
David Philips and Michele Schweisfurth’s volume has been designed as an introductory text in comparative and international education (p. 4).

The main feature of this volume is a systematic concern with fundamental conceptual clarifications. Thus, the meanings of comparative vs. international dimensions, both as fields of inquiry and specific mindsets, become the very organising principle of the whole volume. These two strands are addressed in their own specificity in clearly dedicated chapters: comparative education is dealt with in chapters 1, 2, 5, 7 and 8, while chapters 3, 4 and 6 are dedicated to the international education realm. In fact, comparative and international education fields of inquiry are effectively discussed throughout the book. The authors choose to focus on the how these different strands contribute to the knowledge production and to the improvement of school practices around the world. Their analysis highlights possible interrelations between the world of practitioners – as ONG based – and that of theoretical construction and academically oriented one. From this point of view and when compared with similar texts, the volume makes a considerable progress in investigating the internal and external borders of this field of study.

The main arguments are presented and discussed in the eight chapters, introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 (*Making Comparisons*) and Chapter 2 (*How Comparative Education has Developed*) both set the scene for the inquiry into comparative education. The analysis spans from a historical overview of the leading figures in comparative studies, to a recollection of some crucial theoretical tools, such as ‘the spectrum of educational transfer’ (Ochs & Phillips, 2005) and the ‘framework for comparative education analyses’ (Bray & Thomas, 1995). In addition, the analysis is enriched by constant and illuminating references to the recent knowledge production of international bodies and scholarly journals in the field.

Chapter 3 (*Domains of Practice and Fields of Inquiry in International Education*) and Chapter 4 (*Education and National Development: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Questions*) present development policies related to international education. These focus on domain of practice, including the internationalisation of the norms of teaching and learning, international schools and global citizenship education, as well as aspects related to fields of inquiry such as the notions of insider and outsider research, research and participants relations in the field as...
well as a thorough understanding of research within international frameworks, globalisation studies, education and development studies. This part of the volume is to be considered the most innovative in terms of the conceptual elaboration of what international education means and its relationship to comparative education. The authors’ main argument, which I am in total agreement with, is the importance of overcoming an ‘ethnocentric and single-solution outlook’ and the idea that the international researcher may benefit from intercultural competences and a more robust comparative, critical and analytical perspective. At this point of their analysis, Philips and Schweisfurth highlight important interconnections between the comparative and the international strands. As Epstein maintains in the foreword to the book, ‘the description and elaboration of international education activity found here is unequaled anywhere in the literature’ (p. ix). The issue of development is thereafter addressed and read from economic, social and holistic perspectives. The part dedicated to the exploration of the links between education and development represents another helpful insight into the complexity of the field under investigation. The chapter ends with an illustration based on the ‘education for all’ policy. It offers a very efficient overview of some theories, such as the human capital theory, modernisation, liberation and conscientisation, correspondence, reproduction and perpetration theories. However, I believe that a more critical perspective on these issues is needed in order to avoid ethnocentric and dominant language practices (see Preece, 2008). In fact, a ‘positivist’ notion of development, as mainly related to ‘developing countries’, ‘helps to normalise the new imperialism’ (Bicuum, 2005; cited in Preece, 2008).

Chapter 5 (Comparative Education: Method) and Chapter 6 (Researching Education and Development: Perspectives, Practicalities, and Ethics) discuss methodology issues and research design in comparative education. They refer to notions of classical theories and scholars such as, Edmund King, Brian Holmes, Harold Noah and Max Eckstein, and also to more recent literature such as the ‘classification of comparative research’ of Theisen and Adams. After addressing a number of fundamental phases and concepts, they propose an original structure for comparative inquiry. The stages of Philips and Schweisfurth’s research project include: conceptualisation (neutralisation of questions to be addressed), contextualisation (description of issues against local backgrounds in two or more cases), isolation of differences, explanation (development of hypothesis), re-conceptualisation (contextualisation of findings), and application (generalisability of findings). The conceptual richness and the fruitful dialogue between classical readings and current developments in the field have to be remarked upon. In this sense, The Conceptual Matrix of Education Reform Discourse of Yoneyama (2004) and Policy Borrowing in Education: Composite Process (Phillips & Ochs, 2004) are two useful theoretical lenses the book offers to its readers.
From a methodological point of view, however, I would prefer to be presented with a more detailed analysis as to the meaning of comparisons from larger sociological perspectives. In fact, if comparisons are not to be viewed as simple mental operations, then readers should be introduced to deeper sociological perspective of what it entails (Fideli, 1998). In addition, it is worth remembering that comparison between national states is only one style (or level) of comparison between others (Bray & Thomas, 1995; Fideli, 1998). This text seems to engage foremost with a peculiar and highly diffused style of comparison – the macro-analytical style of comparison in Fideli (1998, p. 50) or the state/provinces level in the ‘cube model’ of Bray & Thomas (1995). But it neglects other styles and levels – for instance, those included in the ‘cube model’ of Bray & Thomas – that is, individuals, classroom, school, districts, world regions, countries, continents. This traditional line of reasoning endorsed by the authors also leads them to neglect the insights offered by ethnographic methodologies, except for Alexander’s (2000) scholarship and Tobin, Wu & Davidson’s (1989) research.

Chapter 6 (Researching Education and Development: Perspectives, Practicalities and Ethics) deals with problems of methodology in international education, presenting several perspectives while grasping the meanings of the concept of development: economic rationalism, Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives, anthropological perspectives, post-colonialism, gender, human rights. It also mentions the global security issue. Chapter 7 (Comparative Education Research: Survey Outcomes and their Uses) discusses issues related to large-scale comparative studies on educational achievement such as those conducted by IEA and PISA-OECD. The criticism of the authors is opportunely balanced with some positive sides of such large-scale inquiries and this is a reasonable choice if this text is expected to be used in different national contexts. I would however expect more evidence as regard the benefits of large-scale inquiries. From my teaching experience, students focus more on traditional negative accounts of the limitations of such statistical data collection. Therefore, the choice to highlight mainly the shortcomings, as proposed by many traditional readings, may result inopportune, especially in countries with weak statistical and sociological traditions.

In Chapter 8 (Outcomes of Comparative Education: Selected Themes), the last chapter, we are offered a series of key themes in comparative education, such as transition, post-conflict education, education in small states, pedagogy, and citizenship education. These are highly relevant issues and their choice is a good illustration of the contemporary research directions.

The volume is primarily designed as an introductory text in the field of international and comparative education. Its merits lie in its high conceptual density, clear internal organisation and elaboration of international education,
viewed both as a distinct and interrelated field as regard comparative education. I also appreciated the authors’ defence of the interdisciplinary legitimacy of comparative education construction, as rooted in different disciplines from sociology to philosophy. Another possible line of reasoning as an organising principle of the volume could have been that of a more systematic presentation of the most influential current schools of thought in comparative education and of research approaches. This would have allowed the introduction, for example, of the neo-institutionalist school of Stanford, the socio-historical stream of Luhmannian resonance developed by Schriewer (2004; see also Schriewer & Martinez, 2004) at Berlin or the very influential critical-historical approach school initiated by Popkewitz (2000, 2003, 2008). For all these reasons, the volume is a refreshing and efficient introduction to the comparative and international education field, worth being adopted as a course textbook or translated for non-English contexts. It represents an important point of reference not only for students and newcomers in the field, but also for scholars and experienced practitioners.

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References


