

# Education in the Mediterranean: New collaborative structures and initiatives within the context of a Uniting Europe

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This commentary provides an overview of the Mediterranean Education Project by responding to four questions: Why is it necessary to have a Mediterranean project on education? Which Mediterranean are we referring to? What is the status of educational scholarship in the Mediterranean? How can the M.E.P. contribute to educational collaboration and scholarship in the Mediterranean?

## Justifying a Mediterranean Education Project

There are many reasons which could justify a Mediterranean project on education. The first is very simply to provide a space or forum for the countries bordering on the Mediterranean basin to speak to each other about education and broader cultural issues. Such a forum is important not only for reasons of comparative analysis in a region which is notoriously difficult to represent holistically, but also to encourage the representation of voices that have often remained unheard. A more provocative justification could be linked to an analysis of the complex processes leading to an increasingly integrated Europe, and the need to 'write back to the metropole', to use Edward Said's phrase (1993). For despite the European Union's slogan of 'unity in diversity', European identity is increasingly reinforced through the exclusion of 'the other' (Balibar, 1991; Coulby, 1994; Sultana, 1995). It is important that in such a context and historical conjuncture, the Mediterranean region, the South without which culturally and historically Europe would not be possible, re-discovers its voice and its strengths. This is especially true because a uniting Europe can represent new circuits of imperialism (Sivanandan, 1989), an imperialism that is financial, commercial, economic, political and cultural. While Europe can also represent some of the most progressive moments in humanity's history in search of democracy and respect of human dignity (Rohrs, 1992), one must not forget the logic of capital underlying the search for European competitiveness on the world market, and that this logic has already in the past led to domination and exploitation of 'the other' (Fanon, 1968; Ross, 1992).

The Mediterranean Education Project seeks therefore to focus on the production and circulation of knowledge around the Mediterranean, to valorise the experiences and research achievements of the various peoples living in the region, in order to encourage south-south and south-north dialogue. It is an attempt to help the Mediterranean explore its identity, through a focus on educational issues, and through this to enhance the possibility of mutual understanding and co-operation among the Mediterranean peoples in the various spheres of life. In this context it is important that being *for* the Mediterranean does not mean being *against* others. It simply means that the South has to enter into a dialogue with the North from a position of strength, having discovered the wealth of its resources, having overcome the very real barriers of communication

between its members, and having articulated its own vision for itself.

In order for this to come about, it is crucial that a variety of fora and spaces are gradually developed where authentic dialogue can take place. For such dialogue to be fruitful and enabling, participants must meet with the understanding that each voice is to be respected and heard; there must be a desire to understand each other and to celebrate both the diversities and the similarities of the different groups as these struggle to articulate a critical discourse on education and school systems in the Mediterranean.

Such a discourse has international, besides national and regional dimensions. Mediterranean people have left their homes and sought an education and a livelihood the world over. Little is known about their fortunes in host countries in Europe, North America and Australia, for instance. It is crucial to the project to facilitate the study of the educational experiences of the children of these migrants, in order to explore the specificity of challenges, problems and dilemmas as Mediterranean families seek to integrate themselves through the educational opportunities made available in their newly adopted homes. A further international aspect of the project is the increasing interest shown by scholars of the North in issues relating to the South, especially as the North-South axis has to a large extent replaced the East-West dichotomy as a focus for the social sciences.

## Which Mediterranean?

At one level, the Mediterranean excludes definition, and is marked rather more by rifts than by solidarity and regional cohesion. Several authors have tried to impose a unity on the basin, and perhaps the most instructive by far has been Fernand Braudel (1949, 1966), who considered the Mediterranean to be a unit or a system conditioned by its geography, climate and historical 'longue duree'. We can therefore talk of axes of unity and solidarity on the one hand, and axes of discord and division on the other in the characterisation of a Mediterranean identity.

There is certainly a geographical unity, delineated by Braudel as the northern-most limit of the olive tree to the northern-most limit of the palm tree. One could also speak of a historical lineage of the Mediterranean, where unity was imposed on the region by one power or another. A further axis of unity could be termed 'cultural', with comparative elements in theatre, artistic expression, cinema, literature and public celebration and rituals suggesting a Mediterranean character or spirit. There certainly seems to be an economic unity, given that most Mediterranean countries would be peripheral or semi-peripheral to industrial capitalism. Finally, one could also - perhaps paradoxically - refer to a religious unity, given that the Mediterranean is the home of the three monotheistic religions that have, by and large, dominated history in the West.

Needless to say, there are also important axes of discord, so that at times the idea of a regional 'unity' seems improbable and unattainable. The basin itself has two major rifts, one running north to south, the other east to west. Here we note different political regimes, different conceptualisations of democracy, and important and historically rooted tensions based on religion, ethnicity and cultures. It is enough here to simply refer to ex-Yugoslavia, to the Greeks and the Turks, to the Cypriot problem, to the Arab/Israeli conflicts. Even among the Arab nations themselves, perhaps the prime candidate for unity, attempts at generating forms of political and economic integration have largely failed, whether we refer to the Arab League of 1945, the Maghreb Arab Union of 1989, or the Mediterranean Forum, where the best that could be achieved has been soft diplomacy (see collection of articles in Balta, 1992).

It comes as no surprise therefore that as Edgar Pisani (1992) has pointed out, superpowers such as the United States, or organisations such as the World Bank and, for a long period of time, the European Community, have failed to acknowledge the existence of a Mediterranean 'region'.

And yet, we increasingly find attempts to 're-invent' (Balta, 1992) the Mediterranean, to bring it back to life, to restore the vigour it enjoyed in previous centuries when the sea was a medium of communication, of commerce, of knowledge transfer rather than an obstacle. Unesco's Mediterranean Education Programme, which brings together several initiatives in a number of diverse fields focusing on the specificity of the Mediterranean basin, is an important step with important consequences in this regard.

The Mediterranean, if considered as a region, constitutes an important bloc. It contains twenty states if one had to include Portugal, and covers 3 million square kilometres. It is the home of 500 million inhabitants, representing 8% of the world's population. 200 million of these Mediterraneans are Arabs, and in all, over 200 languages are spoken around the basin. There are two demographic regimes, with a high birth rate to the south so that the average birth rate in Turkey is 3.6 and that of Libya 6.7 compared to 1.3 for Italy and 1.8 for France. That North-South divide colours other features of the Mediterranean, with the latter seeking opportunities in the former through extensive migration movements. 10,000 qualified graduates leave the Maghreb every year, and in all 15 million have left their Mediterranean home since the 1950s. Most of the countries of the south have their eyes on the European Union: five states have already become members of the Community, representing the Latin Arc of Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece. Turkey, Cyprus, Malta and Morocco have applied for full membership. In many ways, however, the dependence on Europe is clearly there even if not formalised: two thirds of the external commerce of the Arab states is with the EU, which reciprocates by having only 3% of its external commerce with the same Arab countries. European investment in the Mediterranean comes mainly through tourism, and the region accounts for one third of the volume of the global tourist industry. The figures are constantly increasing, with obvious repercussions for cultural as well as economic and environmental realities of the countries affected: there were 58 million tourists in the region in 1970, 117 million in 1986, and despite the current depression in the market, it is expected that by the year 2025 the figures will rise to anywhere between 370 and 758 million (see Balta, 1992; Luciani, 1984; Grenon and Batisse, 1989).

## Education in the Mediterranean

A focus on the field of education illustrates the same axis of diversity and unity that characterises so many other features of the Mediterranean. There has in fact been little co-operation in educational scholarship in the region, and the key comparative education journals and scientific reviews have not once featured studies that attempt to identify common elements, or to look at differences in any systematic and integrative manner. There have been a number of initiatives that have attempted to facilitate collaborative research ventures and networks. The most important of these are the activities of the Community of Mediterranean Universities (based in Bari, Italy), Unesco's South Eastern Mediterranean Environment Project (SEMPEP, based in Paris), UNIMED (based at La Sapienza University in Rome), the European Union's MedCampus and the newly established Laboratorio Mediterraneo. Most of these initiatives have been short-lived (such as the Adult Education Network of the Mediterranean), have tended to be largely one-person initiatives with little attempt to collaborate (or success in collaborating) with other similar projects, have focused on training rather more than on education, have not developed in any systematic manner comparative education analyses, and in most cases have unproblematically privileged the transfer of knowledge from the north to the south.

And yet, there is ample opportunity and scope for this kind of collaboration in education, and for the development of networks of scholars, joint research projects, and systematic comparative analyses. There are over 250 universities and research centres in the Mediterranean, with the youngest University being that of Cyprus, established in 1992. There are close to 130,000 University teachers and researchers, and most Universities have a Faculty, School or Institute focusing on educational sciences. There is also plenty of scope for comparison between education systems. Higher education systems in the Mediterranean, for instance, tend to be more focused on teaching rather than research, an obvious repercussion of lack of sufficient funding and of the transfer of knowledge southwards. Most Mediterranean universities tend to be dominated by Faculties providing traditional professions such as doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, architects and religious specialists. There tends to be an over-reliance on the metropole and the 'north' for research and training partnership, often leading to post-colonial dependences. Teaching styles and pedagogies tend to be uncritical and unquestioning, given the authoritarian relationships that dominate at many levels of the different institutions (Boissevain, 1982) and the proximity of education systems to sources of power, whether these are secular or religious. Indeed, secular universities are a rarity in Muslim countries, for instance (Busutil, 1992).

There is a similarly wide scope for comparative studies of Mediterranean compulsory education systems. Just to mention a few examples, one could focus on the influence of the Napoleonic tradition on the development of centralised administrative systems. Economic underdevelopment has also led to an attraction for vocationalist forms of schooling on the part of system managers, while colonial experiences have, paradoxically, kept most of the population away from such vocational schools given that manual labour was constantly associated with low status. The importance of religion in the Mediterranean region has led to a situation where parallel educational services are offered through denominational schools. At all levels, the medium of instruction presents a veritable challenge, as policy-makers have to

decide whether they adopt an international language to teach scientific knowledge, or translate and adapt books in the mother tongue.

### The Mediterranean Education Project

The MEP responds in a concrete way to both the possibilities of collaborative work in the Mediterranean region in the field of education, and in answer to the prevailing limitations as outlined above. In fact, the MEP sets out to signal a field as a focus for study, and has, as its main goal, the desire to encourage education scholars and researchers to start speaking to each other, to represent themselves and their work to others on their own terms. The MEP sets out to facilitate the recognition of the expertise of education scholars in the Mediterranean, and the valorisation of this expertise and experience through a set of interrelated activities and initiatives. The most important of these are the following:

The setting up of a Research Network among education scholars in the Mediterranean. The first activity that is under way in this regard is the publication of a Directory of Mediterranean Education Scholars, carrying information about educational and career paths, experiences, research interests, language abilities, and record of publications.

The administration of a Mediterranean School of Comparative Education, organizing courses, seminars and workshops that facilitate the attainment of the MEP objectives, under the auspices of the Community of Mediterranean Universities.

The organization of the annual Selmun Seminar, a forum of the Mediterranean School of Comparative Education bringing together representatives from each Mediterranean country to present state-of-the-art reviews of educational development in their respective systems, and to propose collaborative educational research projects.

The launching of a Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies, reporting educational research and discussing concerns related to Mediterranean countries, and to the diaspora of Mediterranean people worldwide. The MJES has a Mediterranean and International Board of Editors. The first is made up of a representative from each Mediterranean country, who is responsible for soliciting and refereeing articles from colleagues. The second is made up of internationally renowned scholars who have written about the Mediterranean or are leaders in the field of comparative educational studies.

The development of a Documentation Centre, facilitating knowledge about, and use of research resources in education in the Mediterranean.

The production and dissemination of pedagogical and curricular material, including information technology software packages, that are sensitive to and reflect Mediterranean realities and concerns.

The Mediterranean Education Project is collaborating closely with a number of other organisations, and is currently negotiating the terms of support from UNESCO and ALECSO, among others. It is through this set of initiatives, and in collaboration with other projects that have similar goals and aspirations, that educational studies can lead to better understanding between peoples of the Mediterranean and the construction and consolidation of a culture of peace.

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