



**Postcolonial perspective in the history of education: research problems and trends in an international context**

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**Abstract**

In my study I examine how the mostly English post-colonial theory, strongly related to ISCHE and the international History of Education Society UK, becomes a more and more determinant approach within the research field of the history of education from the 1980s. In order to do so, first I define post-colonialism, briefly mentioning the debate surrounding post-colonial theory, as well as the relevant interpretative frame which goes beyond the “third world”. In the second part of the paper I survey the more determinative works in the field and the related conferences, also mentioning the most recent research results. The appearance of researches with a post-colonial perspective in the history of education became prominent in the last two decades. Apart from clarifying the terminology (for example culture and ethnicity) these studies move away from the simplifying primitive/modern dichotomy, reinterpret spatial and temporal dimensions and in relation to the creation of cultures and identities write of processes which integrate active agents which are multidirectional and affect each other mutually. In Hungary the post-colonial studies that open Pandora’s Box have not yet gained ground in history of education, even though their role in the international history-writing of education is unquestionable.

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In his 1995 study, Antonio Novoa formulated the rethinking of historiography and the history of education in an interdisciplinary way as a future goal, which will be based on post-colonial theory and the related critical traditions, in order to enable viewing history from multiple perspectives and interpret it in various ways (Novoa, 1995). This study, written almost 20 years ago, is the result of an era, in which the attention of the historically acclaimed and presently still determinant international organization for the history of education, the “International Standing Conference for the History of Education” (ISCHE), as well as that of their official journal, *Paedagogica Historica*, was directed towards concepts that determined historiography, such as “empire”, “home”, “colonizers” and “colonized”.

The establishment and movement of power always defines the position of education. The relevance of post-colonial theory is evident in all research which is focused on an educational context and in which a historically ingrained system of majorities-minorities is discussed (Niedrig & Ydesen, 2011b).

In my study I examine how the mostly English post-colonial theory, strongly related to ISCHE and the international History of Education Society UK, becomes a more and more determinant approach within the research field of the history of education from the 1980s. In order to do so, first I define post-colonialism, briefly mentioning the debate surrounding post-colonial theory, as well as the relevant interpretative frame which goes beyond the “third world”. In the second part of the paper I survey the more determinative works in the field and the related conferences, also mentioning the most recent research results.

The headway of the widely researched field of post-colonialism, which bears the stamp of significant persons (Abraham, 2007; Loomba, 2007), can be closely linked to the liberation of colonized states from colonization, but today post-colonial theory is not limited to countries with a colonial history (Tárnok, 2004). The concept itself has at least two meanings as, on the one hand, it directly refers to the time period after gaining independence, while on the other, it also signifies the defined, critical form of theory creation and interpretation (Goodman et al., 2009). It is an approach which does not consider “Europe” (meaning Western Europe), the “West” as a point of reference in its analysis, but rather argues for the contingency and flexibility of reference-points. It argues for a point of view which interprets the text in the given context, rather than trying to understand areas outside of Europe through the “advanced” and “developed” image of Europe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Katalin Kéri also agrees with this in her work which summarizes primarily comparative studies which set universal history-writing as their goal specifically emphasizing the importance of “non-Western” viewpoints in understanding cultures and in understanding the formation of an individual's attitude and viewpoint (Kéri, 2010).

Gertrúd Szamosi, in her study called "Post-colonialism" (A posztkolonialitás), implies that the firmly established and institutionalized critical discourse of post-colonialism points far beyond the historical and political reality of the "third world", as every ethnic identity formation, which was born within the unconscious power struggle of communities, has a post-colonial reading; and in its interpretation Central-Europe has a rich "web of interpretation which was sewn from mutual colonizing" (Szamosi, 1996, p. 418). Susan Zimmermann, in her analysis of the turn-of-the-century Hungarian women's movement, points to attention that there would be need for a historiographical trend, which subverts the hegemonic "western" approach, does not consider the "west" as the central model of history, and does not generally apply the developmental process of western history to the whole world (Zimmermann, 2000).

We can consider the works of Frantz Fanon and Mahatma Gandhi the forerunners of post-colonialism, while its academic institutionalization can be linked to Edward W. Saïd's *Orientalism*, published in 1978,<sup>2</sup> which was an important milestone in disrupting the centralized and universal values of Eurocentrism. Post-colonialism means, on the one hand, a historical period, and on the other hand, an ideological orientation, in which liberated states try to distance themselves from the structures and mind frame of the colonisers. Parallel to this, there began a closely related process which examines the concepts that define the colonizer discourse, such as race, gender, class and nation-state. However, it always remains a question, whether the boundaries of colonizing disappear with the official achievement of independence by the colonies. Therefore, from this approach, decolonization is not merely a formal political process, as it has created various theories which can be linked to representation, history, language, culture, and capitalist modernism; it can be understood as the counterpoint in the paradigm of Eurocentric enlightenment (Abraham, 2007).<sup>3</sup> According to Prakash, post-colonialism is situated in a field which is neither within nor outside of the field of western dominance, but exclusively touches upon it. The researchers of the field themselves point to the fact that post-colonialism – being a critical concept in itself – continuously prompts one to (self-reflexively) ask questions and is a very controversial field (Abraham, 2007; Loomba, 2007). The final goal of post-colonial theories is always social action, the creation of the basis for a more equal society. This can be linked to the controversy or difference in approach which contrasts the importance of theory/culture/literature with the importance of real political action and involvement.

Post-colonial theory can add to the global, universal and world-wide analysis of various cultures. It is also becoming an increasingly prevalent notion in the historiography of education that it is not sufficient to write separate histories in every country.

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<sup>2</sup> Saïd, 1995. (first edition: 1978) Saïd's work was later much criticized, to which he replied in the afterword of a later edition of his work, and in some cases revised his own standpoint (Tárnok, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Criticism on the subject mostly highlights the fact that post-colonialist theories accepted global capitalism as a frame in which they can operate without questioning it.

Contrastive analyses that compare and contrast the individual histories of countries once they have been written are likewise questionable – in part due to the different viewpoints and analytical methods.<sup>4</sup> In order to be able to devise an approach which can understand and appreciate the diversity of cultures in individuals, and reflect on their own biased viewpoints, which are embedded in power and interest relations, there is a need for a historiography that arches across nations and countries. The de- and reconstruction of the “east”-“west” dichotomy that was created in traditional “western” history writing can be achieved by striving for a universal and global viewpoint, and the creation of a history becomes possible, in which the position of various cultures is not organized on the basis of the two fixed power poles that are linked to specific attributes.

We can put the expansion of researches with a post-colonial perspective in the history of education to the past two decades, and they are primarily linked to ISCHE and the History of Education Society UK in Europe. In this field the first determinant event took place in 1993, when ISCHE organized its conference in Lisbon called “Education Encounters Peoples and Cultures: The Colonial Experience 16th-20th centuries.” The *Paedagogica Historica* journal<sup>5</sup>, which published selected studies from the conference, already showed the new trend in the historiography of education, which aimed to redefine the theoretical frame of the research on colonization and post-colonization time periods, concentrating on the voices of the colonized, in order to broaden the histories that have been written from the point of view of the colonisers. The next important event was the „Education and Ethnicity” conference,<sup>6</sup> also organized by ISCHE in 1999 in Sidney where the following topics were foregrounded – pointing further than the word “ethnicity” which was used in the conference title itself: the central role of language, the relationship between imperial education and gender, and transnationalism. It was within the topic of transnationalism that the notion was conceived that cultural and pedagogical effects did not only work in one direction (Goodman et al., 2009; Novoa, 2009).

Parallel to this, the reinterpretation of the relationship between local and global levels, which transcended the boundaries of nation-states, came into focus in historiography. Studies examining the history of the empire and education were published in the care of

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<sup>4</sup> When Katalin Kéri discussed the same subject she highlighted the fact that, on the one hand, these analyses are never complete, as it is impossible to present the entire history of humanity, and on the other hand, that treating a country’s historiography of education as homogeneous can blur the characteristics of ethnic groups, nations and groups. It is also a problem in these cases, that a universal, global level synthesis does not occur. Instead of this she offers an approach, which collects the histories of eminent pedagogical thinkers from various places in the world, by which she presents the movement of pedagogical notions, thoughts and practices of certain ages and territories (Kéri, 2010. p. 273)

<sup>5</sup> Novoa, Antonio – Michael Depaepe . E. V. Johanningmeier (eds.) (1995): *The Colonial Experience in Education: Historical Issues and Perspectives*. *Paedagogica Historica* Supplementary Series. Ghent: C.H.S.P.

<sup>6</sup> Sherington, S. – C. Campbely (eds.) (2001): *Education and Ethnicity*. *Paedagogica Historica* special issue 30. 1.

both ISCHE as well as the History of Education Society UK, which highlighted the fact that the political and sociological changes around the world are in a close and interrelated relationship and they can be linked to each other in various ways. The post-colonial studies open a new field of research on the one hand, and on the other, in addition to reinterpreting old data, they supply new historical data as well (Goodman et al., 2009, Novoa, 2009).

The next milestone in the field was the international symposium held by the History of Education Society UK in Hamburg in 2007.<sup>7</sup> Within ISCHE, research that reinterpreted and thematised the relationship between the empire and education also continued in the first decade of the 21st century. *Paedagogica Historica*, as the result of the symposium, presented a wide spectrum of thematic research. In his study, Michael Depaepe surveys Belgian education in the Congo in colonial times (Depaepe, 2009), Tim Allender examined the various stages of intellectual transfer between the British Empire and India between 1813 and 1919 (Allender, 2009). Bagchi's research shows how pedagogical activism in colonial Bengal (1900-1930) was defined by gender, (Bagchi, 2009), while Ruth Watts explored the effect that colonization had on the colonizers in Great Britain (Watts, 2009).

In the same volume of studies – partially reflecting on the 1995 article as well – Novoa outlines the three main tendencies of the history of education with a post-colonialist viewpoint (Novoa, 2009). When reinterpreting the relationship between time and space he does not consider space to be a fixed and rigid entity, space does not become merely a physical definition. Similarly, time does not become a chronological description either, nor is it independent of space. Time simultaneously has width (the present is not a time period, but rather the transformation of the past into the future), and thickness (time runs not on one strand, but on multiple strands at once). This reinterpretation simultaneously means the immaterial approach to space, as well as the possibility of various times existing parallel to each other within the same time period. In other words: "(...) historian needs to provoke an earthquake in order to understand how these layers work, how they are connected and disconnected, producing contested explanations for the same 'events'. Only as such can we conceptualise post-colonial realities, that is, by looking at various layers of power, culture, imagination and identity. Then, we will be able to understand how different discourses, languages, histories and times are connected, where they are disconnected, and how they ultimately create 'new' communities and societies" (Novoa, 2009, p. 818). The multiplication of spaces and the expansion of time in the historiography of education means the opening of dominant nation-state borders. Therefore, a kind of space concept is needed, which is not exclusively limited to signifying physical boundaries, but simultaneously has physical and representational traits as well. The focus of newer research is already the question

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**9 The volume containing the various studies:** Goodman, Joyce – Gary McCulloch – William Richardson (eds.) (2009): "Empires overseas" and "empires at home": postcolonial and transnational perspectives on social change in the history of education. *Paedagogica Historica* 45. no 6.

of how these social spaces are constructed both as geographical concepts and as discourses which are essential in the creation of identities. The third and most important challenge for the history of education in the 21st century is the 'new zones of looking', in which it becomes possible to lessen the gap between historical and comparative research and to refine relevant theories. "Over the last decade, post-colonial studies have emerged as a meeting point for a variety of disciplines and theories, which may bring stimulating clues to an understanding of the bridge between colonialism and educational theory. Because it is a project committed to an historical and psychological 'recovery', post-colonial studies may open a Pandora's Box, invading into the silences and ellipses of historical amnesia." (Novoa, 2009, p. 820) Identity becomes the focus of the studies, in other words, the discourse in which the subject constructs their own identity. Here Novoa alludes to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, which is one of the defining books of Political science and more specifically of nationalism- and nation-interpretations (Novoa, 2009). Benedict Anderson understands nations as politically and culturally imagined communities, "since we only imagine that due to its nature it is definable and that it is a sovereign unity" (Kántor, 2004). In Anderson's approach the devaluation of sacral language, the faltering of faith in the monarch being chosen by God, and the radically new, homogeneous way of understanding time had an important role in the formation of nations. Communities became comprehensible with the dawn of printed capitalism, when people began to think in newer ways and to relate to each other differently (Anderson, 2004).<sup>8</sup>

Anderson's thesis, rather than resulting in fixed and rigid identities, points out the diversity of identities created by various communities. During colonial times the empires created the myth of the "imperial nation", which was universal and was able to absorb cultural differences. According to Novoa, one of the main goals of the history of education is to analyse how various cultural communities reinterpreted different European scripts such as the civilized/savage or the modern/primitive. The creation of the colonized "other"<sup>9</sup> cannot be separated from pedagogical processes, is not independent of school books, from the school, from the content of teaching and learning, which were fundamentally defined by the discourses based on the modern/primitive dichotomy in colonial times (Novoa, 2009).

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<sup>8</sup> In the case of Anderson's "imagined communities" the following questions rightfully arise: who is in the position to imagine a given nation? When and how do women take part in "imagining"? Linda Racioppi and Katehrine O'Sullivan See, 2000. 29. There is a lack, obvious from these questions, which stems from the fact that historians and sociologists were not able to use the existing nationalism theories without distortions. This increasingly realized lack caused contemporary nationalism- and nation-researchers to turn their attention towards the concept of nation as a category defined by gender. Furthermore, nations are not defined only by gender, but simultaneously by other differences as well. These differences rather than being mutual elements, equal or similar, are social categories which work differently. Sinha, 2004. 185

<sup>9</sup> See: Thomas-Olade – Velho, 2011.

Parallel to the research done by the History of Education UK and ISCHE, studies focusing on multicultural teaching and education within the history of education were increasingly foregrounded primarily in a German context. German colonization appeared in the history of multicultural education from the middle of the 2000s, to which the studies of German education historians from the 1980s contributed significantly. These focused on the educational policies of the German Empire (1817–1918) and the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) and shed light on the fact, that even by then, differences were conceived on the basis of nationality/ethnicity/culture and language. These studies also pointed out how the German educational system reacted to various “different” children who were not part of the collective German nation. The volume “Writing Post-colonial Histories of Intercultural Education”, edited by Heike Niedrig and Christian Ydesen, was published in 2011, which, among others, is dedicated to the history of intercultural education in different national, sociological, historical and geographical contexts, such as Japan in colonial times (Frey, 2011), the post-colonial reinterpretation of the history of intercultural education in Germany (Baquero Torres, 2011), disputes on education in colonial India (Ellis, 2011), or the construction of the “other” in the Turkish educational system (Çapar, 2011).

A volume called “Connecting histories of Education: Transnational and Cross-Cultural Exchange in (Post-) Colonial Education” will be published in 2014, edited by Barnita Bagchi, Eckhardt Fuchs and Kate Rousmaniere, in which a number of studies discuss colonial and indigenous education in different geographical contexts. The volume shows that in terms of education, reinterpretation, appropriation and hybridization was characteristic of intercultural and transnational exchange, because of which the approach, in which colonial times were characterised by the one-way export of imperial educational systems, is obsolete.

Research with a post-colonial view is not typical in the Hungarian history of education. Yet those studies must be highlighted which broaden the strongly Eurocentric Hungarian history-writing of education by exploring the history of education of non-European territories – they broaden the already existing interpretational grids. Katalin Kéri, in one of her most recent studies in the topic, published in 2010, gives a detailed description and analysis of those researches and works of art – mostly published abroad – which tried to validate this universal, comparative or cross-country view point in the history-writing of education. In her study, she points out why a world-wide perspective is important in research on the history of education. Salimova and Dodde formulate in their handbook that the universal history of education can contribute to the formation of the academic and multi-perspective approach through common points, through the interlinked elements in way that it simultaneously points out its individualities. An effort is noticeable within the “Western” history-writing of education as well whose goal is not to show only the “Western” history of education, but also to allow “other” cultures to appear (Kéri, 2010, p. 266.). In her 2013 presentation called “Intercultural – comparative studies” Katalin Kéri formulates that the intercultural history of education

is becoming more and more important, which signifies the spatial and temporal expansion of comparative approaches. Intercultural studies can contribute to strengthening theoretical grids, help reconcile different identities and can promote international cooperation and as such can also help the international embeddedness of the Hungarian history-writing of education. In addition, these studies point out the non-institutionalized histories of education for study along with those communities, groups and territories which have previously been neglected in history-writing. At the same time the study also alludes to the difficulties of researching the intercultural history of education, for example, the differences between viewpoints, unresolved terminology (intercultural/cultural/intracultures/cross cultural), varied methodology, temporally and geographical varying use of concepts, the different modes of collecting data, linguistic difficulties and the very fact that interpretation itself is dependent on culture (Kéri, 2013).

The appearance of researches with a post-colonial perspective in the history of education became prominent in the last two decades. Apart from clarifying the terminology (for example culture and ethnicity) these studies move away from the simplifying primitive/modern dichotomy, reinterpret spatial and temporal dimensions and in relation to the creation of cultures and identities write of processes which integrate active agents which are multidirectional and affect each other mutually. As discussed, in terms of terminology, these multi-perspective studies are simultaneously concerned with multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural and post-colonialist approaches. In Hungary, as Antonia Novoa said, the post-colonial studies that open Pandora's Box have not yet gained ground, even though it is obvious from the above discussion that their role in the international history-writing of education is unquestionable. However, there are school-creating initiatives which – regarding its terminology – talk of intercultural (universal) history-writing.

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