

International and comparative education: what's in a name?

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International education and comparative education are closely related terms. Both feature in the subtitle of *Compare*. In this anniversary volume Mark Bray explores a wide range of definitions of comparative and international education, describes institutions that promote and reflect one or both fields of enquiry and asks how much these definitions matter. Much of Bray's discussion exhumes old 'debates', rivalries and power struggles among university departments, academic associations and journals about the methods and purposes of comparative and international enquiry. He suggests that the editors of *Compare* should 'work harder to define what is and is not within the bounds of comparative education, international education and comparative and international education' and to consider the ordering of the words international and comparative in the subtitle of the journal. Such an endeavour he suggests would enhance the prestige of the journal and serve the academic community better.

While I respect any attempt to reflect critically on the criteria of scholarship employed by different disciplines and fields of enquiry I wonder whether a review of scholars' definitions – many of them brief, simple and partial in the extreme – rather than an analysis of what scholars do in practice, can move a field of study forward. Catharsis has its place – and journals, departments and associations have their times. In the early twenty-first century how might international and comparative education move forward?

As I reflect on the various terms that have been used to describe the departments in which I have worked over the past 37 years¹ I recognise much of what Bray writes about term imprecision and boundary porosity. The permutations and combinations of the terms 'education', 'comparative', 'international', 'development' and 'studies' used by the authors in this anniversary volume underline his points even further. The meanings of these combined terms also reflect the particular histories of academic enquiry in different countries. In this anniversary volume, for example, Robert Arno presents the work of Schultz, Goulet and Seers as integral elements of comparative and international education as it was studied in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, these authors would have been rather unfamiliar to students of university courses titled 'comparative education' in the 1960s and 1970s. The work of these authors is more likely to have featured in courses titled 'education in developing countries', 'education and development' and 'development studies'.

Much of the value of comparative education in the early twentieth century lay in promoting comparisons of similarities and differences in the organisation of education in different nation states. In its time this was an important and path breaking endeavour.

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It increased awareness among scholars and schoolteachers that education philosophies, policies and practices varied across countries and that different practices could be imagined. But, as Bray (in this volume) and others (for example, Crossley and Watson 2003; Epstein 2008) point out, valuable lines of comparative enquiry in education can also be pursued via units of comparison other than country – across communities within countries, across times, across cultures, across values and across ways of learning.

Comparisons of difference and similarity are fundamental to all social sciences and indeed to scholarship in general. Comparative education has no monopoly over the term ‘comparison’. What it did attain a monopoly over was a debate in the 1970s about the methods that should or should not be used in the comparative study of education. Debates over theory in comparative education at this time focused on the theory of method (hence the *methodology* of comparative education) rather than theory of the content of enquiry. Perhaps, even then, comparative education was already stretching its interests so wide that method became the only common ground. By contrast, and drawing from other disciplines, theoretical debates in ‘education and development’ focused more on content than method. Societal relations of conflict and consensus framed the analysis of relationships between education and equality/inequality, and between education and economic growth and widening income disparities. The role of education – as a former of human and/or social capital, or as screener/sorter of ability and/or social background – was also disputed.

The content published by journals of comparative education is extremely wide. Elsewhere I report the results of an analysis of the content themes of 471 articles published in *Compare's* sister journal, *Comparative Education*, between 1977 and 1998 (Little 2000). Already by 1977 authors were being invited to contribute articles ‘dealing with international or analytically comparative aspects’ of a long list of themes including, *inter alia*, educational reforms and problems of implementation; education and socio-economic or political development; education and work; teacher preparation and reorientation; and curricular content and the learner’s experience. Additionally, articles were published on cultural diversity and pluralism, pedagogic and philosophical theory, the education of minorities and language policy. And if this list of content areas was long so too were the lists of conceptual and methodological tools that authors brought to bear on their comparative and/or international enquiry.

International education is even wider than comparative education. In a recent profile of international education I provide one statement of broad intellectual purpose, one statement about the range of international education practices and a list of types of analysis addressed in recent times under this rubric (Little 2008). At its simplest, international education extends the boundaries of knowledge about education beyond single nations and cultures and involves the practices of analysis, advocacy and cross border activity. In this essay I went on to identify six broad types of analysis:

- (1) *Other’ education systems, policies, practices and philosophies.* These analyses make familiar unfamiliar policies, practices and philosophies and increase knowledge about diversity in education. They emphasise the importance of understanding education policies and practices in the context of the societies in which they are rooted. They locate education within myriad economic, social, cultural, religious and political forces, usually national, but also local and extra-national (global, international, transnational). They may focus on education in a single country or community or they may compare two or more communities or countries systematically.

- (2) *Educational borrowing and lending.* These analyses embrace the borrowing and lending of educational ideas, policies and practices between rich countries, between poor countries and between rich and poor countries. They focus on the reasons for, the means by and the implications of borrowing and lending. They include, but are not confined to, 'lending' in the form of colonial imposition and lending within post-colonial modalities of Official Development Assistance or 'aid'. They may focus on one relationship of borrowing or lending, or on two or more, with the explicit purpose of drawing comparisons.
- (3) *The contribution of education to development.* These analyses explore the implications of education characteristics, process and outcomes for the wider society. As Christopher Colclough (in this volume) explains, these characteristics, processes and outcomes and the relationships between them are usually explored in lower income countries and in their relationships with the rest of the world. Interestingly, in an early discussion of the purpose of comparative education, the term 'development' referred to the development of societies worldwide. Parkyn (1977, 89) asserted that the purpose of comparative education was to 'increase our understanding of the relationship between education and the development of human society' (everywhere).
- (4) *Education, dependency and globalisation.* Early 'education and dependency' studies explored the interconnectedness of education, societies and economies through the concepts of exploitation, imperialism and dependent economic and political relations between poor countries and rich countries. More recent writings extend the focus on interconnectedness to global interconnectedness and the increasing role of education in maintaining global competitiveness in rich countries. In all of these studies it is the *relationship* between two or more countries that form the unit of enquiry. Analyses may highlight a single relationship or may explicitly compare two or more relationships.
- (5) *International education practices and organisations.* These include studies of institutions and organisations that: (i) adopt and/or assess an explicitly international or intercultural curriculum (for example, the International Baccalaureate); (ii) enrol an international student body (for example, international schools); and (iii) further international understanding (for example, UNESCO); or iv) promote educational development across the world (for example, the World Bank). As above they may focus on a single institution/organisation or on two or more.
- (6) *International education comparisons.* These studies provide snapshot summaries of education systems worldwide and are frequently used (or 'cherry-picked') by policy makers to justify education reform at home; or by 'development' agencies to promote and urge reform elsewhere.

Running alongside these types of analysis are other dimensions of international education or comparative and international education. Robert Arnove (in this volume) distinguishes scientific (embracing many of the above types of study), the practical/ameliorative and the international understanding/peace dimensions. Elsewhere I have distinguished the dimensions of analysis, advocacy and activity (see Little 2008). My use of the term 'advocacy' embraces Arnove's second and third dimensions. In the case of international and comparative education advocacy urges improvements in access to education, in opportunities for learning and in ways of creating a better and more just world. In the contemporary world much advocacy work is undertaken by

intergovernmental and international non-governmental organisations such as UNESCO and the Global Campaign for Education promoting Education for All in the poorest countries of the world.

Advocacy has a long history in Europe. In the seventeenth century Comenius established a pansophic college to promote understanding among Christians and nations involved in the wake of the Thirty Years War. In the late nineteenth century Marc-Antoine Jullien, a French educator, and regarded by some as the founder of comparative education, promoted the systematic collection of information about education ideas and practices as a means of promoting trust among educators and politicians in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. Today, educators in all corners of the world are engaged in promoting education for peace, for sustainable development and for intercultural understanding.

Analysis and advocacy are common to both comparative education and international education. Many scholars move their work from analysis to advocacy while some find that their work is moved from the realm of analysis to that of advocacy by others. Analysis and advocacy are important, related but separate academic endeavours. Importantly their relationship is asynchronous in time. Good advocacy follows from good analysis of a defined problem or question; good analysis of a problem or question does not follow from good advocacy of its solution. Good analysis involves good comparison. Good comparison depends on the choice of units to be compared and the choice of an appropriate design and detailed methods and analysis. Comparison, units for comparison, the overall design of a comparative enquiry, methods and detailed analysis all follow from the initial problem or question that frames the enquiry. Tension between analysis and advocacy is not inevitable. It arises when advocacy ignores or distorts the results of analysis.

Changing times

In most parts of the world the circumstances in which early twenty-first century researchers and teachers work differs in important respects from the circumstances in the early twentieth century that gave rise to comparative education, to 'oversea' education and to colonial studies.² They also differ from those of the mid- twentieth century, when journals and departments of international education, international and comparative education, education and development, education for development, education and international development, development education, global education and post-colonial studies, to mention but a few, began to flourish.

The most significant change in scholars' work in recent years is technological. The World Wide Web has transformed our lives in ways that would have been unthinkable even 20 years ago. It is transforming communication between scholars, the means by which we access material relevant to our current field of enquiry and the means by which we work with our students. No longer are we restricted to face-to-face conversations with staff and students in our departments or universities; no longer are we restricted to reading journals and books held in our university or personal libraries. No longer are we restricted to face-to-face conferencing a couple of times a year.

It is also transforming the ways in which readers access journals and the ways that journal editors work. How many of us read the hard print copy of a journal issue cover to cover? How many of our students visit a library and check back copies of a handful of journals for articles of relevance to the question they are researching? How many have noticed that the subtitle on *Compare's* journal cover is international and

comparative education rather than comparative and international education? How much does it matter? In many ways the title of a journal is an irrelevance to the World Wide Web. What is important is the title of the article and the match between it and the keywords that I enter into my search engine.

The late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have also seen a massive increase in the number of scholars engaged in what the World Trade Organisation and UNESCO have called cross-border education – including movements of scholars and students across national borders to engage in educational activity. Back in the late 1950s and 1960s cross-border travel was limited to many fewer students and scholars, who in turn spent longer periods of time travelling to their destinations and much longer periods in their destinations when they reached them. Mass, cheap airline travel has changed the supply of and demand for travel to foreign places, to foreign universities and to conferences held in foreign parts of the world. Increasing numbers of scholars are engaging in what I have termed elsewhere ‘international activity’, even if this activity is confined only to travelling to another country to present a paper about one’s own country. More seriously, increasing numbers of scholars are involved in researching ‘other’ national systems, are comparing aspects of their own systems with ‘elsewhere’, are exploring the impacts of regional and global agencies, movements and markets on national and local practices, without being members of international and comparative education societies. And at least some of this research is recognised by some members of those same societies as work of a very high academic standard and of great relevance for and value to those societies. Traditional boundaries between international/comparative education and ‘other’ educations have become much more porous than they were.

So if cross-border education is increasing, if more scholars and students are aware of educational policies, practices and challenges elsewhere, if we tend to access journal articles rather than journal issues, and if traditional boundaries are becoming more porous that raises the question of whether there is a place for journals as we currently know them? Already those who wish to publish their research, their ideas, their ideologies and their prejudices can do so freely on the Internet. And those who wish to read them can do so provided there is a match between the searcher’s keywords and the titles and the content of the article, or blog or wiki.

While the use of the World Wide Web is already leading to greater democratisation of knowledge production, it bypasses what is arguably the most important function performed by most journals – that of quality assurance by independent reviewers. What criteria do and should independent reviewers use when they assess articles? What criteria should they use in the future? And who should the independent reviewers be? And while this brings us back to the question of field identities that Mark Bray addresses in his article, and, by implication, to the question of the identities we use to describe and judge our work, I propose that we present our challenge less in terms of definitions of the field(s) and more in terms of what we might endeavour to do together in the future. Our identities, I suggest, should derive more from what we do together than from surface definitions of who we say we are. I offer a six-point challenge.

A six-point challenge ahead

- Share a mission

Let us share a mission to expand and deepen our knowledge about education practices, policies and philosophies worldwide; to employ that knowledge to imagine how education and learning could be arranged for future generations; to expand and deepen our knowledge about the outcomes of education in wider society; to employ that knowledge to imagine how education and learning can be used to increase well-being across all social groups and to reduce disparities between them.

- Build bridges

Let us build bridges to forge collaboration with all those who are committed to creating a body of knowledge about education and its contribution to the future well-being of individuals, of communities, of societies worldwide. We need to build these bridges to those who, hitherto, have studied education in familiar settings, who share this commitment and who wish to locate their understanding of education on a broader canvas. And let us build bridges to those who work on similar content and problem areas but with the conceptual and methodological tools offered by different disciplines. Tools of enquiry are conceptual as well as methodological and the sharing of concepts across disciplines can deepen understanding considerably.

- Recognise and seek out diversity

Let us recognise more than we do currently the diversity of current practices, policies and philosophies of education in the world of the early twenty-first century. This diversity deserves to be valued, analysed, described and shared. It is a diversity that needs to be understood in relation to the national and local, as well as global, circumstance and aspiration. And, as Gareth Williams (see his contribution in this volume) points out, accessing and valuing this diversity depends on the languages we use to analyse, describe and share knowledge about education. Most of all, we need to seek out this diversity. The search requires a tolerance for analytical and descriptive studies of single communities and societies and an appreciation that such understanding must be achieved before meaningful comparisons can or should be made. The search requires a tolerance for description of contexts, of programmes and of systems. The guidelines of this journal, *Compare*, note that manuscripts need to go beyond mere description. This is a very important aim but it must not be assumed that the term description – or analysis, for that matter – enjoys a shared understanding across contexts and disciplines. In some contexts ‘descriptive’ profiles of education systems and sub-systems are easily accessed through published materials and websites. Where this is the case, then their reproduction does not constitute original knowledge. In other contexts, such information is neither available nor accessible and the very act of producing what may appear to some as description may require a considerable amount of ferreting, problem solving, collation – and analysis. In another journal with which I have been associated – *Assessment in Education: principles, policy and practice* – we deliberately created separate spaces in the journal for conventional articles that ‘analysed’ educational assessment and for what we termed ‘profiles of assessment’ that provided descriptions of assessment systems and programmes likely to be unfamiliar, of interest to our readers and unlikely to be accessible through other means. There is also a case for ‘international’ journals to create space for translations of high quality articles from one language to another.

- Search for context-specificity and universals

Linked with our search for diversity is the need for a more refined understanding of those aspects of education practices, policies and philosophies that are context-specific and those that are found across all contexts. There is also a need for a more refined understanding of the context-specific and context-universal nature of the underlying drivers and inhibitors of education practices, policies and philosophies. The search for difference *and* similarity, diversity *and* unity, and uniqueness *and* universality is central to our intellectual endeavour.

- Present our research more clearly

In the search for improved communication across conceptual, cultural and linguistic boundaries we need to be clearer than we often are about the focuses of our enquiry, the choice and appropriateness of our units of comparison, the design and methods we employ for the enquiry, the types of analysis we employ, the conclusions we drawn from the enquiry, the types of generalisation we judge that we can and cannot draw, and, where appropriate, the recommendations for action.

- Allow methods to serve, not dominate

Finally, a note on methods. Good methods of enquiry are vital for sound analysis. The value of a method lies in the extent to which its application generates new insights into a problem and its possible solution. So-called ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ methods offer a wealth of tools for approaching, addressing and analysing problems as well as advocating solutions. Let those methods be better understood and practised, let them be shared and employed in collaborative teams and let them be selected in relation to the problem in question. But let not the current fashion among some scholars (including in comparative and international education) to name and identify themselves and/or others as a ‘quant’ or a ‘qual’ – or, even more unhelpfully, as a ‘positivist’, ‘anti-positivist’ or ‘post positivist’ – undermine collaborative enquiry designed to analyse educational problems and advocate solutions worldwide. Methods should serve, not dominate, analysis.

Notes

1. I am currently Chair of Education and International Development, Institute of Education, University of London and member of the Department of International and Lifelong Learning, founding member of the London International Development Centre, trustee of the United Kingdom Forum on International Education and Training and member of the Academy of Social Sciences. I was formerly Research Assistant, Research Officer and Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, and, since 1987, at the Institute of Education, University of London, in the Department of International and Comparative Education, (1987–1995), the Education and International Development Group (1995–2001), the School of Lifelong Education and International Development (2001–2007), the Department of Education and International Development (2007–2010) and, from 2010, the Department of International and Lifelong Learning. I was the past president of the British Comparative and International Education Society (BCIES) in 1988 and of the British Association of International and Comparative Education (BAICE) in 2002.
2. To explore the origins of colonial education and ‘oversea’ education as taught and researched at the Institute of Education, University of London see the archive *Education and Developing Countries: 75 years* at <http://edc75y.ioe.ac.uk> (accessed 28 July 2010).

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