DAVID TURNER

DEVELOPMENT, GLOBALISATION AND DECENTRALISATION: COMPARATIVE RESEARCH TOWARDS A THEORY FOR MANAGING DIVERSITY

1. INTRODUCTION

When we enter into the process of researching education, or even before we start researching phenomena in education, we carry into our examination a number of assumptions. These assumptions are so deeply ingrained in our way of thinking and our underlying philosophy or epistemology that we find it difficult to examine them critically. In this chapter I wish to look at the range of conceptual and theoretical tools which we apply when developing a study in education. More particularly what I want to examine is a range of conceptual tools which are completely lacking or missing from those that we regularly deploy.

In spite of all evidence to the contrary, we believe that if a group of similar individuals or institutions find themselves in the same position, they will act in the same way: conversely, if a group of individuals or institutions act in different ways, then we believe that there must be something different about them that explains the difference in their behaviour.

I say, "in spite of all evidence to the contrary", because we know in practice that in all studies of social phenomena intra-group variation is much larger than inter-group variation. Thus if we are looking at the performance of a class of students, the difference between the best girl in the class and the worst girl in the class, and the difference between the best boy in the class and the worst boy in the class, will be much greater than the difference between the performance of the average girl and the average boy. And this is true for all groups that we define for the purposes of analysing educational difference; within the group is always greater than the difference between groups.

However the notion that in similar circumstances similar people will respond in similar ways is extremely deeply embedded in our way of perception and thinking. We can trace it back to the origins of logic in the Aristotlean syllogism. Two forms of the syllogism might be noted:

If A then B;

A;

Therefore B.

We might take a concrete example of this:

If a pupil is female then she will score better on the maths test;

This pupil is female;

Therefore she will score better on the maths test.

(This example could be extended by countless examples; this pupil will score better if they are taught by method X, pupils from a home with many books will perform better, and so on.)

There is an alternative form of the syllogism:

If A then B;

Not B;

Therefore not A.

Again we might exemplify:

If the pupil gets sufficient support at home then they will stay on at school;

This pupil has not stayed on at school;

Therefore they were not getting sufficient support at home.

This line of reasoning and the search for those indicators which will allow us to differentiate between different groups of pupils or different groups of institutions has formed the basis of large-scale survey methods in educational studies. Such studies are devoted to identifying which background variables account for the difference between pupils who perform well and those who perform poorly. But the influence of such an approach goes far beyond the actual concrete examples cited here. In our general way of thinking about educational situations, we assume that if two groups perform differently there must be some underlying factors, that could be manipulated and that account for the differences. I am going to call this approach which assumes that homogeneous agents will respond to similar circumstances in similar ways 'single-centredness'.

Having briefly exemplified what is ment by single-centredness, it would perhaps be well to spend a moment examining what the alternative is. A label for the alternative, 'multi-centredness', is relatively easy to identify, but what should be included under the heading of multi-centredness? In a multi-centred understanding a group of individuals or institutions, identical on all measured criteria, in identical circumstances might be expected to behave in radically different ways. However they might be expected to divide themselves among the possible courses of action in predictable proportions.

This concept that individuals or institutions faced with identical options would choose to respond in divergent ways is both easy and difficult to grasp. It is relatively simple to grasp the concept and to acknowledge intellectually that it could happen. But it is so much a variance with our normal way of thinking about educational responses that we might well dismiss it as impossible in practical circumstances. For that reason I shall examine some concrete circumstances in which a multi-centred understanding might be developed.

2. MULTI-CENTREDNESS

Some years ago I taught identical twins. My first and immediate observation was that I found it very difficult to distinguish between the two of them. But perhaps more importantly, I discovered that most of my colleagues also failed to distinguish between the two identical twins. Some background reading on the topic of identical twins suggested to me that identical twins are often not, in fact, identical, but are mirror images one of the other. And this turned out to be the case with the twins in my class. And with considerable effort I was eventually able to distinguish between them. A second observation followed almost immediately upon the ability to distinguish between them; I noticed that one of them worked hard and the other one copied his work from his brother. In this way, for the minimum combined effort, they could both receive praise for their work, since most of the people who taught them did not bother to assure themselves that both of them were contributing to the work produced.

In many ways this is a typical multi-centred situation. Two people as similar in background and circumstances as we can imagine found themselves in a situation where it made perfectly good sense for one of them to work and the other to copy the work from his brother. Had both of them chosen to work hard, they would have received no more praise or reward than under the solution chosen. On the other hand, had both of them chosen not to work, they both would have been punished for laziness.

There is an additional aspect of multi-centredness which might perhaps be noted here. Although the logic of the situation promotes a difference between the two twins, it does not determine which of them will work hard and which of them will copy. Indeed it does not say that one of them will work hard all the time, as opposed to a situation where one of them works hard in maths and the other one works hard in English, for example. The latter solution would give a distribution of labour and specialisation which again would be difficult to explain in single-centred terms.

The result of applying a multi-centred model, therefore, is the development of a break between the overall pattern of the outcome (in any particular classroom we would expect one twin to be working hard, and the other copying from him) and the individual responses of each agent to the circumstances (we will be unable to predict which of the twins will be working hard). Because of this disassociation between the overall configuration of outcomes and the responses of individuals, there is room within a multi-centred approach to apportion praise or blame. Genetics and

circumstances may have produced a situation in which the optimum benefits accrue if only one twin works. But neither inheritance nor environment explains which twin works hard in a particular class, and the hard-working one deserves credit for his diligence as much as the idle one deserves blame for his laziness.

This brings in a slight aside, in the sense that it raises the kinds of difficulty which we face in assigning responsibility, praise and blame in a theoretical framework which is single-centred. If behaviour is the outcome of genetic or environmental influences, then responsibility for action must be limited, as we recognise in allowing that extenuating circumstances mitigate responsibility. Managing the theoretical demands of two distinct models of behaviour, one of which relates to explaining behaviour, and the other of which assigns responsibility, we are more likely to produce confusion than clarity. Or we are left with clichés such as, "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime", or, "Hate the sin, love the sinner". As with so many clichés, however, these are either meaningless or impossible to operationalise.

Outside of the education system we are more fully familiar with multi-centred interpretations. In the rush hour, some commuters take the train, some the bus, while others drive to their place of work. The single-centred solution that all commuters would choose exactly the same route to work, and that we might find the entire rush hour packed into a single train while all other routes remain empty, is so counter-intuitive as to be absurd. What is less clear is whether we have formalised our understanding of traffic into multi-centred theoretical approaches which would allow us to be able to predict with some degree of certainty what proportion of commuters would take any particular route. However, again we can notice in a multi-centred understanding that it is possible to arrive at predictions about the overall configuration, while of traffic, it remains difficult to tell whether any particular commuter will be travelling a particular route on a particular day.

In addition to the scenario set out above, of identical twins, I have tried elsewhere to develop an approach to classroom management, which might explain how teachers produce very different classroom atmospheres.(Turner, 2004) There is, of course, a great deal more that could be done in terms of developing multi-centred approaches more fully. At the moment we have only indications of where such approaches might lead us. For example, the current research literature records, but does not explain, that identical twins perform better at school if they are dressed differently, or if they are separated for their classes. A multi-centred approach suggests why this might be the case.

3.   MULTI-CENTREDNESS AND POLICY ANALYSIS

One of the interesting aspects of multi-centred approaches, as should become clearer in the examples which will be introduced later, is that they support policy development. Even today, when the bulk of theories being used are single-centred, policy makers are looking for solutions which are multi-centred. Thus policies will frequently be couched in terms of goals and targets, even though those goals and targets are without theoretical foundations. For example, the UK government has set

the goal of having 50 percent of young people having an experience of higher education by the year 2010. Yet there is no available explanation of why 50 percent is the appropriate figure. Indeed, as noted above, we have no concept that it is the appropriate response of any group that 50 percent should attend university; either all of a group should, or none of it. We therefore know that when a policy maker sets a target in terms of a percentage of a group achieving an outcome, the figure has simply been plucked out of the air.

In some cases targets might be set by comparing groups; the same percentage of girls as boys should attend schools, for example. However, this is an atheoretical approach, and based upon the dubious grounds that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

If we return to an educational setting we might observe that 80 percent of people with the appropriate qualifications at the end of upper secondary schooling proceed to university. And we might wish to examine why eighty percent of pupils, rather than ninety percent or one hundred percent, follow that route. Our immediate reaction, in a single-centred approach, would be to try to identify what it is that distinguishes the twenty percent who do not proceed from the eighty percent who do. We might for example wish to differentiate between working class and middle class pupils, or between young men and young women. And certainly we might come to the conclusion that ninety percent of appropriately qualified middle class pupils proceed to university, while only forty percent of working class pupils do similarly. Or we might discover that ninety nine percent of boys proceed to university but only sixty percent of girls. The multi-centred approach does not deny there can be differences between groups. What it does suggest, however, is that in all but extraordinary circumstances the groups into which we divide our study remain heterogeneous in their responses to circumstances. Not all working class female students will choose to go on to university, nor will all of them choose to leave.

What this analysis suggests is that in many education settings an understanding which is multi-centred holds out a more interesting analysis than a model which is simplistic and single-centred. However there is a further aspect of multi-centredness which is of interest, and which may make it even more urgent that we address the question of developing multi-centred theoretical approaches and frameworks. Multi-centred theories which told us why eighty percent of a group do one thing and twenty percent do something else, and perhaps even more importantly told us what it was in the circumstances which would help to shift from eighty percent to eighty five percent, are exactly the kind of frameworks which policy makers would find useful. Even where single-centred approaches have provided the beginnings of an explanation of educational phenomena they have not proved useful to policy makers.

We might take, for example, a widely accepted conclusion from single-centred approaches: children who grow up in homes with a large number of books do better in school than children who grow up with no books at home. But no policy maker has ever suggested that the policy response to this understanding should be to distribute books to people's houses. Nor has any policy maker suggested that an appropriate response to gender differences in educational achievement would be the

provision of sex change operations for young people. Single-centred interpretations very rarely give rise to appropriate policy responses even when they provide a reasonable description of circumstances which promote or inhibit educational development.

4. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Now let us examine three practical policy situations and see how multi-centred approaches could help us to develop more specific policies for those situations.

The first example relates to the identification of institutional racism. In the UK more Afro-Caribbean boys are excluded from regular school than any other ethnic group; is this the result of racism in the school?

In fact Afro-Caribbean boys are almost three times as likely as the majority population of the country to be excluded from regular schooling.(Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 4) This is a prima facie case for the presence of racism in the system. However, we need to be careful in examining the exact mechanism by which this might happen.

We might be looking at a situation in which Afro-Caribbean boys are exactly as likely to respond negatively to the school setting as their peers, but where teachers respond much more vehemently to the behaviour of Afro-Caribbean boys than to other boys and girls who exhibit similar behaviour. This would certainly be a case where we would identify racism in the school, and on the part of school teachers. But it is not clear that this is the only way in which high levels of exclusions could be accounted for. It might possibly be the case that Afro-Caribbean boys, on leaving school, will enter particular segments of the labour market, possibly including segments which are prejudicial on grounds of race. This in turn might mean that the school curriculum was particularly unsuited for the preparation of these boys. In such circumstances Afro-Caribbean boys might be expected to resist the imposed school curriculum, to resist it more directly and positively, and in greater numbers than the rest of the school population. Indeed, rejecting the school curriculum might then be a perfectly reasonable response to their position in the external labour market, and have nothing to do with racism in the school (although there might well be evidence of racism in some other part of the system). The point at issue here is that the identifiably different behaviour of a specific group of pupils might either be a specific feature of the education system or a very reasonable response to circumstances outside the school which are relevant to school performance.

Single-centred approaches to the theory cannot help us to distinguish between the two cases – between inexcusable racism within the education system, and everybody within the school system making perfectly reasonable adjustments to equally inexcusable racism outside the education system. However, the policy implications of the two cases are radically different. But until we have a multi-centred approach which helps us to analyse what proportion of specific pupil populations can be expected to reject the school imposed curriculum, we will not be in a position to differentiate between internal school phenomena and responses to external circumstances.

The second example relates to gender differences and discrimination on the basis of gender. Consider a school system in which 98% of boys stay on for secondary education and 95% of girls stay on for secondary education. Are the girls under-represented in secondary education? Are the boys under-represented in secondary education? Are the boys over-represented in secondary education?

We really have no idea because the only kind of standard that we can apply is an *ad hoc* comparison of groups within the system; one group stays on more or less frequently than the other group. We do not have any theories that cover the percentage we would expect to attend. We have no framework for judging whether a particular percentage of school attendance is appropriate for the economy, for personal development or for social development. Since we have no multi-centred theories, the only standard that we can apply is whether males and females, in this case, behave in the same way. But why should we assume that groups that face differentiated labour markets and differentiated roles in society should necessarily respond in exactly the same way to the education system?

We face the same kind of dilemma in evaluating local autonomy, as can be illustrated with a third example. In England the government introduced a compulsory hour of reading and an hour of mathematics into the primary school. In Wales no such unified structure was imposed but schools were expected to introduce their own strategy for developing reading and mathematical skills among young children. In Wales, 80% of the schools chose to adopt the English solution (National Literacy Trust, 2004) Does this represent a lack of local autonomy? Does it represent the fact that the materials were available and cheap for the English solution? Is 80% a high figure for the voluntary adoption of a uniform solution in a system where there is local autonomy? Is 80% a low figure?

The fact of the matter is that nobody knows. We do not have any kinds of multi-centred theories which would allow us to engage with the question of whether those schools which chose the external solution were exercising their autonomy or not. As is quite apparent, the lack of such a theoretical framework is a major shortcoming of our present understanding of issues in globalisation, centralisation and decentralisation.

Most of the interesting questions which we face in education policy today require multi-centred answers. In the summer of 2000 there was considerable controversy in the press when a young woman, with very high examination scores at the end of upper secondary schooling, was refused admission by Oxford University. This was taken (most notably by the Chancellor of the Exchequer) as an indication that pupils from state schools were being discriminated against by the elite University (BBC, 2000). But unless a University can accept all students who apply to it, how can we possibly know whether there is discrimination or not? What proportion of state school students would we expect to be in Oxford University, if no discrimination were exhibited? What percentage of working class children, middle class children, children of single mothers, or any other group would we expect to be in Oxford University as evidence of a fair admissions system?

The fact of the matter, again, is that we really have no basis for making these judgements. The Government is to establish an office to oversee the fairness of

University admission procedures. Establishing a bureaucracy and a system of accountability is the easy part: the difficult part is providing a multi-centred analytical framework so that judgements about the equity of admissions policies can be made. This is a notoriously difficult area, which in the past has included discussion of quotas, positive discrimination and affirmative action. However, there is a radical shortage of theory in this and related fields.

In all of those complex areas of policy which have been highlighted in this chapter, there is a complex interaction between individuals and institutions who have to opt for a course of action, and policy makers at some larger level of integration who have to encourage, discourage or approve the selected course of action. "We cannot appoint more teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds if they do not apply / are not qualified". "We cannot admit more children from state schools to the University if they choose not to apply". This complex interaction between policy and personal preference is typical of educational settings, especially those educational settings which are important for ethical reasons. But is a lack of applicants sufficient evidence that our processes are fair? Or might this not be a response to perceived or real unfairness in our procedures? These are admittedly difficult areas, but we are seriously under-equipped in terms of theory to address them.

5. CONCLUSIONS

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that in the context of globalisation and expansion of education systems, most of the theories which we apply are single-centred, while most of the interesting problems we face are multi-centred. Discussion of the exercise of local autonomy, of global influences and of trans-national effects are conducted without a theoretical framework which allows us to evaluate the true strength of those influences. If we are to develop a clear understanding of how local, national and international forces act together to influence the development of education systems, and the opportunities of individuals, we need to develop frameworks of analysis which are multi-centred. Such multi-centred approaches would connect directly with the concerns of policy makers and have a direct impact upon policy making.

6. REFERENCES

BBC (2000) "Chancellor attacks Oxford admissions", BBC News, Friday, 26 May, 2000, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/764141.stm) accessed 1 April 2004

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Statistics of Education: Permanent exclusions from maintained schools in England.* London: HMSO.

Also at (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SBU/b000427/stats_bulletin_08_03.pdf) accessed 1 April 2004

National Literacy Trust (2004) "The attitude towards the literacy hour in Wales", http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/database/primary/viewslithour.html Accessed 1 April, 2004

Turner, David A. (2004) *Theory of Education*. London: Continuum.