

# A cosmopolitan intellectual: the trajectories of Noah Sobe in (the history of) education<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Full Professor of Cultural and Educational Policy Studies in the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago (USA), Noah W. Sobe specializes in the history of education, and in comparative and international education. His researches examine the global circulation of educational policies and practices with particular emphasis on the ways in which schools work as loci of resistance to the cultural impositions upon individuals, peoples, societies, and worlds. He is also interested in research methodologies in comparative education, investigating specifically how notions such as those of context, nation, transnational and global/globalization can be reconceptualized. Also, he dedicates himself to the history of affect and emotion in education, with focus on the history of boredom in school. His formation and access to the educational arena, as well as his theoretical and methodological choices are examined in this interview, which also discusses his academic connections to Brazilian researchers associated to Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), to the School of Education and Institute of Brazilian Studies of the University of São Paulo, and explores his current attributions as Senior Project Officer in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Education Research and Foresight program, part of the Futures of Education: Learning to Become initiative. The reflection also covers the effects of COVID-19 on the international educational scene. As a whole, this dialogue offers the readers a stimulating and contemporary arch of problematizations, among which the disturbing statement made by Noah Sobe that “future is a cultural fact”.

## Keywords

History of education – Transnational history – History of affect and emotion – UNESCO – International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE).

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Fonte: Arquivos do entrevistado.

## Introduction

Full Professor of Cultural and Educational Policy Studies in the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago (USA), Noah Webster Sobe specializes in the history of education, and in comparative and international education. He is currently on leave from his academic activities to take on a post as Senior Project Officer in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Education Research and Foresight program in Paris, where he collaborates with the *Futures of Education: Learning to Become* initiative. He also works as an associate researcher in the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) Thematic Project “Knowledge and practices in frontiers: toward a transnational history of education (1810-...)” (contract #2018/26699-4) coordinated by Diana Vidal and Carlota Boto in the School of Education in partnership with the Institute of Brazilian Studies of the University of São Paulo.

Among his previous professional activities, we may cite his membership of the Executive Committee of the International Standing Conference on the History of Education (ISCHE), and his term as President of the USA section of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES). He co-edits the *European Education Journal*, affiliated to the Comparative and Education Society of Europe (CESE), and belongs to the editorial boards of several academic journals, including the *Cadernos de História da Educação* (Notes on the History of Education). His studies examine the global circulation of educational policies and practices, with particular emphasis on the ways in which schools function as loci of resistance to the cultural impositions to individuals, peoples, societies, and worlds. He is also interested in research methodologies in comparative education, specifically investigating how the notions of context, nation, transnational and globalization/global can be reconceptualized. Also, he dedicates himself to the history of affect and emotion in education with a focus on the history of boredom in school.

For the amplitude of his production, and for the international recognition that he enjoys in the community of historians of education, Noah Sobe participated in 2015 as an invited speaker to the VIII Brazilian Congress of History of Education that took place in the city of Maringá. At the time, he took part in a roundtable entitled “Sources, Theories, Schooling and Childhood: Affect and Corporeity in North American Progressive Schools of Tomorrow”, later published in the book *História da Educação, Matrizes Interpretativas e Internacionalização* (History of Education, Interpretive Matrices and Internationalization) organized by José Gondra, Maria Cristina Machado and Regina Simões for EdUFES (2017).

Even before that, the North American historian of education was already known for his publications in Portuguese. The first of them was in 2012 in the *Revista Brasileira de História da Educação* (Brazilian Journal of History of Education). It discussed the

work of John Dewey in the interwar era, and it made use of tools from transnational history. The article was translated into Portuguese by Bruno Bontempi Jr. and illustrates the research collaboration developed by the two researchers preceding the dissemination of Noah Sobe's works in Brazil.

Four years later, a new article by Sobe was published as part of a dossier organized by Miriam Jorge Warde for the Brazilian journal *Cadernos de História da Educação* (Notes on the History of Education). In that text, he examined "attention" as an object of knowledge related to the management and organization of individuals, taking inspiration in the work of Maria Montessori. In this case, the translators were Katya Braghini, Milena Belo and Paulo Jorge de O. Carvalho, indicating the strong links made by Noah with the group associated to the Graduate Studies Program in Education: History, Politics, Society at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), then coordinated by Miriam Warde, whose long-standing interest in the relations between history of education in Brazil and in United States of America not only prompted the idea for the dossier, but continues to be a landmark in this facet of Brazilian educational historiography.

His access to the discussions in the transnational history of education and the contact he has had with historians of education in Brazil were strong elements in the invitation he received to integrate the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) Thematic Project "Knowledge and practices in frontiers: toward a transnational history of education (1810-...)". Focusing on the circulation of subjects, artefacts, knowledges and practices between Brazil and other countries in the period from the early 19th century to the present day, the Project takes as its point of departure the transfer of the Portuguese Royal Court to Rio de Janeiro, the moment of establishment of the first royal press in Brazilian lands, and of initiatives that would lead to the first general law of primary education in 1827, and to the creation of secondary and higher courses, and also of the first Normal Schools. It extends to the current days in understanding that the appropriations, interchanges, sharing and exchanges of knowledge and actions at the international level that occurred during those two centuries left stamps of innovation in different traditions that comprised and still comprise the educational knowledges and practices in Brazil today.

In the interview that follows some of the theoretical matrices of Noah Sobe's reflection about the history of education are spelled out, as well as of his political practice in the field. Concerning the first topic, the discussion about the concepts of transfer, entanglement, and appropriation are of major interest. Indeed, after adopting the perspective of cultural transfer, the North American historian criticized that concept and defended the idea that "an 'entangled history' approach can be usefully applied to thinking about intercultural exchanges in the history of education" (SOBE, 2012, p. 16). This is because, as he states in this interview when answering to the sixth question, "concepts like 'entanglement' and 'appropriation' gives me more flexible strategies for understanding how people, objects, principles, affects—even 'futures'—were assembled in educational settings and with what consequences". With respect to his political participation in the field, Noah highlights in particular the amazing dynamism and creativity of the history of education, not only in

the configuration of new themes, but also in expanding its list of questions in the search for renewed theoretical frameworks and in its dialogue with other academic fields.

The conversation conducted here with Professor Sobe covers other areas of interest not circumscribed to scholars of the history of education. His recent participation in UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative is explored in some detail. Of particular interest is his statement that "future is a cultural fact" based on his analysis of the impact of COVID-19 in the projection of new horizons. This investigation also covers an analysis of the role that new technologies have taken in the current scenario, and about the differences in access to them by different countries and social groups. UNESCO's work also affords a reflection about the importance of teacher education in redesigning the future, and in understanding the contemporary world as marked by complexity, fragility, and uncertainty.

Concluding the interview, a selection of articles published in English and in Portuguese, some of them with open access, invite the continuity of the dialogue with this researcher engaged with the past, present, and future of education in the world. Lastly, for his movement between themes, approaches, countries, and institutions, Noah Sobe fully embodies the character of a cosmopolitan intellectual. And now, let us have him in his own words.

## References

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## Interview

**You recently became Senior Project officer for Education Research and Foresight at UNESCO. Tell us about your new job and the goals you are aiming to achieve.**

It is a real honor to join UNESCO especially as it is an organization that has played such an important role historically in advancing the right to education. One of the great contributions of UNESCO is that it serves as a global laboratory of ideas and brings important perspectives – for example, on rights, humanism, and diversity – into contemporary global debates on education. And, in an interesting move for a historian of education, I myself have jumped from the past directly into the future! For two years I am on leave from my faculty position and am working on UNESCO's new *Futures of Education: Learning to become* initiative. The project follows in the footsteps of the 1972 Faure *Learning to be* and 1996 Delors *Learning, the treasure within* reports. An International Commission has been established and this Commission will issue a report in November 2021.

However, there are two key differences between the current initiative and this earlier UNESCO work. The first is that the Commission is headed by Her Excellency Madame Sahle-Work Zewde, the President of Ethiopia, which is a notable break from the previous commissions which were chaired by male Europeans who both in fact were former ministers in the French government. The second is that broad consultation, public engagement and a commitment to co-construction are embedded in the new *Futures of Education* initiative. There are a lot of ways for people to get involved and I'm confident that the initiative will have a much broader impact than if it simply involved a report written by a group of 18 global thought-leaders no matter how eminent and thoughtful they are. Already, we have published a book with short pieces from UNESCO Chairs on how education might need to be repurposed and revised for the future of humanity and the planet. The Commission has released several documents and we have done some exciting things like launch a series of short animated videos that aim to catalyze debate on key questions for the futures of education. In sum, the vision of the initiative is that UNESCO's work on the futures of education takes the form of an ongoing conversation. It is a debate and dialogue that has already started and needs to continue well beyond 2021.

**In a recent podcast discussing the Futures of Education initiative you mentioned the idea that “the future is a cultural fact”. Could you develop further this concept and speak about which kind of applications are foreseen for education?**

I think the idea that “the future” exists in human minds and hearts has been perfectly illustrated by the Covid-19 global pandemic, which of course is more than a health crisis but has fast become an economic, political – and educational – crisis. What has changed with coronavirus? With alarming suddenness, the futures that we all envisioned have changed. In other words, everything we anticipated was going to happen in the next week, month, year dramatically shifted.

While it is true that we cannot ignore the concept of time as natural or scientific horizon that contributes to our ability to distinguish between past, present and future, we also need to think of the future as a kind of cultural horizon. The idea that the future is a “cultural fact” comes from the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai<sup>3</sup>. This the “future” that is saturated with emotion and affect, it is layered with multiple meanings and it appears in various forms as aspiration, anticipation, and imagination.

And, how people think about the future is a central concern to education. So many of our educational processes are framed with the concept of learning-in-the-now for application and benefit to-come. The expectations and aspirations that teachers embed in students become tremendously important. In fact, the “right to aspire” is unevenly and

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**3-** Arjun Appadurai was born in Bombay and is a researcher renowned for his cultural studies of contemporary times, notably focusing on the cultural dimensions constitutive of globalization. He is Goddard Professor of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University, and Senior Fellow in the Institute for Public Knowledge; he is one of the founders of the distinguished journal *Public Culture*. Appadurai is the author, among other books, of *A vida social das coisas*, (EdUFF, 2008), *Modernity at Large* (1996) and *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006). In 2010, the journal *Estudos Históricos* published an interview he gave to Bianca Freire-Medeiros and Mariana Cavalcanti: APPADURAI, Arjun. Entrevista com Arjun Appadurai. *Estud. hist.*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 23, n. 45, p. 187-198, June 2010. Available from: [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0103-21862010000100009&lng=en&nrm=iso](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0103-21862010000100009&lng=en&nrm=iso). Access on: 22 July 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-21862010000100009>

unjustly distributed in the contemporary world, as Arjun Appadurai and other researchers have argued. And this is important because how we think about, forecast and seek to prepare ourselves and/or manage future possibilities and scenarios is not an idle activity. It is a world-making and worlds-making undertaking.

One of the major challenges facing the countries of the Global South is to guarantee equal opportunities for access to good quality education. In these quarantine times, the use of distance learning technologies has become essential. In Brazil, we are faced with the fact that 30% of the population does not have access to the Internet. How is this relationship between the need and usefulness of new teaching technologies and the structural inequality that prevents their dissemination in countries like ours being considered within the scope of this project?

In the Covid-19 crisis we have seen both the educational promises of distance learning technologies as well as their weaknesses. And one of the drawbacks is that unevenness in access exacerbates inequalities. Against some of the optimistic claims being advanced in other circles, the International Commission on Futures of Education has taken the position that a shift to online distance learning is in no way a universal solution. So yes this question you raise is being directly addressed in the project.

Separate from distance learning technologies, however, I do think that we should consider ways that digital connectivity might need to be considered part of an expanded right to education. This would be internet access – not simply to access teacher and school lessons online – but digital connectivity instead conceptualized as essential for lifelong learning, for independent inquiry, even as part of the basic exercise of the right to information.

A issue to bear in mind, however, is the unquestionable, ongoing significance of schools as physical spaces that bring students together with teachers and other learners. As we contemplate the future transformation of the school we must preserve spaces that bring people together in physical co-presence as well as the importance of actual physical places of learning. In this pandemic many have realized the importance of schools as spaces for social and emotional learning; I think we have also seen (because of their absence) the importance of schools as public spaces where collective social projects are enacted.

But, combining the problem of adequate connectivity and the problem of adequate physical school spaces we still confront the problem of structural inequality. And honestly here the issue is not financial resources – the issue is how financial resources are distributed in our current world. Consider that in the first four months of the COVID-19 crisis, the net worth of the founder of the US-based company Amazon increased by 24 billion USD. As economists like Jeffrey Sachs remind us, the actual financial investments that would be needed to address structural inequalities in education are quite small comparatively. This can be addressed through better global governance; we can also mobilize to address educational inequalities by beginning to take global solidarity seriously. Taking ‘global solidarity’ as more than words that easily slip off the tongue, we could instead take global solidarity as a firm commitment to standing together. And that standing-together would

need to mean that we no longer permit the levels of inequality that have been allowed to emerge in our world.

**How do you link your expertise as a historian of education to the challenges you have been facing at UNESCO? In which ways do you consider that education and teacher training programs can be part of the efforts of shaping future?**

The idea that “children are the future” is an example of one of those “cultural facts” I was just discussing. It’s an important concept not least because it has inspired many people to come into education in the first place. For healing and improving the world, for creating opportunities and expanding possibilities, for making tomorrow better than today, education is a great profession to enter. And so, on the one hand viewing children as the future allows us to exercise the inter-generational ethical responsibilities that I do believe we have. However, on the other hand, there are dangers to relegating children and youth to “the future”. It can be a way of deferring our own collective responsibility for acting now. One of the clear messages coming from the student movements that we see gaining strength globally, particularly in the Fridays for the Future school walk-outs, is that shaping the future should not be a deferred activity.

Of course, the idea that education should not be preparation for life but is important living in itself has a noble lineage in progressive educational thought (Teixeira, Dewey, etc.). So, one of the most important things that teacher training programs can do is focus attention on the many ways that people “use” the future in thinking about basic educational methods, in the design of curricula and in how we conceptualize the purposes of schools and other sites of organized learning.

And in fact, though it might seem counterintuitive, studying the history of education can actually be one of the more effective ways to make teachers and prospective teachers more “futures literate”. Learning about the ways that teachers and schools have “used the future” in the distant and not so distant past has great potential for awakening self-awareness on how we “use the future” now.

For me, being a historian of education has made me particularly sensitive to the contextual specificity of the ways that teachers and school systems base their work on theories of change and on particular notions of how acting in the present will (or “should”) lead to future results. For a long time modern school systems have approached this as a taming of chance, as a task of trying to generate the most reliable predictive models so that we could “engineer” desired futures. However, it seems to be becoming increasingly clear that uncertainty is a fact of life that resists easy taming – and I think many people are rightly seeing Covid-19 as having delivered precisely this kind of object lesson.

The certainty of uncertainty then has great implications for education and teacher training. Faced with an understanding of the contemporary world as marked by complexity, fragility and uncertainty, I would say that we probably need a great emphasis on diversity, flexibility, resourcefulness, resilience, and adaptability in our educational approaches, and we probably need to adjust many of our teacher training programs accordingly.

**We can say that John Dewey is still “à la mode” and always controversial. Based on your work, what do you consider the reasons for this long-lasting discussion on the educational field about Dewey’s ideas?**

Discussion of Dewey is long-lasting, I agree. But just as “Dewey” enters into pedagogic debates differently in different places, “Dewey” changes over time. I would say that for me right now Dewey’s ideas about the public, particularly as Maxine Greene developed them with regard to education, have a fair amount to offer our thinking about education<sup>4</sup>. I think it’s as simple as the fact that Dewey is a useful interlocutor, but of course certainly not always and certainly not in all spaces and times.

**Addressing specifically to the field of History of Education in which you have had a major role as researcher and an active member of scientific societies, which major trends do you see in HoE around the world (the most recurring subjects, perspectives, methodologies etc.) in an brief overview?**

I see incredible dynamism and creativity in the history of education, particularly as researchers figure out how to study trends and phenomena that at earlier times never appeared to be proper subjects of historical inquiry. I am thinking for example of work being done on affect and emotions, on day-to-day educational practice, on objects, embodiment and relationships. In part this has come because the field is moving beyond chronicling accounts. In part it is because the lock of excessively narrow approaches to social history is easing. The field is moving beyond class and race as sine-qua-non lenses, and, for example, it is increasingly common for researchers to be historicizing their analytic categories at the same time as they develop their work.

I also think we are seeing a much-needed easing of methodological nationalism. This does not mean ignoring the nation-state but rather not taking it as foredrawn category. Finally, I would mention that there are exciting developments in what is sometimes called “public history”, often with archives and museums leading the way. Professional historians have an important role to play but increasingly we need to connect our work to public history and to the role that understandings of the past play in all people’s lives.

**Research in History of Education has shown that models/ideas travel around the world and have impacts on national realities. How do concepts like transfer, entanglement and appropriation help us to understand this phenomenon in the past and in the present? Can you give us some examples of this?**

Building off my comments just now on scholarship that escapes the confines of methodological nationalism, I would say that transnational, global historical scholarship is one of the most exciting areas of work right now. The burdens of this kind of work are

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**4-** Maxine Green is Emeritus Professor of the Teachers College at Columbia University, and specializes in the Philosophy of Education, with focus on Aesthetics and Art in teacher education. For more information about her life and works, see [www.MaxineGreene.org](http://www.MaxineGreene.org).



not light, however. Transnational historical research usually requires multi-sited archival work and proficiency in multiple languages.

Transnational scholarship clearly shows the dangers of essentialism and it prompts us to see our work as research into contingent, provisional, and heterogeneous historical assemblages. In my own work looking at the global circulations of educational practices and policies I have not found the concept of “transfer” particularly helpful—for the reason that suggests crispness or “purity” of origins and destinations that simply does not seem to be the case in most instances. So-called national realities are not homogenous and we do more damage than good to essentialize them. In my work I have found that shifting to concepts like “entanglement” and “appropriation” gives me more flexible strategies for understanding how people, objects, principles, affects—even “futures”—were assembled in educational settings and with what consequences.

**You mention the shift you made in your work from the transfer paradigm to the concepts of entanglement and appropriation. Could you give us some examples of the impact of this methodological approach in your research?**

Let me provide an example from the US educational historiography. For some time there was a crudely sketched story that the first schools in what became the United States, the schools in New England villages organized by Puritan civil and religious leaders, were a “transfer” of a schooling model from England. Then there was a second chapter in this story that begins in the early 19th century with the schooling form that became the “common school model”, which in one telling also represented a “transfer”, for example of Bell-Lancaster models also the famous Prussian example. In the traditional narrative the first was an unsuccessful localization: Puritan schools proved ‘inadequate’ to the new conditions. Whereas the second, was a proper indigenization, a reworking of models ‘more suited’ to American democracy, civic life (and imperialist expansion, it might be added).

One problem with this framing is that it essentializes schooling practices both in the contexts of purported “origin” and in the contexts of “destination”. As a discipline, history can be extremely good at capturing complexity. To me transfer paradigms represent an attempt at a simplifying theoretical model that just doesn’t stand the test of empirical evidence. It is at times useful shorthand to talk about models, and of course quite relevant to situations where historical actors themselves thought in terms of “models” and modeling. But this move also can mistakenly make us think that there are overarching logics and determining factors to historical change. On my view there’s considerably more contingency and blindness of circumstance – and something like the US ‘common school movement’ shows this quite well. The label of “common” was certainly discussed at the time (we can think of Thoreau’s call for “uncommon” schools, for example), but it should not be forgotten that these schools were also discussed as “free” schools and that the structuring of schooling at in the United States in the middle decades of the 19th century also crossed with concerns about abolitionism and race relations; labor in an industrializing society and a rethinking of the labor-leisure nexus; as well as what we could refer to in a Foucauldian idiom as a biopolitics around political participation and

governance. In sum, I've found that an entanglement and assemblage approach is more productive for making sense of the heterogeneity and complexity of schooling than a lineage and adaptation-tracing approach.

**You attended Congresso Brasileiro de História da Educação, in 2015, as part of your research collaboration with Brazilian historians of education, which involve the participation in research projects. How has this experience impacted your overview of the field? Which mutual gains do you perceive?**

The Brazilian history of education community is an inspiration! I have attended a number of history conferences in Brazil, actually. The size and scope of history of education in Brazil is vast. Working with Brazilian historians of education on research projects and hosting doctoral researchers has expanded and nuanced my appreciation of transnational, global history.

### **Recent publications by the interviewee**

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