HALF A CENTURY OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN EDUCATION BY UNESCO: ADVOCATING ONE’S WELL-BEING FROM SOCIETY TO CLASSROOM AND VICE-VERSA

Abstract

*Human rights in education has emerged as interdisciplinary study, providing the possibilities for cooperation of experts from diverse academic disciplines such as law, sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, psychology etc. Starting from 1960’s UNESCO’s Convention against Discrimination in Education, until 2015 UNESCO’s document Recommendation concerning technical and vocational education and training, international politics and policies see education as foundation stone for prosper of societies at local and global levels. Vast of documents adopted from UNESCO suggested that education is crucial for one’s well-being, and as such represents a starting point for educational experts for their practice of teaching children and adults, and advocating their rights. In this paper the review of goals in the agendas adopted by UNESCO will be presented. The results of qualitative analyze of agendas revealed that during the period of 50 years, goals in UNESCO documents concerning education shifted from non-discrimination to sustainabiliy and employability, suggesting that political and economic conditions at global level dictate the process of advocating human rights for the classroom and societies, and rarely address the children’s needs articulated by children themselves.*

*Key words: children’s rights, education, children’s well-being, international education agendas*
INTRODUCTION

For UNESCO, education is a high-priority social field with long-lasting outcomes. While other international institutions like UN, Unicef, etc. also deal with education, UNESCO is recognized as international institution specialized for addressing the challenges in education. As they say, their mission is to promote “a holistic and humanistic vision of quality education worldwide, with the realization of everyone’s right to education, and the belief that education plays a fundamental role in human, social and economic development” (UNESCO, 2011, p.7). UNESCO’s documents are often recognized as a starting point for construction of agendas, recommendations, strategies, etc. in many other states worldwide. The main idea of UNESCO agendas is to promote education as a social and as an individual value, with the anticipation of a long-lasting effect of education on one’s autonomy and well-being.

In general, international agendas on education, at their declarative level, tend to regulate human and civil rights in educational contexts. The main goal in a vast number of agendas is to provide appropriate educational context for children and nowadays adults, and to advocate certain values, depending on the needs of particular society and/or culture. Although these goals seem logical and complement, at first sight, a problem of a dual nature of rights in the educational agendas can be seen. In the one hand, there is explicit push to make education accessible to everyone. This represents the individual perspective on the rights in education, where one’s well-being is a priority for politics. On the other hand, there is a push to achieve socially desirable outcomes, and in this perspective “prescription” of values and goals that is present. These two perspectives Foucault (2003a) identified as regulatory actions of government, which are implicitly driven against one’s prosper. Authors, (Rawls, 1999; Archard, 2005; Delacroix, 2006) also claim that educational agendas are actually driven by politics, and as such represent needs of societies, and not individuals, i.e. children. This issue Rawls (1999) sees as a problem of interpreting rights and needs in agendas, where rights are more about one’s prosper, while needs are actually socially desirable outcomes. Also, rights and law (including agendas and policies), as he states, are usually equalized, yet they are two different concepts, and as such should be addressed differently in research. Similarly, Foucault (2003a) states that educational policies and agendas are actually social norms aimed at the regulation of social relations. From his point of view, educational institutions represent a place of controlling one’s life, activities, and the regulation of one’s social activism. These regulatory social tendencies can be seen in policies diverted towards the education system in which values are externally prescribed and advocated. For instance, the fight against poverty is often mentioned in educational agendas, yet the educational system isn’t the arena where poverty is produced and as such cannot be responsible for ending it. There are numerous examples of social problems which are addressed in agendas, and in which educational entities such as students, teachers etc. cannot directly influence.
Alongside the regulatory functions of the education system embedded in agendas and policies, another hidden problem in educational agendas at international level, is the presence of normalized and standardized measures which students should achieve during their formal education. Although standards and norms are presented as indicators of high quality in education, and as such represent an imperative at all levels of education, it is important to scrutinize their influence on individual development from a psychological point of view.

Picture 1. Educational standards and assessment

Standards and norms have become integral parts of educational agendas, which are nowadays scrutinized in some scientific fields such as philosophy of education and critical pedagogy, and should be further questioned from different points of views at micro-levels, i.e. in the classrooms. From Rawls’ (1999) point of view, normalization has been widely integrated in education and it strongly affects student’s position in the classroom. Similarly the author Slee (2006) claims that educational standards actually separate students, because they differ in their abilities, especially in their early years. Authors (Brothers, 2001; Fortin, 2003; Archard, 2005; Delacroix, 2006) noticed that adults create norms and name it competence, and as such are considered socially desirable outcomes in education. However, when a child is expressing its own point of view on desirable competencies, adults often call them wishes. To achieve consensus on desirable outcomes (i.e. standards and norms) in education, it would be important to include students in public debates about this
issue via focus groups, supported by scholars in this field. This kind of practice began some ten years ago and research from classroom suggested that childhood and processes within it, are socially regulated by adults, and that adults and children have different points of view on some issues regarding education. For instance, adults perceive norms and standards as indicators of child’s well-being and quality, while students see norms and standards as obligations and demands from adults that should be achieved (Alanen, 2004; Qvortrup 2008; Corsaro, 2011). To support these claims, Cunningham et al. conducted research in 2004, and found out that children prefer exploration and interaction with their peers over academic activities regulated by adults, suggesting that reciprocal processes are in children’s focus. This perspective could be named participatory-emancipatory perspective, and as such represent a foundation for self-actualization. In other words, it is questionable how standards and norms in education contribute to a student’s positive self-esteem and self-actualization, which are from a psychological point of view perceived as highest goal of one’s development. To conclude about external regulation, Archard (2005) emphasized that the majority of educational agendas are based on social perspective, which includes standards, norms and regulations, and as such doesn’t actually refer to a child’s participation and autonomy. In other words, educational agendas and policies are about external regulation and achieving socially desirable outcomes. In that perspective, a child’s individual well-being and self-actualization is subordinated in accordance to social expectations. This dual social perception of students in which they are seen as individuals, both dependent and independent, results with confusion in classrooms: teachers are between social expectations (standards, norms and external assessment), and students’ needs (autonomy and self-actualization). The imperative of standards and norms for authors (Chomsky, 1999; Foucault, 2007a,b; Craddock, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Torres, 2009; Steger and Roy, 2010) is an indicator of the presence of neoliberal values in education. For instance, Torres (2009) states that norms and standards are directed towards efficiency of the educational system, and not towards pupils’ positive learning experiences, suggesting that educational settings have hidden purposes, which are rarely addressed in the research. So it would be important to scrutinize classroom practices and social agendas in advocating human rights in education, with a critical approach to proclaimed values in educational agendas.

Research goal

The purpose was to identify the main goals in the UNESCO educational agendas, along with the responsibilities and outcomes anticipated within each agenda.
METHOD

To find out which priorities were given in the educational agendas in UNESCO over the last 50 years, content analysis of 10 UNESCO educational documents was done.

Research methods

A content analysis of the available UNESCO documents was performed. All of the documents were retrieved from the official UNESCO web-site, in the link to educational documents, English versions. The analysis of the retrieved documents was qualitative, i.e. content analysis was made.

Analyzed UNESCO’s documents were as follows:
Convention against discrimination in education (1960),
Recommendation concerning the status of teachers (1966),
Recommendation on the development of adult education (1976),
Convention on Technical and Vocational Education (1989),
Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education (1993),
Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997),
Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (1997),
Recommendation on adult learning and education (2015), and

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Hereafter, the presentation of qualitative analysis of UNESCO agendas on education will be presented.
Table 1. Goals and responsibilities within analyzed UNESCO’s educational agendas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nr.</th>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Main goal(s)</th>
<th>Target/ responsibility</th>
<th>Anticipated outcome(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Convention Against Discrimination in Education</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>To reduce discrimination in society</td>
<td>Educational administration and law institutions</td>
<td>Access to education for all students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Recommendation Concerning the Status of Teachers</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>To achieve adequate formal education for teachers, at every level (preschool, primary school, secondary school)</td>
<td>Governments, high Education area</td>
<td>Professionals (teachers) well educated for assessment of children development and teaching all children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>To introduce human rights in education, at all levels including higher education. To achieve better cooperation between different countries and cultures, including economic trade.</td>
<td>Educational institutions, teachers</td>
<td>Raising awareness on issues of human rights, and needs for cooperation between different countries and cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Achieving better educational access at tertiary level and lifelong learning for everyone, with special emphasis on females.</td>
<td>Educational institutions at tertiary level, administration</td>
<td>Achieving economic and cultural development, social progress, and development of educational system through programs of lifelong learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Convention on Technical and Vocational Education</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>To expand and improve the technical and vocational education for pupils and adults, due to technological development of societies at global level.</td>
<td>Educational institutions at tertiary level, market</td>
<td>Exchanging information in the development of technical and vocational education and strengthening international co-operation in this field.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nr.</td>
<td>Document</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Main goal(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Recognition of qualifications as a means of increasing mobility of scholars and the exchange of scientific knowledge at international level</td>
<td>Governments, educational institutions at tertiary level</td>
<td>Increasing mobility for teachers, students, researchers and professionals, and achieving better understanding between cultures and peoples, with mutual respect for their diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>To maintain and develop knowledge of subject through scholarship and improved pedagogical skills (for higher education teaching staff).</td>
<td>Educational institutions at tertiary level</td>
<td>Higher education contribution to the achievement of the goals of lifelong learning and to the development of other levels of education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>To find common solutions to practical recognition problems in the European region, due to vast number of educational programs at tertiary level.</td>
<td>Educational institutions at tertiary level</td>
<td>To establish common ground for international cooperation and recognition of program at tertiary levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Recommendation on adult learning and education</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>To equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realize their rights and take control of their destinies.</td>
<td>Educational institutions at tertiary level</td>
<td>Developing individuals’ capacity for critical thinking, autonomy, participation in sustainable development processes and enhancing one’s awareness for the protection of the environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nr.</td>
<td>Document</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Recommendation concerning technical and vocational education and training</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>To empower individuals and promote employment, decent work and lifelong learning.</td>
<td>Educational institutions at secondary and tertiary level, government</td>
<td>Supporting individuals to make transitions between education and the working position, and to sustain employability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The content analysis reveals UNESCO’s several phases in promoting education through international agendas. The first phase is from 1960’s until 1970’s where UNESCO agendas on education were focused on governments and introduced recommendations for stakeholders, regarding the reduction of discrimination in educational system. This phase could be named phase of promoting one’s basic human rights in education, and as such represent true effort for achieving one’s well-being through access to education at micro-level. In this phase, individual well-being was to be achieved through political action, and individuality was taken into account.

The second phase is between 1970’s and 1990’s, where UNESCO switched agendas from governments and stakeholders to educational institutions, precisely education institutions at tertiary level, i.e. colleges, faculties and universities. The main goal during these 20 years was to establish external and additional support to preschool education, primary and secondary education, starting from formal education for teachers, to recommendations for life-long learning. This is a start for directing responsibilities from stakeholders towards other social factors, such as educational institutions, suggesting that values and socially desirable outcomes should be routed from one institution to another. In an educational contexts, this re-direction of responsibilities occurs between higher education area and classrooms, especially at the primary and secondary level. Therefore, this phase can be identified as the phase of directing responsibilities from stakeholders to educational institutions.

Lastly, the third phase of UNESCO educational agendas is from 1990 until today. This contemporary phase is a phase of directing responsibilities from educational institutions towards individuals, in which individuals have the responsibility for achieving one’s own well-being. In other words, individuals are solely responsible for outcomes in their life, while educational institutions have obligations to assess externally prescribed standards and norms on their students. Although there is not strong evidence on how these educational agendas influence one’s self-actualization, or how they actually address social issues such as poverty, violence, arm conflicts etc., it is clear that (re)direction of responsibilities from social factors to individuals is far from the first of UNESCO’s educational agendas from almost 50 years ago.
Table 2. Scheme of UNESCO’s (re)direction of responsibilities in its educational agendas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Educational institutions</th>
<th>Classrooms</th>
<th>Individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor</td>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>Teachers, university professors</td>
<td>Teachers, parents, students</td>
<td>Individuals, their families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main task</td>
<td>To promote human rights</td>
<td>To educate for human rights</td>
<td>To advocate human rights</td>
<td>To practice human rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Societal</td>
<td>Societal/Institutional</td>
<td>Institutional/Individual</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase</td>
<td>Promoting one’s basic human rights in education (1)</td>
<td>Directing responsibilities from stakeholders to educational institutions (2)</td>
<td>Directing responsibilities from stakeholders to educational institutions (2)</td>
<td>Directing responsibilities from educational institutions towards individuals (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As this table suggests, during the last half century, UNESCO’s agendas have significantly switched their advocacy paradigm from social responsibilities for promoting human rights in education towards directing these concerns and responsibilities toward individuals. This practice is covered with syntagme social activism, but the true effects of such social practices are to be researched across nations.

**DISCUSSION**

The content analysis of UNESCO’s agenda on education and human rights reveals a switch in responsibilities from social factors to individual factors. After the first phase, in which human rights were addressed, came an era of economic influence in education, which some authors actually refer to as neo-liberalism in education (Chomsky, 1999; Harvey, 2007; Torres, 2009; Steger and Roy, 2010) The presence of a close link between its agendas and political conditions are even explicated in agendas, describing this education-profit chimera as a path to one’s well-being. As UNESCO (1989, p. 232) themselves states “close collaboration between UNESCO and the International Labor Organization in drawing up their respective instruments so that they pursue harmonious objectives and with a view of continuing fruitful collaboration”, suggesting that the 1990s were the years during which neoliberal ideas were introduced to education. This is consistent with authors (Chomsky, 1999; Foucault, 2007a,b; Cradock, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Torres, 2009; Steger and Roy, 2010) work, which emphasized the presence of neoliberal values in educational agendas. Later that decade, higher education had been described as an instrument in the pursuit of knowledge and competences for all citizens, and a pillar
of education quality (UNESCO, 1993; UNESCO, 1997), although in reality, high educational institutions cannot meet these requirements by themselves.

Implications for future studies

Analysis revealed that UNESCO agendas have become oriented towards individuals’ responsibilities regarding one’s own well-being. In other words, there is less social support and social advocacy, suggesting that future studies should be focused on interpretative aspects of quality of life within longitudinal studies and interdisciplinary research. Also, there is a strong need for critical studies in the field of human rights, which has to be driven by the scientific research.

Research limitations

The main limitation in this paper is the analysis of only 10 agendas. The analyzed agendas were retrieved from UNESCO’s official web site on education, so the number is limited by the availability of the documents. Actually UNESCO has a vast number of agendas and recommendations closely linked to education, but in other fields, such as trade and economy. These agendas weren’t taken into account during this analysis.

Another limitation is the purely theoretical approach to this issue: previous papers concerning educational agendas have only had theoretical contributions, and should be acknowledged as a discursive approach to this issue. In the future, methodology for researching a connection between educational agendas, neoliberal values and one’s quality of life should be established.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of UNESCO’s agendas on rights in education has revealed a close connection between UNESCO and global politics, mostly western-introduced. Responsibilities (re)directed at different levels (stakeholders → educational institutions → classrooms → individuals), present in agendas are coherent with global politics of maintaining societal power relations. The process of (re)direction of responsibilities only contributes to slow changes in educational systems (education is limping after societal change, to be precisely), making the changes in classrooms less efficient than had been expected. So, educational agendas, educational changes and practice of advocating human rights at micro-levels should be conducted simultaneously with advocacy at the macro-level. It means that teachers and students should be acknowledged as partners by stakeholders in the process of constructing educational policies, and not solely as recipients of rights in agendas.
Literature:


