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Knowledge transfer, educational change and the history of education

New theoretical frameworks

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical overview of the field of knowledge transfer and educational change and a discussion of the issues raised in the six papers in this special edition.

Design/methodology/approach – A theoretical analysis of the field of knowledge transfer.

Findings – The six papers consider issues such as the interplay of ideas between British and Indian educationalists, post-war debates over literacy standards, the use of curriculum materials for the process of citizen formation, the influence of international exchanges in the education of adolescents for citizenship, Vigotsky and the transfer of knowledge across time, space, culture, disciplines and networks, and the way constructions of Chinese identity within history books were shaped by knowledge processes that transcended nation states.

Originality/value – This special issue of the *History of Education Review* engages with new approaches that have become available to historians in the past decade illustrating how they might be applied for the first time to key issues in the history of education across colonial and state borders. It addresses questions about the movement of knowledge across national and cultural boundaries, and examines key problems facing educators in a range of colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Keywords Knowledge transfer, Educational change, Theoretical frameworks

Paper type Research paper

“Knowledge transfer” has become a powerful paradigm in historical research in the western world in the past ten years. Its recent use in tracing the provenance of ideas across boundaries that relate to educational ideas, pedagogic practices, curriculum, conceptions of citizenship, colonial/metropole constituency or of ethnic identity in different national domains, demonstrates the paradigm’s broad applicability. “Knowledge transfer” framing does not generally disrupt the usual repertoire of theoretical approaches used in history of education research, including the broad range of topic areas just mentioned. However, this framing goes some way to meeting the often unsatisfying pursuit of identifying and characterising the provenance of ideas and practices in education, where it is clear, nevertheless, that nodal sites of innovation and creativity in one domain emerge, usually reconfigured, in other domains.

Knowledge transfer approaches, in fact, emerged first in the field of comparative education rather than in the field of history of education. For educational comparativists this development grew out of a need to find new direction: where scholars at Columbia University (New York) and at Humboldt University (Berlin), in particular, sought new directions for their work as they moved away from overused globalisation critiques.

The impetus was to seek out greater historicity in their research and to develop a “knowledge transfer” critique that better characterised the historical context of their work. These scholarly endeavours have had a strong impact on the way intellectual and educational praxis transmission is now viewed. For example, Schriewer and Martinez (2004) compare Spain, Russia/Soviet Union and China in their analysis of the variable degree and the dimensions of the internationalisation of educational knowledge between the 1920s and the 1990s. This work sees no one centre of innovation but rather identifies a phenomenology that offers multiple pathways of transmission.

Phillips and Ochs (2003) suggest another useful approach, particularly their theorisation regarding “externalising potential” (where the receptiveness for new ideas occurs or is imposed), the significance of context and the “indigenisation” of policy exported from external domains. And “borrowing not copying” as a talisman conceptual motif is used by similar work that includes the scholarship of such luminaries as Steiner-Khamsi (2004) at Columbia University. Schriewer’s most recent work has taken this approach one step further. This work looks at the dissemination and reception of the educational philosopher and reformer John Dewey’s ideas across the world, where local ideological and discursive configurations have shaped these ideas in different ways in countries such as Argentina, Mexico, Japan and China. There is considerable scope for future education research to follow such a methodological framework.

Much scholarship is yet to be done to apply this approach to colonial domains: although Vera and Caruso (2007) have examined the transmission of monitorialism and other education technologies across Spanish South America and Allender (2009) has examined the evolutionary deployment of British praxis and administration in colonial India. In her study of Colombo plan scholars in New Zealand universities (1951-1975), Collins (2012) explored the way knowledge exchanges took place across national, colonial and cultural boundaries, these flows leading to mutual and sometimes unintended benefits. Furthermore, in the colonial sphere, of potentially great impact for future research is Bayly’s (2003) scholarship regarding transnational history. Rather than relying only on any one theoretical approach, Bayly’s empirically based research traces the flow of ideas, de-centering nation states, to illustrate “[...] the interdependencies and interconnectedness of political and social changes across the world in a period well before contemporary globalisation”.

“Knowledge transfer” frames also offer new ways of understanding intellectual and cultural transmission across colonial boundaries that is not dependent on embedding simpler metropole/colony binaries. Understanding the historicity of such processes has forced a rethink about how best to characterise this interplay, and earlier models have been placed under scrutiny as a result. For example, old models of imperial imposition on colonial domains have given way to notions of “Empire at Home” and “Empire Abroad” binaries. The work of Hall and Rose (2006), which examines the impact of empire on constructions of womanhood, masculinity and class “at home” in Britain, is a good example of this academic technique. This is whilst “centre/periphery” approaches have become inadequate in fully capturing the complex nature of knowledge transfer across colonial/state boundaries. As well, ethnicity has been written into this historical framework as previously hegemonic subaltern narratives have been reconfigured in the past ten years. Diasporas attached to colonies and former colonies are recognised and are given new voice where, within subaltern

groupings, such as women, there is also oppression that is evident, which was internal to these groupings. Better understanding this kind of “internal” oppression has been articulated by new scholar endeavours to pose frames that explore transnational feminist phenomenology (Anagol, 2005).

In the Australian context relatively recent theorisation, that seeks to better characterize knowledge transfer from other parts of the world, provides new and robust approaches. Yet, for most of these works the state also remains paradigmatic. Curthoys and Lake (2005) proffer models of transnational history where analysis is centered on understanding what happens to people and practices when they cross national boundaries. More than this, these authors posit the obligations of academics of transnational histories to a broader international interpretative historical community. Lake’s (2002) earlier work on Faith Bandler, a leading campaigner for the 1967 referendum in Australia, concerning aboriginal legal status under federal law, sees Bandler’s activism inspired by US civil rights radicals, and US inspired cultural expressions through ballet, that railed against oppression and racial prejudice. Yet, Lake’s work is firmly referenced by Bandler’s Australian national locale. Darian-Smith *et al.* (2007) in their study of Britishness as a global phenomenon examine what happened to this Britishness in its diffuse forms as the empire declined. This work embraces trajectories differently established in each “local” state/colonial domain, including Australia. These emerging nation-based trajectories define the book’s analysis of how different resistance thinkers and activists, in each state/colonial domain, variously contested the empire’s otherwise overwhelmingly strongly shared traditions and common loyalties.

Finally, within the paradigm of knowledge transfer, the network and circuit conception of empire and nation state is also compelling. This conception is readily applicable to topics in this special issue, including the transmission of schooling practice, educational theory, ethnic identity, literacy and numeracy testing modalities, conceptions of citizenship, cultural transmission through school texts, as well as new pedagogy. Lester (2006) poses a further frame for these kinds of inquiry by seeing transnational linkage, but only as a means to better analyse the “local” colonial practice, performance and experience. Examination of this local practice informed from “outside”, but also in its own right, is seen by this author as a more productive enterprise, rather than simply attempting to locate putative social, economic and political causes for this practice in any one national domain. Furthermore, the work of Lester and others builds on Ballantyne’s (2002) impressive organising metaphor of an agglomeration of overlapping webs to explain the multi-sited history of empire.

The idea for this special edition originated from discussion between the editors at the Australia and New Zealand History of Education held in December 2010 at Wagga in country NSW, Australia: a conference made memorable by floods and a power outage. The idea of cross-border exchanges of knowledge and praxis had emerged in the conference and with the encouragement of Tanya Fitzgerald, the editor, the time seemed right to build on this theme in a special edition of the journal. This special issue of the *History of Education Review* engages with new approaches that have become available to historians in the past decade illustrating how they might be applied for the first time to key issues in the history of education across colonial and state borders. It addresses questions about the movement of knowledge across national and cultural boundaries, and examines key problems facing educators in a range of colonial and postcolonial contexts. The six papers consider issues such as the interplay

of ideas between British and Indian educationalists, post-war debates over literacy standards, the use of curriculum materials for the process of citizen formation, the influence of international exchanges in the education of adolescents for citizenship, Vigotsky and the transfer of knowledge across time, space, culture, disciplines and networks, and the way constructions of Chinese identity within history books were shaped by knowledge processes that transcended nation states.

In the opening paper, Georgina Brewis seeks to explore some of the remarkable parallels between social service and higher education in Britain and India. The paper begins with a brief account of the development of higher education in Britain and India before exploring the intellectual influences underpinning the rise of social service in both localities. It ends with a discussion on the interplay of ideas between British and Indian educationalists and social servants and the hybrid groups and associations this reciprocity created. The paper explores the thesis that social service was an expression of practical patriotism that was closely linked to a nation building agenda in both metropole and colony. It considers the vibrant social service culture, which developed in higher education colleges in both metropolitan Britain and colonial India in the period 1905-1919: examining the transfer of ideas and practices between British and Indian social servants in the early twentieth century, and the many reciprocal influences that lay behind the student social service movement. The paper examines ways in which a student social service movement was forged "[...] in and between multiple and connected sites, rather than within any one metropolitan or colonial site". It argues that social servants in both metropole and colony shared a set of core values, and that social service was seen as a unifying force that cut across religious and communal rivalries.

In the following paper, Roger Openshaw and Margaret Walshaw argue for the ability of transnational history to broaden and deepen historical analysis in the context of educational history, especially in cases where historic processes in one nation reveal significant and long-standing issues that appear to have significant parallels elsewhere. Utilising the early post-war debate over literacy and numeracy standards in the New Zealand public education system as an example, this paper examines how such debates are characterised by sharp divisions between professional and public opinion and competing conceptions of education. The paper illustrates ways in which these conceptions combine to create a conviction that public education is in crisis, thus necessitating a decisive response from officialdom.

The paper illustrates the way debates are frequently shaped by the tactics of persuasion, obscuring the fact that underpinning rival claims lie radically different, probably irresolvable conceptions of schooling. The discussion poses significant questions for historians interested in the concept of transnationality. As the paper points out, all these debates appear to share intensely political characteristics, where protagonists are heavily engaged in the tactics of mass persuasion. Across national and continental boundaries, for example, many employers today remain convinced that "standards" have declined and continue to advocate for firm government action on mandatory standards. At local, regional and national levels and in nations widely separated geographically, concerns continue to be expressed over the increased surveillance of teachers and the accompanying tendency towards viewing educational success in terms of readily assessable outcomes.

In Phil Cormack's paper, the key problems facing governments and educators in the antipodean colony of South Australia in the mid- to late nineteenth century take centre stage. Questions of how educators were to shape future citizens as properly moral and

productive subjects in the face of a rapidly expanding population spread over a large area focus on the value of the reading lesson in the newly established compulsory primary schools of the colony. Issues such as religious rivalry meant the Bible could not be used in public schools, and the desire for centralised rather than local control, meant that curriculum practices could not simply be imported from the centre of Empire and applied in the colony. The paper explores ways in which South Australian educators developed a new hybrid text for teaching reading. This hybridity took the form of a “school paper”, entitled *The Children’s Hour* (1889-1963), which featured the innovative use of literature and other genres, and provided new ways to shape the identities of school students and teachers. Cormack argues that the school paper, which was distributed widely across the state, was strongly implicated in the discursive construction of both a global/imperial and local/Australian identity; and represents an informative case of the ways in which teaching and learning practices have been highly mobile in the field of reading. *The Children’s Hour* shows the way that the colonial margins were able to act as sites of innovation in curriculum and pedagogy and not just as importers of ideas from the imperial centre. As the paper illustrates, the humble school reading text is an overlooked site for examining processes of the constitution of national identity and the citizen-subject. In this way, *The Children’s Hour* can be seen as part of a process that made Australia thinkable as a nation, and “Australianness” possible. It is also a reminder of the significance of communication technologies in the formation and maintenance of national identity and the process of knowledge transfer, and that in studying these processes, the role of the school has often been overlooked.

Links between adolescence and citizenship education in Australian education history and the transfer of knowledge across international borders are explored from a different perspective in the fourth paper. In it Julie McLeod and Katie Wright draw on a larger historical study of Australian adolescence and citizenship education from the 1930s to the 1970s. The paper focuses on international exchanges during the 1930s, a decade of significant educational debate and reform, arising in part from the combined influence of child-centred progressivism and psychology. It considers the influence of Carnegie-sponsored activities on Australian education, and the ways in which the Corporation fostered trans-pacific and trans-imperial exchange, situating these internationalising networks of expertise as forms of power/knowledge relations. The authors argue that Australian education in the 1930s was more cosmopolitan and embedded in international exchange than is usually remembered. They examine the role Carnegie-supported events played in promoting the exchange of ideas about education for citizenship in the post-war years. The paper makes a case for a stronger appreciation of such transnational dynamics, not only in building histories of adolescence and schooling, but also in contemporary memory and constructions of Australia’s educational history more generally.

In the penultimate paper, Kelvin McQueen argues for the significance of Vygotsky’s contribution to the transferability of his knowledge, and for his “unbounded” and radical approach to a range of educational matters. The paper explores some of the influences on the development of Vygotsky’s unbounded perspective by examining the biographies of two influential teacher-mentors of Vygotsky: his father and his private tutor. These biographies intersect with two radical political currents that swept across Russia from the mid-1800s: narodism (populism) and its associated terrorism. The paper then considers the significance of an early paper by Vygotsky and argues that this political treatise helped to form his orientation towards educational

questions. The paper concludes by posing a question. Was Vygotsky's research paradigm actually an attempt to discover how knowledge transference could reduce the propensity of some to go beyond civilised bounds? The paper argues for the remarkable ability of Vygotsky's ideas to go beyond political and national boundaries. Given the censorship of his ideas within the Soviet Union during his life, their "transferability" is remarkable.

In the final paper, Yeow-Tong Chia examines the conceptions of "Chineseness" and the perceptions of China in Ontario's High School History Curriculum from 1945 to the end of the 1980s. It does this by examining the syllabus and textbooks used in schools in this Canadian province. This aspect of teaching is an unexplored facet of the history curriculum in Ontario High Schools. The author argues that the way Chinese history was represented in Ontario High Schools is an interesting case study of how white settler societies viewed and understood Asia. The paper sheds light on a hitherto unexplored facet of the history curriculum in Ontario High Schools. Using textbooks and curriculum documents as sites reflecting the dominant world view of the white settler population, the paper illustrates the process of knowledge transfer drawing on conceptions of Chinese History in the school curriculum in Ontario, as seen through a "western" gaze. In the examples presented in this paper, and the other contributions to this special issue, important new theoretical questions are raised and opportunities presented for further exploration of the intersection of knowledge transfer, educational change and the history of education.

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