

NON-WESTERN EDUCATIONAL TRADITIONS

**ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO
EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT AND PRACTICE**



TIMOTHY REAGAN

**Non-Western Educational Traditions:
Alternative Approaches
to Educational Thought and Practice**

**Sociocultural, Political,
and Historical Studies in Education**

Joel Spring, Editor

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Timothy Reagan

The Cultural Transformation of a
Native American Family and Its Tribe · 1763–1995
A Basket of Apples

Joel Spring

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to Educational Thought and Practice**

Timothy Reagan
The University of Connecticut



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Preface

In all societies, throughout human history, people have educated their children. Indeed, one of the fundamental characteristics of human civilization is a concern for the preparation of the next generation. From one generation to the next, we seek to pass on what we know and have learned, hoping to ensure not merely the survival of our offspring, but that of our culture as well.

The history of education, as it has been conceived and taught in the United States (and generally in the West), has focused almost entirely on the ways in which our own educational tradition emerged, developed, and changed over the course of the centuries. This is, of course, understandable, but it means that we have ignored the many ways that other societies have sought to meet a number of the same challenges. In this book, an effort is made to try to provide a brief overview of several other, non-Western approaches to educational thought and practice. An understanding of the ways that other peoples have tried to educate their children, as well as what counted as “education” for them, may help us both to think more clearly about some of our own assumptions and values, and to become more open to alternative viewpoints about important educational matters.

Unlike most areas traditionally included in the training of educators, very few Western individuals have had any real exposure to non-Western educational traditions, and so the audience for this book is a very broad and diverse one. The book was written to be accessible to both preservice and inservice teachers, but may also be of interest to advanced students in graduate programs as well as faculty members. Although both the book as a whole and sections in particular may be of considerable interest to educators in other societies, the book is written from the perspective of American readers, and presupposes that readers are, at the very least, familiar with the Western educational tradition.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Non-Western Educational Traditions: Alternative Approaches to Educational Thought and Practice consists of nine chapters dealing with a wide variety of different, non-Western cultural and historical educational traditions. In chapter 1, a theoretical foundation and base for the study of non-Western educational traditions has been presented. In chapter 2, a broad overview of traditional, indigenous African educational thought and practice is offered. Chapters 3 and 4 move our focus away from Africa and onto indigenous

educational thought and practice in two distinctive settings in the Americas. In chapter 3, an examination of the educational thought and practice of the Aztecs is used as a case study of indigenous education in Mesoamerica, whereas in chapter 4, the pre-Columbian North American experience is discussed. Traditional educational thought and practice in imperial China is the focus of chapter 5, with a special emphasis on the role of the imperial examination system. Chapter 6 provides an overview of the educational tradition embedded in Hinduism in India, and chapter 7 focuses on the Buddhist educational tradition. Although technically not non-Western in important ways (including its relationship to the so-called "Judeo-Christian" tradition), the Muslim educational heritage is similarly excluded in large part from Western histories of educational thought and practice, and so its inclusion in a book of this sort is certainly defensible. Therefore, chapter 8 presents a survey of traditional Islamic educational thought and practice. Finally, chapter 9, the last chapter in *Non-Western Educational Traditions: Alternative Approaches to Educational Thought and Practice*, summarizes some of the major themes and issues discussed in the book, and suggests future areas for scholarly exploration. At the end of each chapter there are a number of questions for reflection and discussion, as well as recommendations for further readings.

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Timothy Reagan

*It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country,
but rather for him who loveth the whole world.
The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.*

— Bahá'u'lláh

*This book is dedicated to my father,
Gerald Reagan.*

Contents

Preface	ix
1 The Study of Non-Western Educational Traditions	1
The Challenge of Ethnocentrism	3
The Concept of "Tradition" and Its Limits	6
Learning From Oral Traditions	7
Commonality and Diversity in Non-Western Traditions	9
Conclusion	10
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	11
Recommended Further Readings	11
Notes	11
2 Traditional African Educational Thought and Practice	15
The Goals of Traditional African Education	18
The Oral Tradition in African Education	20
Traditional Education as Moral Education	28
The Process of Initiation	29
Vocational Aspects of Traditional Education	31
Concluding Thoughts	33
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	35
Recommended Further Readings	35
Notes	36
3 The Meso-American Educational Experience	41
The Case of the Aztecs	
The Aztec World	42
The Aztec Conception of the "Educated Person"	46
The Educational Functions of the Family in Aztec Society	49
Formal Schooling in Aztec Society	49
Conclusion	51
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	52
Recommended Further Readings	52
Notes	53
4 Education in Pre-Columbian North America	59
The Core Belief System of American Indians	61
Traditional Educational Beliefs and Practices	63
Conclusion	67

Questions for Reflection and Discussion	67
Recommended Further Readings	68
Notes	68
5 The Chinese Educational Heritage	73
The Role of Confucian Thought in Traditional Chinese Education	76
Traditional Chinese Educational Practice	80
The Imperial Examination System	82
Conclusion	85
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	86
Recommended Further Readings	87
Notes	87
6 Hinduism and Education in Classical India	93
The Vedic Tradition	95
<i>Shruti</i>	96
<i>Smrti</i>	96
The Role of Sanskrit in the Vedic Tradition	97
Hindu Beliefs and Practices	97
Traditional Hindu Educational Thought	99
Traditional Hindu Educational Practice	101
Conclusion	103
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	103
Recommended Further Readings	104
Notes	104
7 The Buddhist Educational Tradition	109
An Overview of Buddhism	111
Wisdom	112
Ethics	112
Meditation	112
Traditional Buddhist Educational Thought and Practice	114
Conclusion	116
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	116
Recommended Further Readings	117
Notes	117
8 The Islamic Educational Enterprise	121
Islam: An Overview	123
The Life of Muhammad	123
The Central Beliefs of Islam	124
The Five Pillars of Islam	126
The Role of the <i>Qur'an</i>	128
Islamic Philosophy of Education	130

Traditional Islamic Educational Practice	132
Conclusion	133
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	134
Recommended Further Readings	134
Notes	135
9 Themes and Lessons in the Study of Non-Western Educational Traditions: Concluding Thoughts	141
Some Common Themes in Non-Western Educational Traditions	141
Areas for Future Research	145
Conclusion	145
Questions for Reflection and Discussion	146
Recommended Further Readings	146
Notes	147
Bibliography	149
Index	177

1

The Study of Non-Western Educational Traditions

Most books and courses that deal with the history and philosophy of education include few, if any, references to indigenous educational ideas and practices in Africa and the Americas, and relatively few references to those of Asia. Although there have recently been calls for the inclusion of the perspectives of women and people of color in studies of the history and philosophy of education, such efforts, when they have taken place, have often entailed little more than the addition of vignettes indicating the contributions of women and people of color to the Western tradition. In other words, the idea that there might be valuable insights to be gained from a serious examination of non-Western educational traditions themselves—indeed, that these traditions might be fully and in all respects comparable to the Western tradition in their unique richness and diversity—is one that has been rarely voiced. Furthermore, where non-Western educational ideas and practices have been discussed, they are often subjected to a treatment roughly comparable to the “orientalism” discussed by Edward Said with regard to the Western (and specifically, Anglo-French-American) response to Islam and the Islamic world. Said argued that:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. . . . European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.¹

In other words, when scholars *do* try to examine non-Western educational thought and practice, all too often they tend to do so through a lens that not only colors what they see, but also reifies the object of study—making it, in essence, part of “the other” and hence alien. Reification results not only in the distortion of what one is trying to understand, but also in its subjugation to one’s own preexisting values and norms. This problem is not, of course, unique

to the study of educational thought and practice; it is a common criticism of Western scholarship about the non-Western world in general. For example, in his discussion of the study of indigenous African religions by Western scholars, the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek wrote of the "systematic and intensive use of dirty gossip" in place of solid and sensitive scholarship.² In a similar vein, the anthropologist Adam Kuper wrote of *The Invention of Primitive Society* by 19th- and 20th-century anthropologists and social theorists in the West.³ In terms of traditional African educational practices, A. Babs Fafunwa commented that, "Because indigenous education failed to conform to the ways of the Westernised system, some less well-informed writers have considered it primitive, even savage and barbaric. But such contentions should be seen as the product of ignorance and due to a total misunderstanding of the inherent value of informal education."⁴

The same, of course, can be argued with respect to Western treatment of indigenous educational ideas and practices in Asia, the Americas, and elsewhere. In short, when we speak of the history of educational thought and practice, what we have actually meant in the past has been the history of *Western* educational thought and practice, and the effect of our meaning has been, in essence, to delegitimize the many alternatives found elsewhere in the world. In other words, it is discourse itself—the way that one talks, thinks about, and conceptualizes educational thought and practice—that is at issue. As Stephen Ball noted in a discussion of the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, "Discourse is a central concept in Foucault's analytical framework. Discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships, they constitute both subjectivity and power relations."⁵

The underlying purpose of this book, then, is to begin the process by which the existing discourse in the history of educational thought and practice can be expanded in such a way as to provide a starting point for the development of a more open and diverse view of the development of various approaches to educational thought and practice. Needless to say, this work is intended to be only a beginning. If the study of the various educational traditions discussed here is to be taken seriously, these traditions (and many others as well) will require, and are certainly entitled to, the same sort of concern that has long been accorded the Western tradition. Furthermore, given their differences from the Western tradition, it is essential that we all learn to invite and to listen to the "multiple voices" and perspectives that can enlighten our understanding of these traditions, just as we must learn to recognize that different groups may, as a consequence of their sociocultural contexts and backgrounds, possess "ways of knowing" that, although different from our own, may be every bit as valuable and worthwhile as those to which we are accustomed.⁶ As Carol Gilligan suggested with respect to "woman's place in man's life cycle" in *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*,

At a time when efforts are being made to eradicate discrimination between the sexes in the search for social equality and justice, the differences between the sexes are being rediscovered in the social sciences. This discovery occurs when theories formerly considered to be sexually neutral in their scientific objectivity are found instead to reflect a consistent observational and evaluative bias. Then the presumed neutrality of science, like that of language itself, gives way to the recognition that the categories of knowledge are human constructions. The fascination with point of view that has informed the fiction of the twentieth century and the corresponding recognition of the relativity of judgment infuse our scientific understanding as well when we begin to notice how accustomed we have become to seeing life through men's eyes.⁷

A very similar kind of argument can be made with respect to the differences in perspective and worldview in various non-Western cultural and historic traditions. To be sure, this argument is, at the present time, speculative in nature with respect to many of the traditions discussed in this book, whereas in the case of women, there is now a growing body of fairly compelling empirical evidence. My hope is that others, from a wide array of different backgrounds, would challenge, modify, and add to the base that is offered here, and that someday the study of the Aztec *calmécac* and *telpochcalli*, of the imperial Chinese examination system and its content, and the role of various African initiation schools, among others, might be as commonly taught in courses in the history of educational thought as the works of Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey are today. Having said this, it is also important to stress that I am not arguing that Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey (among others) should be eliminated; they, and many others, are important figures in the development of our own historical tradition, and certainly merit serious study. My focus here is not on replacing the Western tradition, but rather on trying to expand our understanding of education, broadly conceived, through the examination and study of other approaches to educational thought and practice with which many of us tend to be less familiar. Ultimately, of course, as we better understand the educational traditions of other societies and cultures, we will also be forced to reexamine and to reflect on our own tradition in somewhat different ways—and this will be immensely beneficial to our understanding of our own traditions.

THE CHALLENGE OF ETHNOCENTRISM

As we begin the process of trying to broaden our perspectives on the history of educational thought and practice, it is important for us to understand that the activity in which we are engaged will inevitably involve challenging both our own *ethnocentrism* and the *ethnocentrism* of others. Basically, *ethnocentrism* refers to the tendency to view one's own cultural group as superior to others—a tendency common to most, if not all, human societies. In contem-

porary scholarly discourse, one seldom comes across such blatant ethnocentrism, however. Rather, what is far more common is simply the practice of using one's own society and sociocultural practices as the "norms" by which other societies are viewed, measured, and evaluated.⁷ Ethnocentrism of this kind takes two somewhat distinct forms: cultural ethnocentrism and epistemological ethnocentrism.⁸

Cultural ethnocentrism refers to manifestations of ethnocentrism in individual scholars and their work, as well as to the sociocultural context that has helped to form and support such individual and idiosyncratic biases. In other words, we see examples of cultural ethnocentrism when writers and scholars allow common biases, prejudices, and assumptions to color their work in various ways. Racism, sexism, and so on all contribute to cultural ethnocentrism, most often in ways that are unconscious. Thus, the topics that a scholar chooses to explore, the questions that are asked about the topic, the framework within which hypotheses are constructed, how conflicting evidence is weighed, and even what counts as evidence can all be affected by personal biases.

This brings us to the second sort of ethnocentrism, *epistemological ethnocentrism*, which deals not so much with individual assumptions and biases but, rather, with those common to an entire field of study. With epistemological ethnocentrism, we are concerned with what the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn called the dominant "paradigm" in our own field of study.⁹ A paradigm, on Kuhn's account, is far more than merely a model or a theory. As Patton explained:

A paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners: paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate, and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative, telling the practitioner what to do without the necessity of long existential or epistemological consideration. But it is this aspect of paradigms that constitutes both their strength and their weakness—their strength in that it makes action possible, their weakness in that the very reason for action is hidden in the unquestioned assumptions of the paradigm.¹⁰

Thus, the dominant paradigm in a field of study at any given point in time essentially establishes the parameters within which "legitimate" discourse may take place. Kuhn explained the significance and power of the dominant paradigm in a field of study as follows:

Scientists work from models acquired through education and through subsequent exposure to the literature often without quite knowing or needing to know what characteristics have given these models the status of community paradigms. . . . That scientists do not usually ask or debate what makes a particular problem or solution legitimate tempts us to suppose that, at least intuitively, they know the answer. But it may only indicate that neither the