

# LOOKING BACK BEFORE MOVING FORWARD: BUILDING ON 15 YEARS OF COMPARATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN THE MEDITERRANEAN<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – *This paper considers some of the promises and challenges in doing comparative education in the Mediterranean region. The focus on the Mediterranean is, in many ways, a wager, in that the region is rather more notable for its diversity than for its commonalities. Nevertheless, it is argued that comparative education goes – or should go – beyond the positivist concern with comparing ‘like with like’. Rather, 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. It is argued 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 co-ordinating comparative education projects in the region, the paper outlines both the promise and pitfalls of the endeavour, and traces an agenda for future research.*

## Introduction

**I**n addressing the theme of comparative education in the Mediterranean, it seems to me to be both necessary and useful to provide a context. I want to do so in a particularly personal and ‘narrational’ manner, drawing on qualitative case studies I have carried out in the region, as well as the structured attempt, through our Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research (EMCER), to develop Mediterranean comparative studies as a generative endeavour. In so doing, I also want to introduce readers to aspects of Malta’s culture and history, which, as will be seen, are what made me who I am and have also had a decisive impact on my approach to scholarly work in our region. This attempt to link culture, identity and scholarship seems to me the best way to not only address this emergent field of Mediterranean comparative education, but also to link it to the specific focus of the conference, namely ‘intercultural dialogue through education’. What I hope to do, therefore, is to draw on my personal experiences over the last 15 years as a comparativist, highlighting the academic as well as the personal and cultural identity challenges that this endeavour represented for me, with a view to identifying three key obstacles that I see ahead of us in this regional venture, while outlining some agendas for the future.

## **Culture, identity and scholarship**

My experiences as an educational researcher in the region are of two kinds. The first set of experiences that I would like to refer to consists of the qualitative studies that I have carried out over the past decade, at the behest of international organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO and the European Training Foundation. My research has taken me to Albania, Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Palestine, Jordan, and to a more limited extent to Lebanon and Morocco. Some of these studies have a single country focus. Others – like the recent study of career guidance across ten countries and territories in the Middle East and North Africa region (Sultana & Watts, 2007, 2008) – are comparative in scope. Most involved writing case studies of educational innovation, which served as testimonies to home-grown education success stories in the region. As I have argued elsewhere, we need these stories of success, not least as a way of ‘writing back’ to an international community that has tended to see educational development in the region almost exclusively in deficit terms.

In my work, I have written about efforts to integrate low achieving students in state schools across the poorest regions in Albania (Sultana, 2006a); I have documented how girl-friendly community schools are managing to overcome traditional prejudice in remote, rural areas in several governorates in Egypt, where Muslim and Coptic parents now agree to keep their daughters in education rather than marrying them off on the onset of puberty (Sultana, 2008a). In another study, I have described how some brave teachers and schools in Syria have dared to go against the grain, adopting critical pedagogies in order to ensure that their students experience – and develop a taste for – democracy (Sultana, 2001a). In Tunisia, I have tried to capture the rise of mastery learning as a movement to guarantee access, for all children, to a minimum standard of education, even when they live in the remotest villages on the borders with Algeria, in the desert-like environment in Kef and Kasserine (Sultana, 2004, 2005). In a comparative study I have recently carried out, I looked closely at the education policy implementation process in Albania, Kosovo and Turkey, in an attempt to understand how reforms change schools, or should I say, how schools change reforms (Sultana, 2008b).

The place I have visited most remains Palestine – a country that I always go to with hope, but from which I increasingly depart with a heavy heart if not despair, as I see people fenced in, communities fragmented, and human rights trampled underfoot with impunity. In Palestine I documented the setting up of a most impressive Education Management Information System, meant to support the efficient implementation of an ambitious and sound education plan as well as a new ‘national’ curriculum – not an easy task in one of the few territories in the world where communities live in areas that are not contiguous to each other

(Sultana, 2002a). In another study, I tried to capture the ingenuity of the Palestinian people in Hebron, in their effort to ensure that their children retained access to education, despite the curfews, attacks on schools, and mobility restrictions imposed by Israeli forces after the second *Intifada* (Sultana, 2006b). The Hebronites' use of basic distance education methods has proved inspirational to other societies in conflict, where schools and teachers are among the first to bear the brunt of aggression. More recently, and in response to an invitation by UNESCO and UNRWA, I have met with students, teachers and parents in refugee camps in the West Bank, in Jordan and in Lebanon – including those living in the infamous Sabra and Shatila camps – in order to evaluate the quality of education that is available to Palestinians born in exile (Sultana, 2007). In Jordan, I have documented an impressively successful parental education initiative, as well as the implementation of the first large-scale Early Childhood Education and Development service in the Arab world (Sultana, 2009).

All of these studies have involved field work, school and classroom observations, interviews with policy makers, teachers, students, parents and other educators. All have had an especially formative influence on me, shaping my perceptions of the educational challenges in the region, as well as of the resources that the region has in meeting such challenges. I will return to these studies at a later stage in my paper, with a view to highlighting some of the lessons that can be distilled from them with comparative education in mind.

The second set of professional experiences that connect me to the Mediterranean revolves around the setting up of a comparative education programme at the University of Malta 15 years ago. The story behind the setting up of this programme, which has now matured into a modest research centre, is relevant to this paper for more than one reason. It must be immediately said that the initial motivation behind establishing the programme were less than pure – as very little in academia is nowadays. The University of Malta, as indeed the rest of the island, had made a strategic decision in the mid-80s to implement the 'hub' concept in an effort to use its position in the middle of the Mediterranean to provide goods and services to the surrounding countries.

This hub concept was applied to several sectors of the economy – leading to the setting up of a Freeport, the building of a new international airport, and the rapid development of financial and offshore services. The concept was also to be implemented in the higher education sector, with the University set to expand and to attract fee-paying students from the surrounding countries, having, as a major advantage, the use of English as the language of instruction. In parenthesis, it must be said that the articulation of a Mediterranean agenda for the University has long, historical roots (Fiorini, 2001). When it was first set up as a Jesuit College in 1592, one of the motives behind the move was to enable Malta-trained European

missionaries to move to North Africa to help spread Catholicism. Later, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were plans to establish Malta as a seat of learning in the Mediterranean, with a proposal to open a second university on the smaller island of Gozo tabled in 1818. One hundred and fifty years later, academics were again encouraged to focus on Mediterranean studies, or to introduce a Mediterranean dimension in their teaching and research, in some cases building on an already established and modest – but nevertheless international – reputation in some areas, notably anthropology, but also law, literature, and theology.

This also fed into a widespread fantasy that the Maltese have of themselves, namely that puny Malta can act as a bridge between North Africa and Europe, when in fact our history shows that what we have done best is to act as a bulwark to keep ‘non-Europeans’ – whoever these are – (and Islam) out of Europe<sup>2</sup> – a vocation that, might I add, we ironically seem to have revived with a vengeance when, following our entry into the EU in 2004, we became a vital outpost in helping the EU secure its borders through collaborating on Frontex<sup>3</sup> operations. In this way, the Mediterranean sea, which for centuries has acted as the main vehicle of communication between the basin’s north and south, east and west, is now traversed by an invisible but no less effective replica of the Berlin wall, infused by the Schengen<sup>4</sup> spirit which strives to keep the frontiers of fortress Europe intact and the boatpeople at bay.

This University-driven Mediterranean agenda coincided with other aspects of my own personal history as an academic: my ego had taken several blows at conferences where few, if any, ever turned up to listen to papers I had prepared on educational issues pertaining specifically to Malta. Few, if any, felt that what happened in a country barely larger than a mid-sized European town, with a population of less than 400,000, had any relevance to them or their own work. The new research agenda proposed by the University, therefore, promised to expand my horizons from a too narrow focus on Malta toward a wider-embracing comparative gaze at the rest of the region. With the hope, therefore, of becoming somebody at the university, and somebody at international conferences and the academic stage more generally, I embarked on this Mediterranean Odyssean voyage, little knowing where it would lead to, which dangers were lurking below the shimmering surface, which short-sighted (or should I say one-eyed) cyclopean university authority would try to block me or administer me to death, and which Sirens would attempt to lure me off track.

Initial efforts were promising. I recall being encouraged by the likes of the Sicilian Giovanni Pampanini, who had already been fighting windmills, so to speak, in his quixotic efforts to stimulate interest in a Mediterranean comparative dimension. Another key influence was Marco Todeschini, erstwhile professor of comparative education at the University of Milan, Italy.

Together with the support of colleagues from the Faculty of Education in Malta, and some seed funding from UNESCO, I established an extensive network of educational researchers from all over the region, creating a database that profiled their academic background and expertise with a view to facilitating collaborative projects. Different members of this network met annually at small, intimate conferences in Malta, Florence, Cyprus and elsewhere, were we focused on such issues as higher education (Guri-Rosenblit & Sultana, 1999; Sultana, 1999), educational innovation (Sultana, 2001b), teacher education (Sultana, 2002b), and power and education (Sabour & Sultana, 2003) – each bringing the experiences of his or her own country, and sharing them in intensive debating sessions that increased our knowledge of each other and provided us with new opportunities for understanding how our respective education systems were marked, for instance, by shared Mediterranean colonial and post- or neo-colonial histories, by the nature of the relations between state, religious power and formal schooling, by cultural traditions that shaped gender boundaries and lifechances in particular ways, and so on.

Different members of this same network also supported the launch of an international journal with a regional focus, the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* (MJES). Now in its 13<sup>th</sup> year of publication, the journal, produced, I might add proudly, in cottage industry style, appears twice annually, and with 25 issues behind it, has established itself as a unique venue for scholarship reporting on educational issues in the Mediterranean, and serving subscribers from as far afield as Australia, Russia, the US, China and Japan, not to mention most of Europe, the Middle East and, to a lesser extent, north Africa. We have recently turned it into a free open-access online journal, hoping to reach out to more academic communities, particularly as we notice that those who we most want to engage in our region are the ones with the least resources to subscribe, despite the advantageous fee structures we have put into place for low income countries. It is for this reason too that we have thus far resisted requests by major journal publishing companies to sell them our journal, fearing that, despite the undeniable benefits of international market penetration and prestige that they offer, the profit motive will keep the market price high, excluding those who we most wish to reach.

This very productive interaction between like-minded scholars from the region, together with the knowledge resources that have accumulated in our Centre, led to the launch of a master's degree focusing on comparative education in the Mediterranean – to our knowledge, the first master's of its kind, now being offered to a second cohort of students. We hope to build on this experience in order to open it up to students from all over the region, particularly if we manage to secure sponsorships and scholarships from the sources we are tapping.

I cannot stress enough how pivotal and compelling both these sets of overlapping experiences – that is, both the qualitative research I carried out in the region and the setting up of a Mediterranean comparative education research centre – have been for me *academically* and *personally*.

Let me first focus a little on the impact they have had on my academic work, and particularly on my understanding of educational issues. Prior to the start of this Mediterranean journey, I had been happily looking at educational phenomena in Malta through the theoretical and conceptual lenses provided by mainstream, metropole scholars – particularly Anglo-Saxon ones, and to a lesser extent continental ones such as Bourdieu or Habermas, often through translations or commentaries in English. Needless to say, these remain giants on whose shoulders we need to climb. Nevertheless, my qualitative research in the region soon made it clear to me that the contexts from which metropole frameworks arose differed from those that we are embedded in in the economic and geographic ‘South’. The comparative educational work I was doing with colleagues pointed out the need for developing a greater sensitivity to the fact that the economic, cultural, political and social dynamics in the so-called ‘periphery’ and ‘semi-periphery’ have their own specificity, and require more context-sensitive theoretical tools in order to carry out the Freirian task of reading or decoding our world ... with a view, of course, to contribute to the writing of a different text.

Some of the colleagues engaged in this effort to develop theoretical understandings of educational issues in the Mediterranean have been particularly successful in working both with and against mainstream sociological frameworks, developing sophisticated and nuanced understandings of educational issues. The Catalan Xavier Bonal, for instance, the Palestinian André Mazawi, as well as Linda Herrera and my colleague Peter Mayo – all of whom have served generously on the editorial board of our journal – have written some excellent sociological papers on a variety of aspects of education in the Mediterranean, and are in a way exceptional in that their work has attained visibility in both North and South. But there is much, out there, in education, as in other disciplines, that is written in ways that connect in an especially profound and visceral way with our realities – even if those writings predictably fail to capture the attention of metropole publishers and their public.

Earlier I said that the experience of developing a Mediterranean comparative education dimension has had an impact on me both academically and personally. I have dealt a little with the former, and about that even more later. I must, however, dwell a little on the impact all this has had on my sense of who I am. The conference focus is, after all, on ‘intercultural dialogue’, and what is ‘culture’ but the cultivation of a sense of self within broadening circles of overlapping communities? This word ‘intercultural’ – like its relative term ‘cross-cultural’ – is

a bit tricky: it tends to project an image of essentialised and stable entities – reified national cultures that, at the best of times, are prepared to converse with each other (Bensalah & Daniel, 2003). This is a potentially dangerous conception, which plays into the same ideological terrain of that powerful myth that has captured our imaginary, namely the infamous ‘clash of civilisations’. Cultures, to my mind, are complex historical mongrels whose very being is permeated to the core by ‘others’ through processes of osmosis and the uncontrollable and permissive intercourse and exchange between peoples. This, too, is my story.

I was brought up in a colonial Malta: independence was still 6 years away when I was born, and some of my earliest imagic memories of my childhood include portraits of a young Queen Elizabeth in my primary school and classrooms, and waving flags and genuflecting in her presence or in the presence of any member of her family who took it upon himself to have a vacation in this island in the sun, often under the guise of a ‘diplomatic mission’ – or perhaps it was the other way round. I recall my father taking me to Valletta to see the changing of the guards in front of the Palace in summer, and standing with him staring in awe at these tall, white Bombay-helmeted men marching in the midday sun – men who somehow managed not to slouch or sweat ... further evidence of their demi-god status. I remember my thin, wizened grandfather in mourning when Mintoff, our then illustrious lion of a prime minister, declared that political independence could not be celebrated until the foreign naval base closed down and the Brits given their marching orders. My grandfather, like many other thousands of Maltese, felt that the island would go to the dogs without the patronage and protection of the Brits, who had ruled with grace and sagacity for 164 years – or so our school textbooks told us. These books indeed told us much about the wondrous British Empire, but precious little about our own history ... and when it did, it was largely to emphasise how Christian we were, how European our roots were, and how glorious we were to resist Islam, the Turks and the Arabs ... conveniently forgetting to tell us that linguistically, culturally, genetically and even religiously, we had absorbed our so-called ‘adversaries’ right into the core of our being. I grew up, therefore, thinking of myself as white, as European, as Christian, and indeed as almost English ... though not quite.

You can imagine, therefore, what a shock it was for me to travel to the UK for my studies at the age of 24, when, climbing a bus in London for the first time, a young, blue-eyed man spat on the floor! So, these demi-gods could be crass at times as well! Oh my! ... It came as a shock to me that when I spoke in what I thought was perfect English, I was barely comprehensible to the real Brits; that I was not as white as I had been led to believe; and that the more I travelled north in Europe, the darker I grew, both literally and figuratively. You can perhaps also imagine the even greater shock I felt when I started my travels in our region three

years later, to discover that Tunisians and Moroccans could understand most of what I told them when I spoke ‘Maltese’, that there are areas in Jerba, Rabat, Beirut, Jaffa, Naples, Valencia, Alexandria or Tripoli which evoke my own childhood in villages in Malta and Gozo: those smells, those colours, those flat-roofed houses, those women talking to each other as they hung the family clothes to dry on rooftops, the sprawl of bodies, those hot nights with windows and doors ajar at cleverly calculated angles to catch the remotest of cool breezes, those scrawny cats running down dark, winding yet comforting alleyways ... No wonder Braudel, in his masterly portrayal of the region, exclaimed ‘A native of the Mediterranean, wherever he (or she) might come from, would never feel out of place in any part of the sea!’ (Braudel, 1992, p. 237).

What started off, for me, as a smart-Alec move to make headway in academia had increasingly become a much more profound journey that was to shape my sense of who I am, as well as my efforts to connect this sense of identity with reality around me, in purposeful, reflective ways. Let me now focus the last part of my address on the lessons I have learnt during this journey, and try to tease out some issues that may have implications for us participants at this conference, as we try to deepen our understanding of what comparative education in the Mediterranean might feel and look like. While describing these experiences, I will simultaneously be articulating elements of an agenda for Mediterranean comparative education for the future. I will only focus on three key issues here, assuming that several others will arise during the debates and discussions we will have during the conference, and hopefully afterward too, once we have returned to our respective homes.

## **Mediterranean comparative education and apostasy**

First, a note about the legitimacy of having the Mediterranean as a unit of analysis in comparative work. I have written at some length about this in other contexts (Sultana, 1998), so I will just trace out what is at stake here. I recall that when I first started talking at gatherings of comparative education scholars about what we were trying to do in Malta, the initial reactions by some of the guru patricians of the field was not only marked by scepticism, but sometimes by outright hostility. Lê Thành Khôi, for instance, dismissed the project, claiming that there are too many differences in the region that we called ‘the Mediterranean’ to make it the object of comparative analyses. His position was that it was legitimate to focus on southern European studies, or Arab region studies, or Middle East studies, but the all-embracing notion of ‘Mediterranean’ could not hold water – at least in scientific terms, of course. Andreas Kazamias, erstwhile President of the

Comparative and International Education Society and emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Athens, was initially unconvinced at, as he saw it, this attempt ‘to put the Mediterranean Humpty Dumpty together again!’ (Kazamias, 2001, p. xii). He wondered openly whether this was a wild goose chase, whether the imagined Mediterranean gods were false, and whether the idea of a Mediterranean space was a figment of our imagination. Other reactions were equally barbed: one professor at Notre Dame University in the north of Lebanon felt that what we were trying to do was politically problematic, as it diverted energy and attention away from a focus on Arab issues. A highly esteemed Greek comparativist, Professor Marie Eliou, criticised the attempt to start a journal when there was not yet an established community of scholars behind it. An Italian colleague challenged us to think through the implications of substituting a Euro-centric agenda with a MEDA-centric one, when perhaps what we needed most was a more all-embracing vision of global citizenship.

In many ways, of course, these critiques are not without some justification, and the fact that there have been few if any comparative education studies in the region is portentous. Most international aid agencies and development organisations, as well as research institutes, have, at best, a Middle East and North Africa (MENA), or a South European studies programme. Even those which do claim to focus on the whole region, calling their programmes MEDA, or even Mediterranean – such as the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre at the European University Institute in Firenze – are often mostly interested in studies of Arab states, using the ‘Mediterranean’ caption interchangeably – and I would dare say, euphemistically – for ‘Arab’. The diversities between – not to mention *within* – countries in the Mediterranean are striking, with significant and cumulative differentials in all or most aspects of economic and social development indices, whether we are talking about demography, access to power resources, the role and place of religion, the status of individuals and their relationship to inalienable rights, and so on. Diverse colonial histories have led to the development of different educational traditions and systems, as well as to country-specific relations with metropole countries, and with the power blocs present in the region, including the US and the EU.

A simple but hopefully not simplistic answer to all this is that what we are most interested in doing in this endeavour that we are referring to as Mediterranean comparative education is not so much as the search for epistemological and positivist purity in comparing ‘like with like’, as much as finding a new standpoint – one among many others, I might add – from where to gaze at phenomena and to apprehend it in new ways, by refracting it through a different lens. As I have already noted earlier with reference to my own personal journey, adopting a

‘Mediterranean perspective’ can open up new opportunities for the generation of more context-specific and context-responsive frameworks that help us make sense of educational dynamics. We have discovered, over the years, how bringing together scholars from different parts of the Mediterranean – Israelis and Palestinians; Croats, Albanians and Serbs; Greeks and Turks (not to mention Greek and Turkish Cypriots); Syrians and Lebanese; Christians, Muslims and Jews of all denominations and shapes and sizes – generates thematic concerns that might not have surfaced otherwise, including notions of our responsibility for future generations which may contrast with our perceived obligations to ensure that, through the curricular narratives we present our children with, they never forget the atrocities we have managed to pile upon each other across time and space.

We would also do well to keep firmly in mind the fact that regions are political constructs anyway. Take the EU for example: who would have thought that Turkey would be seriously considered in the construction of a united Europe? Certainly not on any cultural, economic or even geographical logic. And yet there we are, with Europe’s frontiers expanding to include countries that, when the European Coal and Steel Community was established in 1950, would not have been considered potential candidates of the new Europe, by any stretch of the imagination. If Europe can think of itself as a supranational entity, despite the many diversities it embodies, there is no reason why the Mediterranean should not – assuming it wanted to. Seen historically, this Mediterranean gaze is nothing more than another faltering step in our effort to widen our associative communities from family to clan, from clan to nation, and from nation to region and to more all-embracing notions of global citizenship.

In some ways, then, what we are doing here is taking up the words that Kazamias uttered when he was converted to the notion that this form of comparative education was not an apostasy as much as a different way of doing ‘science’. ‘So what’, quizzed Andreas, ‘if the Gods are false, if good things are done in their name?!’ (Kazamias, 2001, p. xii). Similarly supportive was an anonymous reviewer of a paper I submitted to US comparative education journal, who suggested that what we were doing was promising not only for our region, but for other areas in the world which had a sea in ‘Medi-terra’ – in the middle of lands – such as the Caribbean, for instance. Robert Cowen, a UK comparativist based at the Institute of Education in London, picked up on this theme when he commented very positively on our efforts at a European Society of Comparative Education (CESE) conference, noting the promise in focusing on what he referred to as ‘permeologies’ and ‘immunologies’ in the ‘rims’ and ‘peripheries’ of this world (Cowen, 1998). Such international support is comforting. But nothing beats the thrill of seeing colleagues from around the

region become excited by this venture, and nothing underscores the value of the project more than its ability to generate new insights into understanding and promoting sound educational practice in our region. This, I would submit, is a key agenda for us all, and for a robust future for comparative education with a Mediterranean dimension.

## **The many heads of the neo/post-colonial Hydra**

Epistemological hurdles were the least of our worries as we set about giving shape to our Mediterranean comparative education project. Much more pressing were challenges that I will group under the term ‘neo/post-colonial’. This needs some unpacking, and a few examples will hopefully give a sense of what I am referring to here.

First, we have encountered substantial difficulties in getting south-south collaboration. Some of these difficulties arise out of the fact that our home universities rarely have the funds to facilitate research and research-related travel. Any such funds are generally made available by agencies and institutions based in the economic ‘North’, and they are often premised on notions of north-south transfer of knowledge, rather than on development models that acknowledge the value of south-south collaboration. But there is a further reason to this, one that belies post-colonial mentalities where we fail to value the indigenous knowledge and wisdom we have in our own region, preferring instead to work exclusively with universities and academics in metropole countries. There are, of course, several advantages in doing so – not least the pleasure of being taken seriously by the big shots in town. But the downside is equally obvious, in terms of choice of research themes, of theoretical frameworks to make sense of data, of the usefulness of such research for the communities in which we are embedded, and so on.

Post- and neo-colonial issues that have an impact on our efforts to develop a Mediterranean dimension to our work arise in other ways too. Much, for instance, has been written about the World Bank and its role in reinforcing dependency through its fundamentalist commitment to neo-liberalism as the master doctrine that guarantees development. I am convinced that such critiques are fair and just. What is even more worrying from the perspective of a critical comparativist is the fact that education in our region is increasingly being colonised by World Bank agendas, particularly now that Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAP) are commonplace. SWAPs may mean well in getting all education actors, including international aid and development agencies, around a table in order to ensure better co-ordination and more efficient use of funds. I have been around several

of these tables as an observer, and very often these are World Bank tables, in World Bank offices, chaired by World Bank staff. I have seen UN agencies, including UNICEF and UNESCO – whom traditionally I have looked up to for the occupation of the moral high ground – being drawn into the ideological terrain as defined by the World Bank.

Much of the goings-on at these SWAP meetings are motivated by good intentions, and also by a principled commitment to educational development. But it is worrying that underneath it all is an increasingly unquestioned slide into a utilitarian, one-dimensional view of education as defined and determined by the ‘North’, in terms of what should be prioritised, who and how should implement it, and what outcomes should be expected to determine success. Anything that does not measure up to this ‘referent’ is consequently defined in deficit terms, further reinforcing dependency.

It bears underling the point that the European Union’s activities are not outside this critique, despite the fact that the EU likes to present itself as enamoured of the so-called ‘social model’, which it contrasts to the presumably more vicious ‘market model’ of the US. While some of its interventions in the region are to be lauded – and I have in mind the recent establishment of the Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures in Alexandria, Egypt – others are much less so.

Take the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, for instance. The so-called Barcelona Process – which was launched in 1995 in order to establish a wide framework for political, economic and social relations between the member states of the EU and partners of the Southern Mediterranean – brazenly suggests that higher education institutions should be set up and developed in the MEDA region with EU member state support in order to safeguard EU economic interests, especially in relation to the goal of offsetting competition from the US. More recently, the EU borrowed a feather from the cap of the American Fulbright programme, establishing an *Erasmus Mundus* programme in order to ensure that the brightest and the best from developing countries in the world studied – and stayed on – in the EU rather than in the US. There seems to have been little concern here about the fact that what represents a brain gain for the EU in its efforts to reach the Lisbon objective ‘to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010’, in fact represents a brain drain from countries who can ill afford this luxury.

Our efforts to develop a Mediterranean dimension in our comparative work would therefore, in my view, require us to recognise what some of the drivers behind development aid are, and to establish our own agendas in ways that are more responsive to our needs, and which benefit our priorities. Mediterranean comparative education should also be recognisable by its active search for

alternative forms of educational practice, ones that contest the reductionist vision of schooling in terms of skills and competences that drives so much of what passes as education in the world today.

### **The lure of ‘dislocated provincialism’**

The development of a Mediterranean dimension in comparative education has a third challenge to face, one that I am here referring to as ‘dislocated provincialism’ – an oxymoron, of course, but one which serves to vehicle what I wish to say. By its very nature, comparative education requires scholars to rise above the particular and to consider this in relation to broader principles, as well as in relation to broader geographic and epistemological vistas. Indeed, one of the benefits that is usually attributed to comparative education is that it provides a body of descriptive and explanatory data which allows us to see various practices and procedures in a very wide context that helps to throw light upon them. Now, a lot of what passes as educational scholarship in our region tends to be precisely the opposite. I am here reflecting in particular on the literally scores of submissions that reach the editorial board of the MJES, and that we have to reject. Needless to say, there are many good, even excellent pieces that we receive and publish, and that also appear in other, often more prominent journals internationally. On the basis of what reaches us, and in the light of conversations I have had with Arab, Turkish and other scholars from Mediterranean countries whose languages I do not speak, and who could comment on papers that appear in their own country’s journals, I have drawn a number of conclusions which, if correct, signal a serious obstacle to the development of comparative education in our region.

I am here referring to the fact that many papers in education are narrow and provincial in scope. They typically focus on a very specific issue, and restrict their purview to a very limited and particular context – such as ‘Student attitudes towards assessment in Grade 12 in a state school in Jordan’, for instance, or ‘The use of portfolios in initial teacher training at the University of St Joseph in Beirut’. My problem with these kinds of papers is not the narrow focus in and of itself: after all, as Leopold Sedar Senghor once pointed out, by living the particular to the full we reach the dawn of the universal. It is rather that such studies remain narrowly provincial, failing to place this specific context in a broader national or regional one, or to analyse how national, political, cultural or economic dynamics have an impact on the phenomena that are being described. Hence the term ‘dislocated provincialism’ that I am using here. At the end of the day, one is forgiven for concluding that what is being described could very well have taken place in

Australia or the Azores, as no contextual clues are given, nor is there an insight into how specificity of place shapes educational phenomena and practices in particular ways.

Such lack of embeddedness appears in other ways too. Literature reviews draw almost exclusively on what is reported in other – generally western and high income countries – and the assumption is made that what was discovered in those countries applies unproblematically to the author’s own. It is not surprising, therefore, that theoretical and explanatory frameworks, when they appear, are almost without exception also drawn from metropole countries, with little attempt to acknowledge the specificities of country and region – such as, for instance, the preponderance of informal labour markets and the impact this has on motivation to engage with formal learning; the negative returns to schooling; the importance of ‘*wasta*’ and family influence in getting employment; the particular relationship between religious elites and leaders in the state apparatus, and how this impacts on education in such areas as curriculum development; or the way private tutoring reproduces élites. Insensitivity to contexts is also often evident when it comes to making recommendations about ways forward, such as when teacher development models are unproblematically borrowed from the UK or the US or France, with little if any attention given to the fact that most teachers in our region are underpaid, and have to hold down a second and third job after school hours in order to make ends meet. In such conditions, teachers have little desire or motivation to invest spare capacities in improving their teaching through the new-fangled approaches promoted by the North, such as school development planning, curriculum development in teams, and after-school preparatory sessions, which might work well in other contexts were teachers do little else but teach.

The methodological tools that are employed also tend to be narrowly quantitative in scope, with papers typically rehearsing the tired mantra that starts off with ‘purpose of the study’, followed by a ‘definition of the problem’ and a ‘definition of terms’, moving on to a description of the methodology, with subsections on sampling, and the choice of instruments used to measure the phenomena in question. When we come to the substance of the paper, what we get is a ‘discussion of results’ section which generally includes the presentation of several, often impeccably designed statistical tables. However, in far too many instances, the reaction of reviewers to such attempts are that the mountain has laboured only to give birth to a mouse ... or, to quote the advice given by an exasperated and perhaps somewhat cheeky referee: ‘What is not worth measuring is not worth measuring well’.

There are, of course, many possible reasons for these shortcomings – though we need to be careful and nuanced in our approach to avoid the temptation of

unproblematically adopting the referents and measuring sticks of metropole universities. Certainly, the almost total dependence of academics on the state for their livelihood renders them vulnerable – as the Finland-based Moroccan sociologist Sabour (2001) states in his discussion of academics in the Arab world, it is a bit like sending out the matador to face the bull without his muleta. The limited intellectual freedom in some of the region’s universities, together with not unfounded fears of reprisals, can act as a powerful deterrent to sociologically imaginative and politically engaged research that speaks to context in very specific ways. The fact remains, however, that comparative education in our region can only thrive if, to sustain the image, we do take the bull by the horns and develop a community of inquiry where we support each others’ efforts to engage the world as it is, to imagine a world as it could and should be.

## **In conclusion**

In conclusion, what I have attempted to do in this paper is to reflect on my personal and professional journey in developing a Mediterranean dimension in comparative education. I have highlighted the way that such a journey has opened the road for cultural dialogue for me, a dialogue that has both intra-personal and inter-personal dimensions leading to self-discovery, and to the discovery of the ‘other’ in this ‘self’, as all Odyssean educational endeavours tend to do. I have also highlighted the practical steps that we have put into place at the University of Malta in an effort to take on what, for many, is a quixotic and idealistic desire to connect educational researchers in this diverse, often divided region of ours. Finally, I have pointed out to three main obstacles that we still need to overcome if we are to make headway in the future, namely: (i) the lack of confidence in the legitimacy of our project; (ii) the neo-liberal and neo-colonial influence on the definition of what counts as education; and (iii) the dislocated provincialism that pervades much of our educational scholarship. In all three cases, the antidote seems to me to be the same: the development of a community of scholars that collaborates across south-south and south-north axes in order to develop the confidence, strength and drive to make a positive difference to education in our region. It is my hope that future activities and associational endeavours such as the one represented by the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education, take us one step further in this direction by providing us with an eminent opportunity for dialogical co-investigation.

## Notes

1. Thanks are due to Linda Herrera for her careful reading of the text, and for her constructive criticism. I am also indebted to André Mazawi for his astute and insightful feedback on various aspects of our Mediterranean initiatives, which helped me better appreciate our efforts in relation to the wider context of comparative education.
2. The first to refer to Malta as a 'bulwark' – in recognition of its having successfully halted the advance on the Ottomans on Europe – was the German scholar Hieronymus Megiser in 1606 (see Friggieri & Freller, 1998).
3. Frontex, which is based in Warsaw (Poland), is the EU agency for external border security. It is responsible for co-ordinating the activities of the national border guards to ensure the 'security' of the EU's borders with non-member states.
4. The term 'Schengen Agreement' refers to two agreements concluded among European states in 1985 and 1990 that deal with the abolition of systematic border controls among the participating countries.

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