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The International Bureau of Education: a centre for comparative education in the service of transfers in education (1946-1968)

Rita Hofstetter & Bernard Schneuwly

«I feel convinced that Piaget would wish you and the Council to know that, while our Bureau would welcome the setting up after this war of an International Organisation of Education, it would consider it a very great pity that the enormous amount of pioneer work done by the Bureau to promote the advancement of education generally should be neglected and duplicated. » (M. Butts to G. Murray, 24 December 1942).

Thus, the Secretary-General of the International Bureau of Education (IBE) addresses the builders of the “New World Authority” (future UNESCO) to have the IBE’s “pioneering” work recognized. Thanks to the sustained negotiations of its respondents, the IBE maintained its existence and autonomy, cooperating densely with UNESCO since 1946, before it was fully integrated into it in 1969.

We trace here the history of the IBE, based on its rich archival resources and referring to the literature of the “transnational turn” (Iriye, 2002; Minard, 2013; Saunier, 2013; about culture and education, Iriye, 1997; Laqua 2015; Sluga, 2013; Steiner-Kahmsi & Waldow, 2012). The creation of the IBE is an example of what Rasmussen describes as the “internationalist turning point” of the late 19th century, guided by the “arrow of progress” (2011, 27-32), leading in the first decades of the 20th century to an “institutionalization of the international”. As the first intergovernmental institution in education,

the IBE can be considered as a “matrix of educational internationalism” (Hofstetter, 2017). We present the work of this called “technical” institution to develop a “charter of global educational aspirations”: this is the way Piaget (1960, p. ix) and Rosselló (1964), directors of the IBE from 1929 to 1968, present the nearly one thousand articles that make up the recommendations drawn up by the International Conferences on Public Instruction (ICPI) and which, since 1934, have been trying to solve global problems concerning educational and curriculum policies.

1. A Brief Retrospective

A brief look back is needed to understand the challenge of the “struggle” (P. Rosselló to M. Butts, 16 April 1943) for the survival of this institution. As we know (Hofstetter, Droux, Christian, in press), at the end of the First World War, a multitude of individual and collective actors - educational, scientific, internationalist, feminist associations - considered that it is through education that peace in the world can be preserved. The eyes converged on the small city of Geneva where the League of Nations (LoN) was being built. As nation states were then reluctant against any interference in their own education systems, efforts to give an educational mission to the LoN have not initially bearded the expected fruit. It is in this gap that the IBE, created in 1925 by the *Institut Rousseau/Ecole des sciences de l'éducation*, slipped into and developed. On the strength of the expertise built within the framework of the *Institut Rousseau* and thanks to a substantial Rockefeller grant, the IBE's promoters positioned it as a technical agency: “a center for information, coordination and scientific research, neutral from a national, political, philosophical and religious point of view” (IBE Statutes, 1926). This first and small IBE (1925-1929) aimed to coordinate all individual and collective initiatives -international associations in the first place- which, like it, wanted to build peace through science and education. In 1929, more stable legal bases were conferred on the institution: henceforth it was governments that were the legitimate members, financing, directing and controlling its activity (IBE Statutes, 1929). The IBE's mission now consisted in applying the methods of international cooperation to the field of education. In fact, the respondents were trying to establish the IBE as the first World Centre for Comparative Education (Hofstetter & Schneuwly, 2013).

When UNESCO was set up in 1946, the IBE could not compete with this giant, but gained by associating itself with it because it would not disappear. “A marriage of trial and convenience”, says Piaget, as pragmatic diplomat; a marriage that has also shown itself to be affectionate, will

strengthen UNESCO's Assistant Director-General (CIIP XI, PV, 1948, 21). The IBE retains its role as a technical and scientific body at UNESCO's disposal. It was under the joint auspices of the IBE and UNESCO that the International Conferences on Public Instruction (ICPI) were convened since 1946. It is the work done within this framework that we are analyzing here.

2. How to develop a "Charter of Global Educational Aspirations"?

To give an overview of the IBE's contribution (in collaboration with UNESCO) to the processes of transfer, internationalization and transformation of educational policies and curricula, three aspects are briefly presented here.

Mode of operation

The IBE's ICPIs were designed as a forum for governments to present and discuss the "highlights of the educational movement", which together provide a means of "gaining an idea of the state of education in the world" (ICPI IX, 1946, PV, 7). The delegates gathered were ministers, diplomats, educators, researchers. Their collaboration undoubtedly constituted the "originality" of the company, which also guaranteed its fertility: "specialists are sometimes happy to be brought back to reality... just like realists to be reminded of the ideal" (ICPI V, PV, 1936, 31).

Schematically described, ICPIs worked as follows. Before the Conference, an International Yearbook of Education published an assessment of recent reforms carried out in each country, a "an educational world tour", commonly introduced by a synthesis of the movement. At the same time, the IBE was launching 2 or 3 surveys on crucial educational problems in an attempt to solve them collectively. For each survey, a questionnaire was sent to all countries around the world to find out how each country was dealing with the problem. The IBE gathered all the replies received, and provided an analytical synthesis of them in a new publication. This served as a basis for exchanges during the Conference, to collectively define recommendations likely to solve the problems addressed.

Themes dealt with

What were the main themes addressed in the IBE surveys and its Conferences, convened in collaboration with UNESCO between 1946-1968? Redesigning Rosselló's classification (1961/1978), we distinguish three main categories:

	N	%
Structure and organization of school systems	17	36,2
Problems of contents and methods	20	42,6
Teacher education and status of teachers	10	21,3
Total	47	100,0

Table 1 : Categories of themes dealt with by the ICPIs between 1946 and 1968

The *structural and organizational dimensions* of public instruction refer to the mandate of governments in this area. At the heart of the debates of the Conferences is the concern for relevant, effective and inclusive management of the school system, which requires appropriate school jurisdiction, organization and administration. An analysis of the speeches made during the 17 CIIPs organized jointly by the IBE and UNESCO reveals a vision of schooling that can be retrospectively described as emancipatory, which is further reinforced during periods of economic expansion: the arguments that justify this orientation (which obviously do not reflect actual practices) are the development of everyone's personality, social harmony, democratization, improvement of international cooperation, aiming in the long term at no less than, thanks to schools, "a reorganization of the world" under the aegis of solidarity, freedom and peace. But it is also the economic concerns of States that are emerging, guiding school policies, the management of school flows and the training of elites.

What should be taught and how? IBE's comparative studies highlight the fundamentally disciplinary structure of programs in all the countries examined. A leitmotif is expressed during these 17 Conferences, namely the tendency to increase the number of notions to be learned, leading to an overload. This observation and the need to adapt programs to social change and advances in educational science have led to a series of recommendations. Three elements functioned as reference in the recommendations: "knowledge to be assimilated, skills to be mastered, and means of satisfying physical, emotional, aesthetic and spiritual needs of an individual and a social nature." (Recommendation 46, 1958, article 4). The ICPIs also addressed the question of methods to be used in the different disciplines. The positions were unanimous: active methods would guarantee effective learning. "School authorities give preference to methods called 'active'" it is repeatedly stated, for such contrasting disciplines as natural sciences (ICPI XV, 1952) and the visual arts (ICPI XVIII, 1955).

The *teaching profession* is studied in several Conferences. These are the same three sets of concerns that regularly appear:

- Working conditions, salaries and control (inspection) of teaching
- Recruitment and addressing the teacher shortage
- Training of primary/secondary teachers, but also school managers and teacher educator; in addition, research is considered as crucial for this education.

The recommendations all seek to ensure a stable situation for all teachers, adequate salaries, the highest possible education, which is summarized, for example, in Recommendation 37 of 1953 on the situation of primary teachers:

Given the fact that the low qualifications of teachers in public or private schools are often among the main reasons for their low salaries and unfavorable conditions of employment, and are also detrimental to the interests of the children, public authorities should consider the desirability of fixing by law the minimum qualifications of teachers in all types of primary schools. (Article 24)

Increasingly global networks

The IBE's internationality can be observed in two ways, which are certainly interrelated, but in fact independent.

1. The number of governments that join the IBE, and commit to paying contributions, the IBE's main resource, can be examined. Figure 1 shows the rapid growth in the number between 1946 and 1968, the period covered in this text.

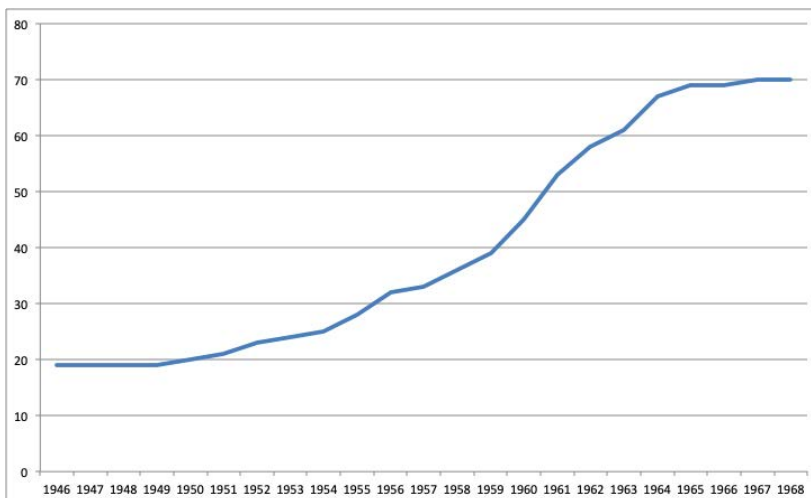


Figure 1 : Number of IBE's members 1946-1968

The number has tripled in 20 years. This is directly related to the decolonization process: until 1946, it was mainly European countries (with the notable exception of the United Kingdom and the countries of the Soviet bloc) and South America (the North is not a member), joined by Iran and Egypt, that formed the IBE. Since the 1950s, several Asian countries have been added, and other countries of the Maghreb and the Near East. It was only in the 1960s that sub-Saharan African countries, which had finally become independent, joined the IBE; in 1968, about 50% of the world's countries were members.

2. The number of countries participating in surveys and Conferences can also be observed. This number is much higher, as shown in Figure 2.

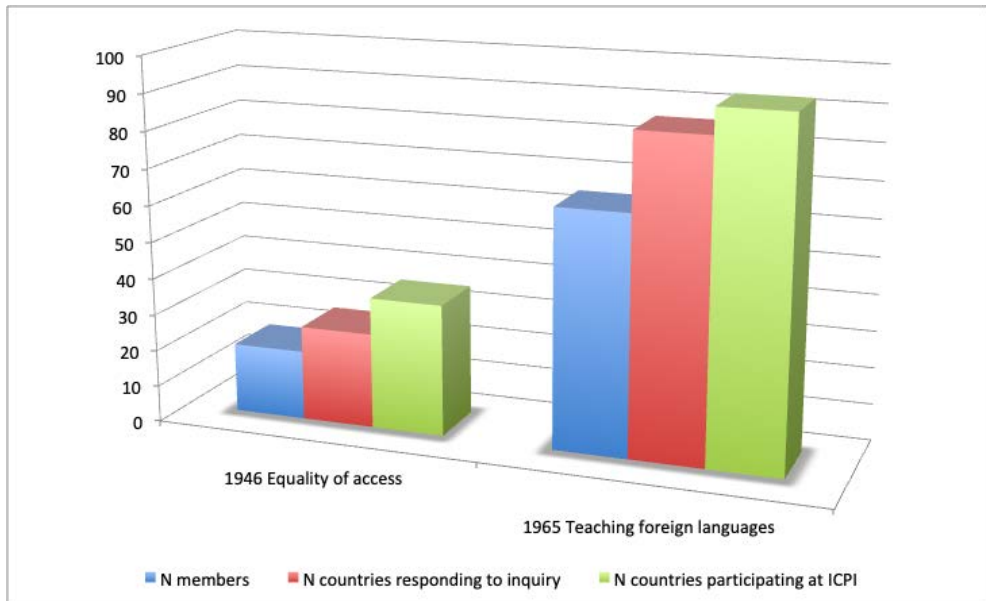


Figure 2 : Number of countries responding to the inquiries and participating at the Conferences of 1946 and 1965

Of the 72 countries accounted for worldwide in 1946, 26 were participating in the survey and 36 in the Conference. The number of countries reached about 120 in 1965; 86 of them participated in the surveys, 93 in the Conference, i.e. three quarters: the IBE became a world reference in comparative education.

3. The theoretical background of the IBE's work

The themes of the surveys and the orientations recommended in the recommendations of the CIIPs are strongly influenced by the values and principles of new education and the pleas of its leaders:

- Values: international and pacifist education, world understanding, spirit of solidarity, educational cooperation;
- Teaching methods: self-government, teamwork, school correspondence, active pedagogy;
- Working tools: scientific objectivity, critical rationality, comparative approach.

Piaget's theorization of self-government demonstrates in particular that cooperation between individuals (children and adults) leads, in any situation, to mutual criticism and progressive objectivity, which allows access to a kind of "moral of thought":

What we need is a spirit of cooperation such that everyone understands all the others, an "internal solidarity" that does not abolish particular points of view, but puts them in reciprocity and achieves unity in diversity. The duty of a Swiss child is not to create a planetary or global mentality that he will somehow tackle on his own mentality; it is to situate his point of view among the other possible ones and to understand the little German, the little French, etc. as well as him- or herself. It is this linking of points of view that we call cooperation, as opposed to their standardization or utopian research of an absolute point of view. (Piaget, 1931/1998, 71-72)

The "mode of operation" of IBE Conferences was also imbued with this spirit: the way in which ministers were invited to dialogue, cooperate and place themselves in a dynamic of reciprocity in order to learn from the experiences of others –not to judge but to improve their own practices and school systems– derived from the principles theorized by the IBE Director. It is even in the way Piaget addressed the participants of the Conferences that we find this same logic: to access the understanding of others, by learning decentralization, to move from the individual to the universal, by reducing egocentrism, seen as the main cause of abuses of power on the planet, and nationalist, racist, chauvinist and imperialist abuses.

4. Concluding remarks

“Elaborating a charter of global educational aspirations” is how the IBE presented its objective during the period under scrutiny, during which it collaborated closely with UNESCO. To achieve this, the IBE’s actors have adopted a precise stance: decentration and neutrality were the conditions of the IBE’s so-called “technical” work, based on objectivity, systematic scientific comparison and even universalism. According to them, this made it possible to learn about the reforms initiated by each other, apparently without judgment, and to bring together in the same forum many governments with sometimes diametrically opposed political positions. The aim contained the following ones: to state the problems encountered, to develop possible solutions, to agree on educational principles that work as common denominators. The process was original –in view of the context of the exacerbation of nationalisms and imperialisms, as well as the struggles for independence and anti-colonialism in which it was experienced– since it is supposed to guarantee (in principle at least) that each delegate, on an equal basis, without any pressure, participates in the definition of recommendations.

This collegiality and freedom were like slogans, rejecting any imposition or standardization. The argument is subtle in order to transform this freedom into a responsibility. It is in the best interest of every government to have the best possible education system. This would guarantee the country’s intellectual and economic performance: emulation would therefore be sufficient. Everyone is invited to enrich themselves with the experience of others. No judgment must be made. The counterpart is clearly stated: through his or her presence, writings, interventions and vote on the recommendations resulting from the said Conferences, the State delegate is involved and, in so doing, commits the government he represents. The more voluntary the commitment, the more demanding it would be. Coming from all over the world, the IBE’s partners thus endorse, at least within the framework of these Conferences, the educational progressivism with which the IBE’s internationalism was then imbued and which will also leave its mark, it seems to us, on other international institutions dedicated to education.

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TRANSFERENCIA, TRANSNACIONALIZACIÓN Y TRANSFORMACIÓN DE LAS POLÍTICAS EDUCATIVAS (1945-2018)

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& CRISTIAN MACHADO-TRUJILLO (EDS.)



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