

An Era of Reforms or the End of an Era? An International Glance at Secondary Education in the 1930s

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The 1935 issue of the *Annuaire* of the International Bureau of Education (IBE, Geneva) stated that it was in progress “an era of reforms” with the argument that “after a revolution or a war people, winners or losers, make an examination of conscience, looking for their weak points and undertake a reform of their educational system” (IBE, 1935, 7).

Isaac Léon Kandel, editor-in-chief of the Educational Yearbook of the International Institute of the Teachers College, University of Columbia (New York), gave the title “The end of an era” to the journal’s 1941 issue. Quoting Kandel: “The last decade has witnessed the development of an interest in education that is almost unparalleled in history. [...] In education the post-War movement for reconstruction or for the organization of new systems has virtually come to a close. [...] The period was brought to and end by the National Socialist Revolution in 1933. There were many who were inclined to look upon this Revolution as another interesting experiment comparable to the Fascist Revolution in Italy and the Communist Revolution in Russia” (1941, pp. xi–xii).

This paper sought to map, from an international perspective, the problems concerned to secondary education in different countries in the 1930s. It is drawn upon the publications of the two abovementioned organizations (Educational Yearbook, 1924–1944; IBE, 1933–1939, 1934–1939, 1934b, 1934c, 1935, 1937, 1938, and 1939) which provide a worldwide perspective on the problematics of secondary education at stake during this period, namely: the extension of compulsory schooling; the conglomeration of different types and tracks (classical/liberal, modern, trade, industrial, commercial, rural, higher primary) of education; social demand and pressure upon secondary schooling; the admission to secondary schooling; the structure of secondary education and its coordination with primary and higher levels; the reform of curricula, programs, and teaching methods; the teaching of living and ancient languages; the design, use, and choice of textbooks; the professional education and remuneration of teaching staff; the budget constraints in education in times of socio-economic crisis; the intellectual unemployment, both of secondary and university graduates; the tangible counter-cycle between education and economy; the political and administrative centralisation of educational decisions, among other issues.

Given its intermediate position, “secondary education always seems to be the nerve center of school reorganization” (IBE, 1937, p. 8), on the one hand. On the other, it is still seen socially as the “survival of a conception of culture formulated when education was the right and possession of a few people” (Kandel, 1925, p. x). The paper will provide enough evidence and thought to respond to the question inscribed in the title.

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