
REVIEWS

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Comparative Education Research. Approaches and Methods.

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The newest international publication issued as the 19th volume of the Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong presents an essential contribution to the methodology of comparative research in education. The book is remarkable not only by its content and a broad thematic scope but also, and above all, by a deep insight in the methodological problems of comparative education based on analyses of ample amount of published comparative studies as well as on own experience from the research provided by the authors of contributions. A group of sixteen authors from 8 universities from 4 countries (Australia, China, Germany, United Kingdom), concerted under the editorial baton of leading specialists from the Comparative Education Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong, prepared a welcome boon to the field of comparative education and, more than this, to the world view on education research as such. The conception of the book emphasises the view that comparative education has a potential to deep understanding of the substance of educational phenomena in the context of human culture. Only readers expecting a manual on specific ways how to use particular research instruments could be disappointed.

The presentation of an overview research types is a necessary background plan of the book. The main aim is to evoke contextual consideration which should influence the choices of tools and research strategies. In our opinion, the major sense of the book lies in encouraging its readers to consider comparative education more carefully, its methodological rocks and dangers as well as the challenges, strengths and potentials of the rigorous comparative research in education.

The history of comparative education documents that the approaches and methods have been a major concern in the field. Particularly during last decades, the discussion has focused on changing educational realities and the ways of their reflection. The turn of millennium has brought new issues, tools and perspectives being discussed at various forums on the global, international or regional levels. The reviewed book is an attempt to re-evaluate the development of comparative education, its significant shifts, continuity and discontinuity in the field. It further attempts to give broader horizons to comparativists located within diverse academic groups and to outline a framework for comparative education research in the globally changing world.

The book is divided into three parts: Directions, Units of Comparisons and Conclusions.

The first part ***Directions*** focuses on different actors and purposes of comparative education. It discusses qualitative and quantitative approaches and the role of

experience in comparative education research. The knowing more about own education supported by learning more about education in other cultures and societies is emphasised as the main purpose of comparative education research. Advantages and disadvantages of quantitative, nomothetic, value-free research are compared with qualitative, idiographic, interpretative, value-added approaches. The appreciation of the complementarity of both approaches respecting various purposes and dimensions of comparison is documented by a particular comparative research on literacy. A broad definition of comparative education refers to a long lasting search for cultural complexity across and within the borders of different countries. Limits of the objectivity of comparative education research traditions and paradigms constituting concepts of comparison are under attention. The main critical point is found in the linearity of positivist approach which is very logical but unable to consider the complexity of education as a complicated phenomenon. An appropriate methodology for comparative education research is to be found within humanities rather than sciences. Ethnographical and phenomenographical methods or case studies related to cultures, values, human and social experiences are at least of similar importance as quantitative data for the re-fashioning comparative education research. The credo of this part of the book stresses the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative work illuminating the educational issues to be investigated.

The second part of the book deals with **Units of Comparison** in a rather detailed way. Comparative education analyses have traditionally focused on geographical entities. In this part, the book gives evidence on other units of analysis such as cultures, policies, curricula and different systems of education. First, the use of **place** as a unit of comparison is discussed. Variety of examples of single-level or multi-level analyses support the view that comparative studies of both types, interpretative or casual-analytic, should pay careful attention to *tertium comparationis* to provide reliable establishment for meaningful explanation and results. Similarities and differences of compared units should be examined in the context, in the networks of determinants and relationships in educational realities. The chapter convincingly demonstrates that comparing places provides an opportunity to examine educational phenomena at different levels and it opens discussion for exploring such units as schools, districts, provinces, countries or world regions.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, familiar comparative approaches have focused on **educational systems**. Mark Bray and Jian Kai, authors of the explanation, indicate the difficulties with defining the educational system despite the frequent use of the term and provide examples of national educational systems as well as educational systems operated by non-governmental bodies. They introduce a set of illustrations of different systems in one country and show that educational systems within different countries are not of the same type. They also state that relatively a few studies explored cross-national systems, e.g. international schools. Antony Sweeting introduces another unit of analysis, the **time**. Exploration of comparing times focuses particularly on important timelines and phases (e.g. educational reforms or transitional processes) in the context of social changes.

The **comparison of cultures** and cross-cultural comparative research probably seem as the most complicated. They focus on rituals, beliefs and ethos but consequently the greatest area of interest is dedicated to the educational equity. In this chapter, particular attention is paid to the **comparison of values**. A set of given examples documents the necessity and possibility to investigate values using quantitative as well as qualitative methods. The most controversial area of comparison in this chapter is introduced by Neville Posthlethwaite and Frederic Leung and concerns the **educational achievement**. It needs interdisciplinary collaboration and finding invariant items in educational systems, variant curricula as well as heterogeneous groups of pupils. The problems of comparison are also associated with variance among schools, regions and countries. The methodology of IEA study, which is properly explored, provides extremely rich opportunity to the analysis. We can only regret that the OECD-PISA methodology which is different was not taken into account in the reviewed book. The book also considers **educational policy** as a rather young area of comparative education research. The chapter by Yang Rui is an excellent explanation of the concept taking into account recent economic, demographic and ideological changes in national frameworks as substantial determinants of educational policy influenced by globalisation. The author explains reasons for increased attention to the changing role of state in education policy and post-nation state era and he demands to investigate factors operating on supranational or sub-national levels respecting diversified challenges of various cultural environments. In our opinion, finding of a broader globally valued interpretation of the curriculum concept which is complex, multi-faced and covering a broad range of manifestation is the virtue of the contribution on comparing **curricula** by Bob Adamson and Paul Morris.

The third, rather a modest part (pages 339 - 381) of the book with the title **Conclusions** consists of two chapters. The first chapter called *Scholarly Enquiry and the Field of Comparative Education* by Mark Bray argues that in spite of different organizational and institutional structures of the research, the field of comparative education is and must be interdisciplinary. Referring to other leading comparativists of recent decades, the author defends the central position of a special discipline, *educology*, among education-related disciplines. Educology could have a coordinating and synthesizing role providing feedback to other disciplines concerned with research on various aspects of education. Comparative education could play the role of comparative educology using the potential of *tertium comparationis*. Until today, comparative education has unfortunately been too eclectic in topics, approaches and methods. It is very difficult to find its specific academic identity. Paradigmatic differences in different times and different parts of the world which are documented by the co-existence of multiple comparative education present further difficulties. The author expresses challenges toward higher intellectual culture, advanced comparative inquiry and a strong rationale for the products of comparative research. The second chapter of this part called *Different Models, Different Emphases, Different Insights* is written by all three editors and is of synthetic nature. In this chapter, we find a rather progressive **step to re-**

conceptualisation of comparative education into comparative educology. The editors successfully provide a *comparison of comparison* in the context of a range of foci within a variety of paradigms. First of all, they reflect the co-existence of *many models* and *parallel units* for comparative study of education. Concerning places, they accept **three variations** for comparison: a) education in at least two countries; b) education within a single country with strong autonomy of different internal units; and c) multi-location study. Concerning the levels of comparison, the cross-national model is substituted by a more sophisticated *framework* respecting cultural, political, economical or ideological (religious) differences or similarities as well. *Intra-national comparison* should be important when different systems exist in one country (e.g. Flemish speaking vs. French speaking schools in Belgium). The attention should be given to *supranational alliances* (e.g. European Union) and to *education* that is conducted in *cyber space* (mainly over the internet). Concerning *times*, three dimensions, *past*, *present* and *future*, are to be in the focus of comparison. *Multileveled* and *multidimensional comparisons* are considered as important, particularly for a holistic comprehension of the essence of educational phenomena.

The editors state that due to evolution and remarkable global shifts in the field, the purposes, character and topics of comparative education research are very diversified. In spite of heterogeneity of paradigmatic frameworks and plurality of approaches, we can agree with them that there are commonalities in the field. Methodological cultivation contributes to a better understanding of educational systems and processes in different parts of the world. The development of comparative education documents growing similarities of the issues facing educationalists across the world in the era of a global mutation of human civilization. Education as a counterpart of the global change and the impact of education on knowledge-based society are to be investigated complexly and comparatively. A choice of methods and their application demand high professionalism and intellectual effort.

The reviewed book is a very advanced attempt to support or inspire further development of methodology of comparative education research in the world.

We recommend the book to a broad academic community, to students and other readers operating in the field of education and having ambitions to improve educational research.

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