the study of the international education project, were the two monumental books of Philip Coombs (1968, 1985), *The world education crisis: a systems approach* (1968) and *The world crisis in education: the view from the eighties* (1985). With the scholarly field of Comparative Education then evolving into Comparative and International Education, the idea is that single/limited area studies and comparisons then eventually feed the all-encompassing, global study of the international education project.

May Comparative and International Education rise to this occasion, to guide the restructuring of education institutions and education around the globe, in that way contributing to the creation of a world more congenial and more fulfilling for humanity, and may the Comparative Education Society of Iran, as the latest addition to the world-wide fraternity of Comparative Education Societies (currently there are 43 societies accredited to the World Council of Comparative Education Societies) too find its niche in this endeavor, and may this conference be the first step thereto

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