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Discussions around Education and Development in Dubai during Global Education & Skills Forum (GESF) – Global Forum or Global Education? Selected Aspects of Seeking New Educational Solutions in the Age of Globalization

Dyskusje wokół edukacji i rozwoju w Dubaju w trakcie Global Education & Skills Forum (GESF)
– globalne forum czy edukacja globalna? Wybrane aspekty poszukiwania nowych rozwiązań
edukacyjnych w dobie globalizacji

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ABSTRACT

The article presents selected references to the Global Education & Skills Forum (GESF), an initiative of the Varkey Foundation and hosted every March in Dubai (United Arab Emirates). The Forum has been organized since 2013 as a multi-day educational forum. It gathers representatives from more than 100 countries every year. Education ministers from different countries worldwide are also among participants. Sunny Varkey, the Varkey Foundation's Chairman, founded the Global Teacher Prize to identify an exceptional teacher who has made an outstanding contribution to the profession. It is given every year during the GESF. This article presents some examples from recent years. Such issues as the outline of the concept of development and global education or a brief description of GESF with analogies to Forum in Davos are also being discussed in the article. Summary version of the concept of development with some references to the sphere of education, especially global education, shows that such issues as North–South relations, especially mutual interdependencies or Sustainable Development Goals (2015), are related to global education. Lexical aspects of the Forum name are also being discussed. Global education in Poland is, in fact, sometimes misinterpreted or defined in isolation from its immanent conceptual scope what is shown by different researchers.

Keywords: global education; Global Education & Skills Forum; GESF

INTRODUCTION

The article addresses the issues of contemporary educational challenges in relation to selected threads arising from the global education forum taking place every March. For nearly a decade, a forum dedicated to the most important educational challenges of the 21st century, namely the Global Education & Skills Forum (GESF), has been held in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The Forum gathers representatives of the world of business, science, practitioners and education theorists, and the culmination of this event is the awarding of the so-called Nobel Teacher Prize. The article discusses both lexical aspects of the Forum name (“global forum”, “global education”) and educational aspects related to attempts to search for new concepts on the international stage in relation to the idea of “together for education”. The article presents, among others, such issues as the outline of the concept of development and global education, a brief description of the GESF and selected threads on contemporary development directions, economics and education resulting from the functioning of the forum in Dubai (some analogies to Forum in Davos are briefly noted).

HOW WE GOT HERE AND WHERE WE ARE GOING – A BRIEF
OUTLINE OF THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT AND
GLOBAL EDUCATION.

As historian and economist David S. Landes (2017, p. 572) states in his insightful panorama of world history from 1998 entitled *Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*: “Summary at the turn of the millennium seems quite simple. From the world of great and small empires and kingdoms, more or less equal in wealth and power, we have become a world of nation-states, some of which are much richer and more powerful than others. We are no longer hundreds of millions, but six billion [in 2020 over 7.5 billion]”.

On the other hand, one cannot fail to notice the lack of agreement or consistency in basic issues related to how we should define, understand, theorize and “lead” development (Payne, Phillips, 2011). As Anthony Payne and Nicola Phillips (2011, p. 204) state: “(...) the term ‘development’ has become one of those words whose constant repetition meant that it lost weight and no one knows what it means. (...) However, (...) development research has remained extremely topical – the extent to which we deal with this issue at the beginning of the 21st century is excellent proof of the importance that is given to this field”.

Analyzing the term “development”, it should be mentioned that the most important political economists (Karl Marx, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Max Weber, etc.) were basically development theorists, while later development theorists (such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek) are

also theorists of the broader field of political economy. Paying attention to these issues, Payne and Phillips call for the embedding of contemporary development research in the understanding of global changes and constellations of economic, social and political forces. These factors make up the modern era of globalization (Payne, Phillips, 2011, p. 212).

In education, especially education known as global education, development theories occupy a special position. Such issues as: North–South relations, especially mutual interdependencies; UN Millennium (2000) and then also Sustainable (2015) Development Goals; social inequalities or poverty, might be examples.

However, global education is sometimes defined in isolation from its immanent conceptual scope, misinterpreted or identified strictly with globalization.

In the research undertaken among Polish teachers in 2012–2017 (Ocetkiewicz, Pająk-Ważna, 2013, p. 35¹; Czaplicka, Lisocka-Jaegermann, 2014, p. 19²; Jasikowska, Klarenbach, Pająk-Ważna, 2015; Świdrowska, Tragarz, 2017) a significant number of respondents gave explanations that cannot be related to areas of interest in global education. Perhaps indirectly, the existence of other terms related to types of education very similar in scope to global education (such as development education, sustainable education, education for global citizenship) also indirectly contributes to this diversity of definitions. The issues of this type of education were taken up in their studies by such authors as Katarzyna Jasikowska, Magdalena Kuleta-Hulboj, Urszula Markowska-Manista, Paweł Rudnicki, Monika Popow, Ewa Szadzińska and Ewa Pająk-Ważna.

IS THE NEW GLOBAL FORUM IN DUBAI A REMEDY FOR ANY SHORTCOMINGS?

Since 2013, in March, in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, there is a multi-day educational forum under the name Global Education & Skills Forum. GESF brings to mind another famous world forum, however, devoted not to education, but to economics, i.e. the annual forum in the Swiss Davos. GESF was founded on the initiative of an Indian billionaire whose parents, who were teachers, immigrated to Dubai in 1959, before the birth of their son (Coughlan, 2015). Sunny Varkey – because it is him who has been mentioned – is a person actively operating at the interface of education, business and philanthropy, and his assets are currently esti-

¹ “Over half of the surveyed teachers reported associations with global education in line with the definition of this term. Another 12% gave associations partially consistent. Every third teacher associates global education in a way that deviates from the definition – the most common associations from this category relate to: comprehensive, interdisciplinary teaching, or universal access to education”.

² “(...) almost half of all respondents believe that knowledge of technological innovations (answer variant c) and about 20%, that the ability to interpret contemporary art (answer variant i) falls within the scope of global education, which is a mistake (see Figure 5)”.

mated at almost USD 2.0 billion (www1). In 2000, he founded GEMS Education, a network of private schools operating around the world (www2). And in 2013, his foundation, in partnership with UNESCO and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education, initiated the creation of the Global Education & Skills Forum.

The forum organized in Dubai is crowned with a spectacular award ceremony – Global Teacher Prize. For example, in March 2016, representatives of 110 countries discussed education and the challenges it faced, and 22 education ministers were present during the Forum. Poland was represented at that time by the ambassador of the European eTwinning program – Jolanta Okuniewska, who was among the 50 best teachers in the world. The final 50 teachers were selected in December 2015 from among 8,000 nominations and applications from 148 countries (www3).

Okuniewska, who had the title of Honorary Professor of Education in Poland, did not win the main prize at that time, but she was included in the ambassadors of the foundation, namely Varkey Teacher Ambassadors. She was invited to act in an advisory group whose task is to act as a link between the management of the foundation and all ambassadors (Okuniewska, 2017). In 2017, this group consisted of five people, spotted a year earlier in Dubai, for their activity and excellent relationships with other participants. The aforementioned Okuniewska belonged to this group as the only European.

Short reports on Global Education & Skills Forum in Dubai are described by Henryk Bednarczyk (2017, 2018) in the “Polish Journal of Continuing Education” and noting the successes of Polish teachers.

The Global Teacher Prize, a prize of 1 million US dollars, was founded to highlight an exceptional teacher who contributes to changing the face of his profession. The goal is not only to inspire millions of teachers around the world, but above all to emphasize their important role in society (www3).

In 2019, this prize was awarded to a Franciscan working in Kenya. Father Peter Tabichi is a teacher of mathematics and physics, and he was awarded a worldwide teacher’s prize to honor his work for poor students (www4). The Franciscan creates science clubs for his students and also implements programs that promote peace between rival ethnic and religious groups.

An important element of GESF is the discussion about technologies and the possibilities of their use in education. Teachers should not be afraid of the spread of robots in education, as the founder of the Varkey Foundation mentioned in 2018, saying, “I personally say that this will not happen, because teachers are those who explain, encourage and inspire their students”.³

³ Cf. film spot from 4 May 2018 (13:01) shared on the GESF website in social media (Facebook).

CREATIVE RESPONSE TO CHANGING REALITY – A COMMON POINT OR A CHALLENGE FOR CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT, ECONOMY AND EDUCATION?

The history of the World Economic Forum organized in the Swiss Davos, whose official mission is to “improve the state of the world”, dates back to 1971, when Klaus Schwab, a professor at the University of Geneva, organized the first conference. Over the years, the event has grown to the size of the most important annual gathering of world elites from the world of business, finance and politics (Śleszyńska, 2018).

In January 2020, the 50th Forum was held and gathered 53 heads of state or government from 117 countries around the world. This year’s discussions focused on climate change, new technologies and the global economic slowdown (Strzałkowski, 2020).

The motto of the Forum taking place in 2018 referred to the growing divisions and was: “A common future in a divided world”. Pollution of the environment, fair distribution of goods, precarious jobs and the future of social systems are the topics that more attention was paid to in the Forum’s 2018 program. “There is a real danger today that our global systems will collapse,” says Klaus Schwab. – “But changes don’t happen just like that. It depends on us how to improve the state of the world and that’s what the World Economic Forum is for” – he adds. It should be noted, however, that there is no reference in this argument to the shared responsibility of those who meet regularly in Davos. Perhaps also because nowadays politicians value the lack of a requirement to issue a joint statement after the conference. They can simply explain that they exchanged views (Becker, Dudek, 2018).

In 2013, by establishing the Global Education & Skills Forum, Hindu businessman and philanthropist Sunny Varkey expressed his hope that it would become such an “educational Davos” (Rai, 2014).

In his statements, Varkey often emphasizes the importance of education and the role of teachers in the modern world. The sad statement of the current status of a teacher resounds from the following statement by this philanthropist: “As I got more involved in the education business and setting up more schools, I kept finding that the image and the respect for teachers was in decline” (Coughlan, 2015). These observations prompted him to look for solutions that would support teachers and at the same time increase the positive reception of their social role, because – as Varkey states – the society does not seem to remember that the prime ministers, presidents or scientists were shaped by their mentors-teachers. As a guest at the World Economic Forum in Davos, he noticed the same lack of attention among the political elite, saying in one of the interviews: “(...) there was no-one highlighting teachers and education” (Coughlan, 2015).

Is GESF a global forum or forum on global education? Looking through the headings of Polish texts about GESF the lexical “freedom of translation” might be noticed. Some authors write about the global forum, others report that it is a forum on global education. Let us give the floor to the founder of the Forum, which states: “All the problems and solutions in the world are in education. Look at the divide between rich and poor, peace and terrorism, the gender inequality, lack of skills, unemployment. It all comes back to education” (Coughlan, 2015). The biography of Varkey himself represents such cultural diversity – an Indian Christian running a business in an Arab country, while the international private schools he creates are called microcosms of different cultures working together.

As Kuleta-Hulboj (2020) emphasizes, the beginnings of global education can be seen in the reflection that started in the 1940s. Unfortunately, this did not mean that this reflection would automatically develop on the basis of global education theory or educational practice at that time.

Nowadays learning about global issues has become an increasingly recognized element of contemporary education. Furthermore, terms such as “global education” or “global citizenship” can be seen within national education policies and international initiatives led by the United Nations, UNESCO, European Commission and OECD. Global issues are also discussed at GESF in Dubai and some links to global education’s most popular themes can be found there as well. For example, the organizers remind us that year 2020 will mark the beginning of a “decade of delivery” in education – with 10 years left to meet the sustainable development goal of promising every child a good education by 2030 (Varkey, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is worth recalling the words of the historian and economist David Landes from the publication about the history of the world, cited at the beginning: “In this world, optimists are top not because they are always right, but because of a positive attitude. Even when they are wrong, they are positive and this is the path to achievement, improvement and success. (...) Here comes one lesson: you have to keep trying. There are no miracles. There is no perfection. There is no millennium. There is no apocalypse. We must keep skeptical faith, avoid dogmas, look and listen, try to set goals clearly to better choose means” (Landes, 2017, p. 585).

And this positive attitude should be wished not only to educators.

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ABSTRAKT

W artykule przedstawiono wybrane odniesienia do Globalnego Forum Edukacji i Umiejętności (Global Education & Skills Forum, GESF), które jest inicjatywą Fundacji Varkey i odbywa się co roku w marcu w Dubaju (Zjednoczone Emiraty Arabskie). Forum jest organizowane od 2013 r. jako kilkudniowe forum edukacyjne. Co roku gromadzi przedstawicieli z ponad 100 krajów. Wśród uczestników znajdują się również ministrowie edukacji z różnych krajów na całym świecie. Sunny Varkey, prezes Varkey Foundation, ufundował Global Teacher Prize, mającą na celu nagrodzenie wyjątkowej osoby (pedagoga, nauczyciela, edukatora), która wniosła wybitny wkład w wykonywanie swojej profesji. Nagroda przyznawana jest co roku podczas GESF. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono kilka przykładów z ostatnich lat. Ponadto krótko nakreślono koncepcję rozwoju i edukacji globalnej czy zamieszczono krótki opis GESF z analogiami do Forum w Davos. Skrócona wersja koncepcji rozwoju z pewnymi odniesieniami do sfery edukacji, zwłaszcza edukacji globalnej, pokazuje, że takie kwestie jak relacje Północ–Południe, szczególnie zaś wzajemne współzależności czy Cele Zrównoważonego Rozwoju (2015), są powiązane z edukacją globalną. Dyskutowane są też aspekty leksykalne odnoszące się do nazwy Forum. Edukacja globalna w Polsce bywa bowiem błędnie interpretowana lub definiowana w oderwaniu od jej immanentnego zakresu pojęciowego, na co wskazują różni badacze.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja globalna; Globalne Forum Edukacji i Umiejętności; GESF