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PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS IN A CHANGING WORLD

THE GLOBAL SOLIDARITY CRISIS


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- AGUSTINUS RYADI

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Education in a Wrestling Match with Standardization

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Abstract

Standardized tests have become the gold standard for determining the success of the educational process, which translates to this: if you pass the test, you are considered to have succeeded both in your education and in life itself. But a plethora of articles, books, TEDtalks and YouTube videos tell us that that assumption is riddled with holes. Standardized tests are suspected of: (1) being discriminatory in its allowing students to pass on to higher levels of education or have become road blocks to permitting the students to where they want to go and where they might be of greater use to society; (2) straightjacketing the educational process through a restrictive curriculum designed to cater to the standardized test. With just these two objections we already see how standardized testing goes against the very goals proposed by UNESCO for Education in the 21st Century, which includes creativity, implying that the products of the educational system have to be people who can think outside the box. But standardization is a box. This paper proposes the hurdling of the standardization blockades by: (1) diversifying the way that the success of the educational process is determined, i.e., offering alternative and not depending largely on standardized tests; (2) designing the assessment of educational success by returning to the original aims of education; (3) creating an open system of education as suggested by Thomas, which will actually lead the entire educational system away from its dependence on standardized tests.

Keywords: Education, Standardization, Globalization, Testing

A. To Standardize or Not to Standardize: That is the Question

Standardization has long been widely accepted as one of the most effective ways of uplifting and ensuring the quality of education for the people of a nation. But as time passes, its flaws start to show themselves through the cracks, especially through the exclusion of some sectors of society for whom the standard tests have become barriers to achieve their educational goals.

A clear example of such criticism over standard testing are the concerns raised as regards the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD). In an overview of all the criticisms that PISA has received from the beginning till about recently, Yong (2020) lists down the flaws of the system and attempts to discredit the test. He says:

It is clear from the criticism raised against PISA that the entire enterprise is problematic and does not deserve the attention it enjoys from all over the world. Its flawed view of education, flawed implementation, and flawed reasoning are sufficient to discredit its findings and recommendations. Its negative impact on global education is emerging. Yet, its influence continues to expand (Yong, 2020, p 17).

When tests are crafted, as we may understand, assumptions have to be made. After defining what we have to find out, we will have to declare what we think would be the indicators or signs of the things we are testing for. In the case of PISA, the thing that seems to be sought is the effectiveness of education. Now, “effectiveness of education”, if we are to be more critical about it, could mean many things, as we might imagine as we ask these questions: Can effectiveness of education be seen in the satisfaction or happiness attained by the students once they graduate and go on in their lives? Or could we measure the effectiveness of the educational system by looking at what type of jobs or the amount of salary, the students later attain? Would a more effective measure of educational success be the economic success of the nation as a whole?

These questions reveal to us that the term “effectiveness of education” can range in meaning from a subjective appreciation to monetary values, two extremes that may not correlate to one another. Even if the people of a nation were to have high salaries, their happiness quotient can be lower than a nation with lower salaries. In which case, nation A will be more educationally successful than nation B from one point of view, and nation B will be more educationally successful than nation A from another point of view, depending on whether you are equating success to subjective appreciation or monetary value.

PISA’s present website is currently honest enough in stating the limits of its programme’s goals: “PISA measures 15-year-olds’ ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges.” Yong (2020) claims that it was not like that before. He says that PISA was marketing itself in 1999 as overall and universal standard for ranking a nation’s educational success (Yong, 2020). That said, we also have to be honest enough to acknowledge the efforts of PISA to make changes in accord with the criticisms made on it. For example, the PISA page in the OECD website announces the types of tests that will be used in the next years. The text is copied below.

Next steps

OECD member countries and Associates decided to postpone the PISA 2021 assessment to 2022 and the PISA 2024 assessment to 2025 to reflect post-Covid difficulties.

PISA 2022

PISA 2022 will focus on mathematics, with an additional test of **creative thinking**. The new **PISA 2022 mathematics framework** was recently launched. Preparations for this test are underway with participants from 38 OECD members and likely 50+ non-members involved.

PISA 2025

PISA 2025 will focus on science and include a **new assessment of foreign languages**. It will also include the innovative domain of Learning in the Digital World which aims to measure students' ability to engage in self-regulated learning while using digital tools.

(from PISA website)

Note that there is an effort to specifically state what is being tested or what is being emphasized in the testing for each specific year. In principle, if the national governments go down to the nuances, they will be able to catch what specific aspect of learning is being investigated for each year, and their educational policies should specifically target the deficiencies in those areas mentioned.

But media and government are often lazy to make nuanced use of the PISA results. Take, for example, the reaction of ACER, the Australian Council for Educational Research, whose aim is “creating and promoting research-based knowledge, products and services to improve learning”. An article written by Lisa Visentin (2022) entitled *Education Minister Blames ‘Dud Teachers’ for Declining Education Results* on the ACER website says that the education minister started a tirade against government teachers based on the PISA results that year.

Lisa de Bortoli (2021), also in the ACER website, tries to put things more in perspective. She claims that the PISA results turn out that way because the Australian students did not take the PISA tests seriously. After all, taking it did not affect in anyway the grades that they were going to receive in school. Her claim is supported by Steward Riddle in *The Conversation* (online) in an article posted on November 19, 2021 entitled *Yes, Australia’s PISA Test Results May Be Slipping, But New Findings Show Most Students Didn’t Try Very Hard*. Riddle goes on by questioning the reliability of the PISA results and/or the way we interpret those results.

The origins of PISA already give us an idea of what type of bias it may have. Note that PISA is a project of the OECD, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. That in itself tells us that the OECD has identified Education as one of the major factors for spurring economic development. Having this as a backdrop, we could perfectly understand that PISA intends to **provide assessment tools for nations** so that they can craft national education policies that would foster economic development. Obviously, if we were to take this and the alternative success indicators of subjective happiness and monetary value, the scale would tip

more towards monetary value than happiness, even though admittedly happiness is difficult to achieve when financial woes are great. But again, there is no fixed correlation between maximum monetary success and maximum happiness.

To make headway into answering the question on whether to standardize or not, we have to return to what we really initially intended to achieve with the setting of all these standardized tests and requirements. What we initially intended to achieve was: education. Let us reflect on what we may really mean when we say that we want to improve education by clarifying to ourselves what education really is.

B. What is Education and What is the Real Aim of Education?

In trying to define education, we must first carefully take note that the word “education” may change its meaning or just some nuances of meaning depending on the context in which it is used. This is probably the reason why we feel at times that we have such conflicting views about education or about the results we want to achieve with education or how we care to measure the success of a national educational system (Arslan, 2018). It could very well be that our opinions are compatible as long as we realize that we are referring to different meanings of the word “education”.

At the very core of most if not all of the possible meanings of the word “education”, we can find two universally present and essential elements: (a) a development in the thought, attitudes and abilities of the student; and (b) the consequent increase of the ability of the individual to survive and hopefully even flourish in his life within society. If we look at Durkheim’s definition (ref., Arslan, 2018), we see education as the process of passing on a *cultural legacy*: it is all the knowledge that the future generations will need in order to survive and move forward in their development as human beings. This is aptly expressed in the popular word *humanization* (Polo, 1994).

What is the aim of education? Dewey, Arslan says, focuses on providing an experience in schools that will prepare the students for what they will meet in society (Arslan, 2018). But Arslan himself indicates that what has to happen in schools is learning and he defines learning this way:

Learning: What is learning? How do we learn? Learning is not only a complex process, but also some kind of a long-term psycho-social process. Learning includes individual acquisition of competencies, behaviours, skills, values, and knowledge. Children acquire these attributes through instruction or experience. The learning process is explained with psychological and physiological approaches. The learning process can be described with three important models. These models are behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism (Arslan, 2018, p 4, the underscoring is ours).

When we set our meaning of “education” in a particular discussion, we must keep in mind that the meaning varies according to two coordinates. In the first “coordinate”, the meaning of education varies in accord with its reference to the individual. When we look closely, there are some discussions on education that tend to focus more on the individual’s right to develop his life in the way that he wishes. This the focus when we are leaning towards giving the maximum opportunities to flourish according to their freely chosen paths, oftentimes based on natural abilities and the fruit of past educational choices. This coordinate is what has given rise to theories like the Theory of Multiple Intelligences or the Whole Brain Theory: these theories want all the types of personalities and neurological types to maximally benefit from education, and the solution is often providing different learning environments and methods for the different personalities and neurological types that could be identified.

The other coordinate to be paid attention to when determining the meaning of education is the *common good*⁸⁹. In the end, we have to admit that education cannot be an egotistic, solitary trip to one’s flourishing. All education occurs within a specific cultural and socio-political milieu. These conditions often channel our educational choices towards what works in a certain society for, after all, as we have said above, one very important function of education is to make us fit well into and be useful to society. This is one of the aspects of having a meaningful life, and education has a very important role in this process.

Moore, Arslan (2018) says, focuses on providing society with “desirable citizens”. This statement is interesting, for it opens this author’s eyes to the fact that education can be defined and the educational system constructed differently depending on whether society’s focus is on (a) allowing the individual to develop all her potentials to the full or (b) providing for the needs of society. If the leaders of a nation think that their role is to maximize freedom and create a very diverse society (which means that we will have to wait for the surprise of what history will eventually bring us) then the system of education will tend to open as many paths as possible for personal development. If the leaders of a nation think that their role is to create a certain type of society that they hold as an ideal, then the system of education should be designed according to that ideal and the citizens be educated with the aim of having all the citizens serve that ideal.

This author thinks that that is precisely what happened in Communist China and Russia: since the goal was to build up a Communist state, then the system of education was directed mainly towards having the people to think Communist, act Communist and be Communist. In Red China, the most important text to be learned by heart was Mao’s Red Book.

But, as they also say in Psychology, this is a matter of choosing an applicable combination of things within a spectrum rather than exclusive either-or choice. Hence, the nations are free to take what they think is best within the spectrum but it would be unwise for them to choose

⁸⁹ I put the word *common good* in between parenthesis because, if we are to follow Thomas Aquinas’ concept of the common good, it would be impossible for the common good to be taken to an extreme as to unjustly eliminate the individual’s freedom. If it does reach that point then it is no longer the common good.

exclusively one or the other extreme. If we use the metaphor of coordinates, then our choice system will land in a point where the values of the x-axis (that is, personal flourishing) and y-axis (that is, the common good) are maximized.

Now, if the aim of education is the correct balance between personal flourishing of the individual and the common good, then our next question would be: does standardization or do standard tests effectively help in achieving this goal?

C. Is Standardization the Best Way to Achieve the Aim of Education?

The answer to this question is “yes” and “no”, or rather “no” and “yes”. We put “no” before the “yes” even though both are relevant in order to answer the question because there is so much material cautioning us about standardized testing that it seems to clearly show that a large part of the world has gone along the wrong path in how it looks on this tool for raising the quality of education. We mean that the red lights have been blinking and they should not be ignored but rather these signs have to move us into action immediately in order to find a solution.

On the other hand, the answer should be “no” and “yes” because it is difficult to find means other than standard testing in order to have some inkling of how effectively our educational system is working. Standard testing still is useful, but we cannot fall into the trap of thinking that one standard test is applicable and valid for all types of education. Many educators agree that, while using standard tests has so many disadvantages, we still need some way of knowing if the students are making any progress. We need feedback. There are educators that provide alternatives. Describing these alternatives are not part of the goal of this paper, but it will certainly be interesting for anyone interested in education to know these alternatives (Smith, 2018).

In this section, we are more interested in looking at the question as to whether testing effectively helps in achieving the goal of the educational process. Now, we have said that the goal of education is two-fold, both aspects of relatively equal importance, the combination of which has to be carefully blended in accord with: (1) one’s personal circumstances and (2) the socio-cultural milieu in which one lives. One’s relevant insertion into society has an undeniable impact on personal flourishing, and the flourishing of the individual citizens of society have a very positive impact on the development of the entire society as a whole.

UNESCO has identified the fostering of *creativity* as one of the important world educational goals for the 21st century. It is part and parcel of the general transition taking place in the educational world today from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning (Singh, 1991). Becoming student-centered not only means having the student actively crafting and implementing his own path toward personal flourishing. This necessarily means paying attention to the individual differences in talent and inclination, in nuances of personality and background culture. If that is so, then there should be an effort to extract oneself sufficiently

away from a factory system style of education where “quality control” (a.k.a. standardized testing) produces uniform products to more individualized system where the diversity of products provides for a creation of a more diverse society where citizens occupy a variety of socio-cultural and economic niches. According to Singh (1991), graded testing is one of the characteristics of the “factory mode” of education. This diversity and creativity are seen to be beneficial to society since new problems need new solutions. Sticking to the same solution for different problems can get us into trouble. On the other hand, finding new solutions requires creativity.

Thus, overemphasis of standardized tests could clearly become obstacle rather than a helpful tool for the achievement of the goals of education. But for now, educators need to grapple and wrestle with the use of standardized test until we collectively come up with a better system that truly serves the purpose of developing the talents of the population in order to create a happy and healthy society.

D. UNESCO and the Incheon Declaration

We have said that the aim of education is to promote personal flourishing while at the same time achieving the common good. While there exists a common good for a specific nation, there is also a level of common good that embraces the entire world.

When the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was established in November 1945, its main objective was –and still is– “to contribute to peace and security in the world by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science, culture and communication in order to foster universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and the human rights and fundamental freedoms that are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.” (UNESCO-UIS, 2014, opening page)

The realization that education is a key factor to peace among nations is a truly brilliant discovery! From then on, the UNESCO has constantly worked towards setting and achieving goals that they hope would finally lead to providing every man, woman and child in the world the education that they need to succeed in life and to make a positive contribution to society, at the very least to be a catalyst for world peace in every place on this planet they may find themselves.

Of course, in order to achieve those goals, UNESCO would have to set quantifiable targets, establish standards and find the tools for measuring the educational achievements of the very diverse countries with their very diverse cultures that are found on this earth. For that purpose, UNESCO has created in 1999 the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), which is the statistical office of UNESCO and the UN depository for global statistics in the fields of education, science and technology, culture and communication.

To facilitate the study of the quality of education achieved in the different parts of the world, the UIS has had to establish the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The ISCED is a set of international standards that could be used for grading educational achievements, the latest version of which is from the year 2011. It has been revised twice, presumably to adjust to new things that have been discovered in the field of education.

The ISCED 2011 is quite complex and we simply have to applaud the UIS for coming up with these standards based on as diverse circumstances as possible. The ISCED 2011, however, is a working tool, not an educational solution. Indeed, we need to make some assessment in order to more or less have an idea of where to start.

As we said above, standards can be debated, debated and debated. What is laudable with the efforts of UNESCO and UIS is that their assessment tools have been the fruit of many and long discussions among the member nations.

What is clear though, is that educational achievements in one country can cause socio-political ripples in other places in the world. Hence, UNESCO's interest in providing the needed education so that the socio-political ripples caused by the state of education in a country produces positive ripples that would be for the benefit not only of one's own nation but of the world over.

The existence of UNESCO just proves the point that there is a need for solidarity and dialogue in order to reach educational goals. The more nations help one another, the easier it is to render to each one the rights that they individually have in terms of education.

In May 19-22, 2015, in Incheon, South Korea, UNESCO and its partners held the World Education Forum (WEF) (2015), the fruit of which is the *Incheon Declaration: Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All*. The Declaration sets very ambitious goals or eradicating problems in education in the world including the lack of inclusivity and inequality. It dreams of achieving those goals by the year 2030. One could imagine how much dialogue and work will have to come into this project, which will need to arrive on agreements on standards against which the completion of the goals could be assessed.

All that would mean debates on standardization. It is not the goal of this paper to enter into a critique of the Incheon Declaration or of UNESCO. Suffice it for us to point out that they will have to come up with some conclusions on the pros and cons of standardization.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

So, what should we do if there are problems with standardized testing? Singh (2018) says that the solution does not lie only in revising the manner of feedback or changing the nature of testing from standardized to non-standardized. He says that it involves the overhaul of the entire system:

The crucial significance of the education system lies in the fact that future-oriented educational change indispensably involves corresponding change and redirection of the education system. The envisioning of new goals for education must also encompass transforming the system.

To this we completely agree. All over the world, we see Departments of Education setting standards and obliging schools and universities to achieve them by providing written proof, which then trickles down and translates into standardized testing in the classroom. Since a system, such as the present one we have set up, is like a factory with a specified idea of what the final product should be, quality control testing would be needed to ensure a “uniformly high-quality” product. This is the reason why there are groups of educators and non-educators who are in favor of doing away with schools (Thomas, 2021).

Singh (2018, p 50) says that education in the 21st century should be an open system:

“The system should have the capacity to nurture creative institutions which can most effectively do the educating. Much of the crisis in education at present, in developing as much as in developed countries, has its origin in institutions which, dominated by the [factory] system, are replicating rather than creating. An important way to lift the leaden weight of the system would be to displace it in many of its functions by networks of creative institutions with capacity for collective response to the innovative challenges of future-oriented education.”

An open system is one that accepts varied formats and types of organization. In other words, the “learning centers” (which we now distinguish from schools) will look differently from one another. The style of each learning center will cater to the more specified skills or ideals that they may want to nurture there and which the students and their parents have already identified as was is most fitting for the future of the students and which, at present, seem to be the path towards their maximum personal growth and maximum productive insertion into society.

This author finds a beginning of this diversification in some schools in the Philippines. One concrete example is The Philippine High School for the Arts. The school provides full scholarship to children whose talent for literature and the performing arts have been identified at an early age. Together with the development of their talents in performing arts that they are skillful in, they also receive the normal basic K-12 education, albeit tailored to allow their simultaneous intense training of the arts. The campus is fittingly set on the mountainside near a forest reserve where the children can have the peace and quiet that will allow them to focus on the development of their talents. The Philippine government pays for the entire cost of their education.

Note that this school was preceded by another school of full scholars named Philippine Science High School. Philippine Science High School began as only one school in the capital with scholars from all over the country. Now it is an entire system of schools spread throughout several provinces in the Philippine Islands. Aside from the K-12 education, the students get special training to open more possibilities to becoming scientists and researchers. As one can see, this school would be the type that the PISA test would be fostering, and not the Philippine High School for the Arts. Dr. Leopoldo Torralballa, a professor of mathematics at the New York University, had seen the Bronx High School of Science in New York City, which gave high quality math and science education to the youth. He wanted something similar in the Philippines and his idea was supported by Congressman Virgilio Afable (Rappler.com, 2014).

A further example would be the CITE Technical Institute in Cebu City, Philippines, which gives training to those with capabilities of working as skilled industry workers. The learning is hands-on and the students are in the factories themselves for most of the period of their training. This addresses skills that are different from those fostered by The Philippine High School for the Arts and The Philippine Science High School.

A fourth example would be Dagatan Family Farm School. The school was originally established to give practical training to the children of farmers, on the one hand, to encourage them to stay at the farm and dedicate themselves to agriculture –which is certainly of great importance to the nation— and, on the other hand, to uplift their skills and abilities so that they can modernize the farms. Unfortunately, this model was difficult to sustain and, little by little, the project somewhat had to gravitate more towards the normal K-12 system. For the original project to succeed, one of the goals should be to change the mind set of society, of the parents and of the students so that they start to appreciate a very professional type of work in agriculture and to leave behind the cliché that working on a farm means belonging to a lower status compared to other members of society. But this revolution in attitude was probably too big a project of just one school or a few schools to undertake. Thus, eventually, the pull of the K-12 system prevailed.

Still, it seems from what we have seen in the previous sections, the call to diversification will not go away. As this author contemplated what this could look like in the future, he was reminded of the *medieval guilds* that once reigned at the time when Europe was transitioning from a feudal to a mercantile society (Britannica, 2021). Guilds were trade associations formed by merchants who started to work together in order to provide greater professionalism in their trade, whether this be being blacksmiths, carpenters, fishermen, etc. Encyclopedia Britannica says that previous to this, the merchants were mostly itinerant and solitary: they would go about from place to place peddling their goods, or they would be providing their services only in their own village. The formation of the guilds changed that, and its success was such that eventually the merchants started forming a middle class with social privileges coming close to

the influence and wealth of the land-owning nobility. Each guild promoted and raised the quality of the products of their trade through the apprenticeship provided to the younger generations.

We somehow imagine that the new educational institutions would be like guilds, not necessarily catering to the specific trades, but addressing the educational needs of people with different talents and abilities. The more diverse, the merrier, although financial support of such an array of institutions would have to be considered. The “factory” approach somehow intended to and succeeded in maximizing financial resources, to the disadvantage of those who did not fall into the category of skill and ability that was being fostered in the schools. It is interesting to realize that the first universities were actually *guilds* of lecturers or of students or of both lecturers and students (Beckwith, 2012).

We note, however, that the educational “guild” or new educational institutions should focus, not on the financial viability side of the institution, although of course that is important and basic, but rather on the values and ideals that educational institutions have as their true goal. The term “market model educational system” (Waslander, 2010) is widely used, and the system has advantages, especially from the point of view of parents and students being free to choose what type of education they want or to ensure the quality education for their children. But treating students collectively like a market converts them into customers, and this notion would certainly change the dynamics of the relationship between teacher and student.

There are those who point out that there is a difference between a *teacher* and a *mentor*, although we do oftentimes call someone a teacher even when her style of teaching is the style of teaching of a mentor. A mentor has greater concern over the welfare of the individual students and strives to become a model to them, which is believed to be of great importance in the education process. For this reason, entrenching society too much into a market model type of education should be avoided because that might produce too many teachers and very few mentors.

As regards our comparison of the new teaching institutions with the guilds, the guilds actually died because, as economic system transitioned from feudalism to capitalism, the monopolistic trait of guilds could not survive (Bosshart & Lopus, 2013). The new teaching institutions should not be monopolistic. Monopolies are advantageous only when the primary goal is the maximization of profit, and indeed profits will go up if one is able to eliminate competition. In an open system of education, there should be no desire to eliminate “competition”. Each and every one of the diverse teaching institutions is occupying a specific niche which caters to a specific group of students with certain abilities. If the aim of the teaching institution is to gobble up as many of the students as it can from the market, then the aim of education will not be achieved and its guiding star of personal flourishing and the common good would be lost.

For this reason, good governance on the part of the nation’s leaders is important. Opportunities should be maximized at the same time that resources are equitably distributed.

It would be a daunting task, but completely worthwhile because, as has been said, the personal flourishing of the citizens is of immense benefit to the nation as a whole. The government should keep an eye and make sure that educational monopolies do not develop, not even a monopoly of control over curriculum that oftentimes governments themselves establish because of too much standardization emanating from the government itself.

UNESCO was established because, indeed, global solidarity is key to the realization of the educational goals of the nations of the world. Although the work that UNESCO carries out will need assessment and the establishment of standards, it is hoped that the investigation, debate and dialogue that UNESCO has to go through in order to determine the assessment tools and standards would serve as a way to eliminate the undesired side-effects of standardized testing and assessment.



The establishment of an educational system that accomplishes the two-fold goal of personal flourishing and the common good is admittedly a very complex and a not-so-easy project. We cannot claim to resolve the entire problem in one article alone. What we have tried to achieve in this article is to invite the reader to reflect on what we have been used to doing up to now, especially from the point of view of standardization and the use of standardized tests. Standardization and standardized tests have been used as instruments to globalize quality education, the example of which is the PISA tests. We have pointed out the main pot holes and the road blocks on the road towards global solidarity in education and have tried to describe some sort of general solution illustrated by the guild system. We hope that one day, through dialogue and the adjustment of the educational system, a student in one nation can feel very comfortable about going to another nation in order to attain his or her educational goals, and that this process become smoother and smoother as time passes.

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