

CONFERENCE REPORT

THIRD MESCE CONFERENCE IN MALTA

MJES EDITORIAL BOARD

The third conference of the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education (MESCE) took place at the New Dolmen Hotel, Qawra, Malta, from 11-13 May 2008. Over hundred-and-thirty educational researchers from various parts of the Mediterranean and beyond participated at the conference¹.

There were two broad conference themes at the Malta conference, namely, 'Intercultural Dialogue Within and Across Nations' and 'Education in the Mediterranean'. Papers selected revolved around such themes as: 'Education in the Mediterranean', 'North-South, South-North, East-West, West-East Relations in Education', 'Migration – Inward and Outward (Diaspora)', 'Post-colonial Education', 'Religion and Education', 'Multi-ethnicity and Education', 'Interethnic Education', 'Intercultural Dialogue Within and Across Nations' and 'Education for Sustainability in the Mediterranean and Beyond'.

The keynote speakers were: Ronald Sultana (founding and current editor of the *Mediterranean Journal of Education Studies* and director of the Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research) and Isabelle Calleja from the University of Malta, Zelia Gregoriou from the University of Cyprus, Andre' Elias Mazawi from the University of British Columbia (Canada), Paolo Landri from the University of Naples Federico II (Italy), and Mark Ginsburg (co-editor of *Comparative Education Review*) from the Academy for Educational Development (USA). Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo from the University of Malta were the convenors.

The conference was officially opened by the University of Malta's Pro-Rector, Professor Alfred Vella who underlined the appropriateness of Malta as the venue for this conference given that 'The country has a history which reflects the cultural hybridity that characterizes this region. Our language is very much a reflection of this, being a derivative of Arabic with a strong influx of romance words'. He expressed the hope that the Malta meeting of the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education would showcase some of the valuable educational research that is taking place in the Region. 'Hopefully this will continue to place education high on the priority list of international institutions within and outside the region'. He also hopes that 'this research will give the Mediterranean region greater visibility in the comparative education literature on a par with such regions as Latin America and East Asia'. Adila Kreso, from the University of Sarajevo

(Bosnia and Herzegovina), addressed the opening session as outgoing MESCE President. In her address, Professor Kreso underlined the most significant activities and developments during her term as President, particularly the organisation of the World Congress of Comparative Education at her home university in the Bosnian capital. MESCE served as the host regional organisation for this world congress. It will serve as the co-operating regional society for the second time running when the congress takes place in Istanbul in 2010 organised by the Turkish Comparative Education Society. Giovanni Pampanini, who launched MESCE at its first meeting in Catania in 2004, provided one of the speeches at the conference's official opening session. Dottore Pampanini underlined some of the themes the society could take up in the forthcoming years.

The first keynote speech, delivered on the conference's second day (the first in which parallel sessions as well as keynote plenary sessions were held) was by Ronald Sultana, Professor of Comparative Education and Sociology of Education at the University of Malta. His talk considered some of the promises and challenges in doing comparative education in the Mediterranean region and argued that comparative education goes – or should go – beyond the positivist concern with comparing 'like with like'. Rather, he argued, it is more about finding a standpoint from where educational and related social phenomena can be seen from a different perspective, generating a deeper understanding of dynamics, as well as fresh insights. Professor Sultana feels that the adoption of a Mediterranean lens facilitates this process, though there are distinctive challenges that arise. Building on 15 years experience in carrying out and coordinating comparative education projects in the region, Sultana outlined both the promise and pitfalls of the endeavour, and proposed an agenda for future research.

The second keynote speaker was the Palestinian scholar, André Elias Mazawi, from the University of British Columbia in Canada. Addressing the issue of 'Whither an Arab "Knowledge Society"? Regionalism, Nation-States and Educational Research for Development', Professor Mazawi provided a critical discussion of the intersection between notions of a 'knowledge society' and 'development' in the Arab region. He tackled the notion of development in relation to configurations of power – national, regional and global – over 'the backdrop of struggles which occur over what is defined as knowledge and what is valued as development'. Professor Mazawi unpacked these power configurations for educational policies and school reforms implemented, from 1990 onward, across the Arab region in the wake of the Gulf war. He then argued in favour of building 'an Arab knowledge society' to 'clarify how competing development agendas are politically constructed and enacted, and why educational development emerged

into a contentious and contested terrain'. He concluded by drawing out the ramifications of these multi-layered dynamics and arguing 'for a re-positioning and re-focusing of educational research in the Arab region, with particular attention to educational research as a leverage for local, regional and global intercultural engagements'.

Paolo Landri, from the Institute of Research on Population and Social Policies at the National Research Council in Italy (CNR-IRPPS) and contract professor at the University of Naples Federico II, was the third keynote speaker on the second day. He analysed the role of educational policies within the framework of the southern welfare state model. He provided an empirical analysis of the educational policies in four countries that adopt the southern welfare model, namely Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, and do so within the 'perspective of *lifelong learning policy* and the realization of the wider Lisbon strategy'. The speaker identified some common characteristics of these countries and some differences in their institutional models, and then explored some of the reasons for these difficulties. Due consideration was given to the influence of socio-economic and territorial inequalities. He finally dwelt on the 'institutional isomorphism' caused by the European lifelong learning policy.

Zelia Gregoriou, from the University of Cyprus, provided the fourth keynote talk: 'Blinding the Intercultural Gaze: From the "Culture of the Other" to the Thick Interpretation of Educational Processes of Othering'. She discussed the conceptual conflation of 'Other' as an ethical term with 'other' as a cultural (essentialist) category in intercultural education. Particular references are made to the orientalist pre-occupation with migrant students as 'natives' (potential objects of study, recognition, representation) and autochthonous students as self-reflecting subjects. Professor Gregoriou argued that many EU member states 'seem to have anchored their vision of intercultural migrant education in, first, the recognition *of* the cultures which the migrants 'bring' with them and, second, the recognition of the European values *by* migrants'. She argued that both autochthonous students and school cultures were exempt from such an approach. She described an attempt to apply Geertz's 'thick interpretation' to an analysis of critical events occurring in classrooms 'hosting' migrant students. 'Instead of re-framing "others" as objects of ethnographic desire, thick interpretation focuses on processes of othering and the intensifications of borders which take place as racialised hierarchies and norms of excellence become disturbed'.

The conference's fifth keynote talk, delivered on the conference's third and final day, was by Mark Ginsburg of the US based Academy for Educational Development. The talk focused on 'Global Discourses and Educational Reform in Egypt: The Case of Active-Learning Pedagogies'. Professor Ginsburg provided an analysis of 'the global discourses (words and practices) that helped to place

notions of constructivism and active-learning pedagogies on the international education reform agenda, particularly since 1990'. He examined the interaction of these discourses with initiatives, for educational reform in Egypt, engaged in by Egyptian education officials and educators at the time the research was carried out. He argued 'that comparative and international educators need to interrogate the variety of discourses operating at both the local/national and global levels as well as to examine the complex interactions that occur across these levels'.

The sixth keynote talk was delivered on the final afternoon of the conference just before its conclusion. The speaker was Isabelle Calleja from the University of Malta's Department of International Relations. Her talk focused on Cyprus and the topic of 'Education and the Teaching of History in the Light of Encouraging Conflict Resolution on the hitherto Divided Island'. Looking at the different interpretations of history in Cyprus, Dr Calleja examined how the literature has affected the way history had been taught in the North and South of the Island. She highlighted two approaches: 'An earlier one where in the long period of the geopolitical transformation of Cyprus, education served the national, political and ideological division of the island and stressed ethnic differences, and images of the other as the enemy'. The second referred to 'a later and more contemporary phase, which attempts to use the teaching of history as a tool to further reconciliation and understanding across the geographical and cultural divide of the green line'. The speaker argued that the changing demands of both domestic and external interests determined these approaches in so far as the writing and teaching of history are concerned.

The third MESCE conference drew participation from numerous countries. There were Algerian, American, Bosnian, Croatian, Cypriot, English, Estonian, Finnish, Greek, Italian, Palestinian, Maltese, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish and Turkish participants. A new MESCE executive committee was elected at this conference, with the two conference convenors, Peter Mayo and Carmel Borg, now occupying the roles of President and Secretary General respectively. Ronald Sultana was also appointed by the executive board as Honorary Member of MESCE. Morocco was chosen as the venue for the next conference.

Note

1. The full programme could be accessed at: <http://www.educ.um.edu.mt/mesce/cprogramme.html>