

# The “flat world”, and techniques of transnational direction of education

Larry Kuehn, Ed.D.  
Director, BCTF Research and Technology

“The world is flat” is a concept, and the name of a book by US journalist Thomas Friedman. He, of course, is not saying that the world is geographically flat. Rather, Friedman argues that globalization is creating a “flat world” in the sense of a common, globalized economic system, and a blending and “harmonization” of the social and cultural. The implication for education, if the concept is correct, is that education systems must become more and more alike to prepare our children to be successful in this global economy.

Friedman builds the case for the world as he sees it by traveling to a number of countries and interviewing people. He reports significant similarities across nations, and that leads to his “world is flat” claim.

But, of course, the current economic and social globe is not flat. We have significant and growing inequalities both within most societies and certainly between different countries.

The explanation for Friedman seeing the commonalities is that he is spending his time with a thin economic and social elite that exists in the countries where he travels. In reality, the elites in each country do have more in common with the elites of other countries than they do with the people who are marginalized in their own country. Education in most countries is being reshaped to reflect the interests of the elites, not those of the society as a whole.

Friedman’s “flat” world is the world of neo-liberal policies, including in education.

## **From nation-building to human capital as a central role of education**

In many countries, a central role of education historically was nation-building. Through explicit and implicit civics education the central stories and values of the nation were developed, revised and taught. This was often a contested field, but one significant to the social and cultural formation and reformation of the nation.

Education in the globalized world has quite different aims. While preparation for participation in the economy has generally been one aim, it has not been the exclusive and central aim. That has been changing as education is seen primarily as developing “human capital.” The individual is an economic unit to be developed to contribute to the economy, with the social, cultural and democratic elements of education devalued and even eliminated.

## **Human Capital, “competencies” and standardized testing**

If you want workers to easily move across countries, you need to take education out of its social and cultural context. That is, you need to identify the things that they will need that are common to the work and eliminate or, at least, reduce in value the aspects of education that have been specific to the nation. It is the development of students’ skills as workers that is described as human capital.

Even if the workers do not move, but the work does, in a globalized economy you seek commonality to ensure that the work is carried out in the same way. This focus on people as

“human capital” as an element of production, leads to defining common “competencies” as central. “Competencies” are characteristics that are demanded of the individual as worker and are removed from the context of the society and nation of the student. Standardized testing is the approach to uniform certification of common competencies. It is not a random coincidence that the demand for standardized testing is a global phenomenon.

A quick Google search finds a number of articles about standardized testing common in multiple countries, including one titled “Global infestation of US Educational Ideas” from the *Journal of Educational Controversies*.

The concurrent appearances of similar education policies around the world flows from at least three processes: policy-borrowing, harmonization, and coercion.

### **Policy-borrowing as a form of influence**

Policy-borrowing is a long-standing practice in education. How one views it is often a function of how well we like the policy that is being borrowed. The influence of Paulo Friere across many countries is one example that can be seen as positive and that could be classified as policy-borrowing. A counter example is that of Bill Gates, who uses his immense wealth to push a particular vision of education which, for obvious reasons, has a high technology component.

The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) is one of the most influential trans-national institutions that promotes policy-borrowing in education. Its PISA project is a set of tests given to samples of students in most OECD countries and recently in another thirty countries as well. The OECD reports test results as a league table, ranking countries according to the tests results. Politicians use these tests as a rationale for changes in policy and funding.

Another example of transnational organizations promoting policy-borrowing is the OECD’s *Education at the Glance*. It is an extensive listing of funding, conditions and other statistical elements related to education. By looking at what it reports on--and what is not reported--the publication defines implicitly what the OECD thinks that education policy should be about.

Education International (the global organization of teacher unions) points out that this OECD publication shapes in negative ways what should be valued in education. The OECD says “improving the performance of education systems and raising value for money is the main task for public policy.” It is pushing education systems “to develop effective mechanisms to understand and respond to the rapidly changing economic and social demands for competencies.”

Through its publications, the OECD is promoting “competencies” as outcomes that should be the focus of education. It is no surprise, then, that “competencies” is a theme that appears frequently in education policy documents in many countries--a powerful example of policy-borrowing.

These are all what might be called policy-borrowing with a public face. They are ideas and projects that one can find out about easily by reading books by Freire, Googling the Gates Foundation, or reading the OECD web site.

However, policy-borrowing also goes on in less public ways. This takes place in meetings, conferences and networks—within academic, government and trans-national institutions and networks.

Education International researchers have identified the importance of “high-level ministerial meetings with the OECD because this is where education policies are largely being designed.”

To an increasing degree, national governments conform to these international directions, rather than responding to needs as articulated through democratic, political processes.

### **Harmonization reduces national influence over education**

Harmonization is another mechanism for knocking the edges off the system--the edges here being the idiosyncratic policies and practices that are specific to a country's history and culture.

Harmonization is often seen by individuals in a positive light. If harmonization of teacher qualifications, for example, leads to easier access for teachers to work in a jurisdiction other than where they got a teaching certificate, then the individuals wanting to move will feel positive about it.

However, there is another side to harmonization. By definition it requires a standardization of whatever is to be harmonized. This process of harmonization through standardization contributes to the dominance of standardized testing.

Harmonization can affect a range of areas--measurements, environmental standards, etc. In the area of employment, its focus is on "human capital." Harmonization of professional qualifications is one of the areas in trade agreements, particularly since trade in services has become a common element of these agreements. Moving people across borders as a part of trade in goods and (particularly) services requires that there be some level of common expectation of the certifying of the skills that the worker brings to a different country.

So harmonization of economies leads to these pressures on governments and educational institutions for harmonization in education. This is at the heart of the Bologna process in the European Union—a process aimed at harmonizing higher education in Europe through a shift from content that is specific to a national context to "competencies" that are broken free from content.

The reach of this process can be seen in the efforts to bring those competencies as defined in Europe into universities in Latin America, as described by Hugo Aboites in "Education as 'Competencies'": The Recolonization of Latin America" (*Our Schools, Our Selves*, Winter 2010). What gets lost in this process is the content that makes an education system reflective of its society and that helps to build a national identity.

### **Coercion by control of funding**

A third mechanism used to spread a neo-liberal conception of education is coercion. We don't find countries invading neighbours to impose an education system—that's fortunate. We do see coercion, though, mostly in the form of holding the power of finance.

Cuts to education are taking place in much of the globe.

Students in Europe are engaged in a "Spring of Resistance," protesting the reductions in programs at universities and increases in fees, taking to the streets in many countries—Greece, Italy, France, Spain, and more. Students in the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Canada have held their own protests.

In Britain, teachers are resisting a loss of pension rights and a pay freeze which will see teachers 12% worse off when they are working and 20% worse off when retired.

Hundreds of thousands of teachers are losing their jobs in the United States. State governments are outlawing collective bargaining in order to impose pay cuts and arbitrary firing of teachers.

Public sector workers in Wisconsin inspired workers around North America with their resistance to the cuts.

The coercion approach has been well-tested. The Bush No Child Left Behind in the US used the approach—do this or no money. On an international basis, it has been the standard practice of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in developing countries. Loans are based on following the education policies that are demanded by the international banking system.

Some neo-liberal politicians have been happy to have an excuse to attack public sector workers and to rescind labour rights won by the struggles of workers. Others have been coerced by what Education International researchers have described as IMF pressure on governments to reduce deficits. Again, an international organization has imposed neo-liberal “solutions.”

In effect, public sector workers and everyone who benefits from public education and public services is being coerced to bail out the financial interests that created the economic crisis.

### **The social base of effective resistance**

If public education is to serve the social and cultural needs of a country and a people, it must be shaped and delivered with respect for that culture. The “flat world” concept is based on a loss of the specific through a process of blending.

Information and communication technologies appear to be lead toward a cultural homogenizing and hybridization. Ironically, these same technologies are essential to organizing the resistance to the policies that are borrowed or adopted because of external coercion. Because at least some of the sources of the problem are transnational, effective resistance itself must be transnational.