DEVELOPING COMPARATIVE EDUCATION IN
THE MEDITERRANEAN SPACE

Inaugural address at the Third MESCE Conference by the First
President and Founder of the Mediterranean Society of Comparative
Education (MESCE) (2004-2006)

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In Cabala tradition, one of the numerous Mediterranean cultural traditions, the
number three is the number of perfection. So, on this particular occasion, I would
like to use my speech to explore along with you whether this third MESCE
Conference is really something that touches perfection and, if this is so, explore
to what extent it manages to do so. Malta is actually the ‘perfect’ place to meet and
discuss something that concerns all of us – Mediterranean Education and, in
particular, Mediterranean Comparative Education.

However, first of all, we should acknowledge the fact that issues like that of
‘perfection’ belong to the ‘culture of the soul’; in other words, it is a transversal
culture belonging to all the cultural traditions of the world. Am I suggesting that
this MESCE Conference is something related to the ‘soul’? Wasn’t it supposed to
be an academic congress dealing with Comparative Education? What is all this
confusion between the ‘soul’ and Comparative Education? Before you start
getting nervous about what I’m saying, let me briefly remind you how this story
starts, or rather, started when I organised the first of a series of three conferences
in Sicily during the 1990s – in 1992, 1996 and 1999. Three, exactly! After that,
in 2004, we created MESCE, an event that again took place in Sicily. In February
2006, Alexandria, Egypt, was the venue of the second MESCE Conference
(thanks to the efforts of Faten Adly), and now, here in Malta, in May 2008 we are
holding the third. So we have had three pre-official meetings and now three
official meetings. This is enough, at least in my opinion, to speak a little bit about
the ‘soul-searching for perfection’ of this intellectual and cultural enterprise.

Is this a conference of souls? Let’s start from the word ‘conference’, a word
with a Latin root, ference: fero, fers, tuli, latum, ferre = to bring. Bringing with =
con/cum. The conference is a place that, in order to exist, needs people to bring
with them their willingness to meet and to converse. It is the same soul – it can
be argued – that is in itself the ‘ideal’ place where something like a conversation
may happen. The soul, in fact, is the ‘ideal place’ where you and I are getting
together in expressing our willingness to converse with each other. It is not par
hazard that I observed before that Malta is an ‘ideal place’ to let souls meet: in fact,
scholars have come here from Istanbul, Sarajevo, the United States, Morocco, Algeria, Italy and many other countries. They are getting together and have brought with them their willingness to meet and converse, because they feel that Education is something extremely important, in so far as Education in itself is the ideal place in which to develop in such a way that one acquires the capability to discuss issues in public. Colleagues have come from different cultural backgrounds, bringing with them their particular understanding of what education actually is, in order to see how and what we educators – we forerunners, we of the intercultural vanguard of this macro-region, the Mediterranean, we comparative educators – can learn from this intra-regional comparison. Vanguards of the conference and conversation, vanguards and defenders of the soul of conversation – against those who want to destroy such an intellectual, lasting conversation.

There is no other reason why people who are so different from one another – Turks, Italians, Bosnians, Moroccans, Algerians, French and so on – should be getting together to study and speak about something so evanescent and, to some, also contradictory and heretical as a ‘Mediterranean Comparative Education’. At the same time, as people are killing each other on some of the coasts of our basin and others, on more peaceful shores, are inciting their electors to declare war on migrant communities, we educators and researchers in Education feel the duty to maintain the gates of reciprocal confidence and conversation open. Yet again, Malta is the ideal, tangible place where such a conversation among different souls can actually take place. I would seriously like to invite you to look again at this meeting of ours not only as an ‘academic’ gathering, that is something abstract and unreal, but also as a concrete witness of souls coming together to converse – and to converse about Education as an important tool for maintaining and enforcing the space for peace.

Let me remind you that this third MESCE Conference is taking place soon after the XIII World Congress of Comparative Education, organised by our Society in co-operation with Sarajevo University and the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES). It was held in Sarajevo in September 2007. Adila Kreso, our out-going President, was the brilliant architect of the terrific ‘monument’ that Sarajevo erected in honour of Comparative Education. We passed the ‘Sarajevo Declaration’ on Intercultural Dialogue, another symbol of the willingness of comparative educators from the Mediterranean to have a dialogue with the whole world. As a consequence of the World Council agreements, Adila is now Vice-President of the WCCES (taking over from me in that position). So, after a couple of decades, it now seems that Mediterranean comparative educators are finally building up their momentum. It gives me great pleasure to announce that the next World Congress, the fourteenth, will be hosted by our colleagues in Istanbul, led by Fatma Goek, another of the founders of MESCE – and, as a result, Fatma will also join Adila in the position of Vice-
President of the World Council of Comparative Education. This means that two well qualified Mediterranean and Muslim women will be sitting at the top of the international scientific community of Comparative Education.

I would like to set the minds at rest of those European political leaders concerned with the Muslim presence within ‘their’ national confines: these two women are not followers or students of people like Bin Laden, but peaceful researchers contributing to the development of ideal settings in which intercultural dialogue can take place. We Mediterranean practitioners and scholars in education would like to let you know that we hold no fears in their regard. We welcome them in peace and we want to work alongside them to confront and stamp out racism and xenophobia that threaten to undermine our efforts in the region.

The current Maltese conference represents a delicate moment of transition for MESCE, from the status of a fledgling society, as MESCE was during the 2004-2008 phase, to the status of an emerging society. It is now time to think about restructuring MESCE as an academic body, to give it a more institutionalised form. I am happy to see that the University of Malta has strongly supported our Maltese colleagues, Peter Mayo and Carmel Borg, incoming President and General Secretary respectively, in the organisation of the III MESCE Conference. But I am still happier to be able to let you know that other universities too are on the way to opening up spaces for Comparative Education: I am speaking, in particular, of the ‘Mohamed V’ University of Rabat, Morocco, and the Corsi University, Corsica, France. In fact, thanks to the joint efforts of Mehdi Lahlou, Dominique Verdoni and myself, the first two from the Rabat and Corsica universities respectively, high ranking representatives of these Universities have been involved in talks regarding future research and meetings in the field.

Seen from this perspective, the Malta conference actually represents a landmark in the development of MESCE as an all-inclusive Society of Mediterranean comparative educators. But in order to ensure this, I am afraid we will have to continue to reflect on our situation for a while. I have made a passing reference to the war-torn areas within our basin; we have lamented the fact that European policy-makers are superficial and disrespectful; but a third point that we still need to emphasise in order to fuel the debate further is that of considering non-Mediterranean people. Who are they?

In the history of our basin, the most widespread cultural traditions have been influenced, above all, by three religions, the Jewish, the Christian and the Muslim religions. Law derives its traditions from Greek philosophy, re-elaborated by the Romans, from Levitic thought and finally from the Muslim Sharia and the pillars of its complex configuration. The same could be said with regard to Literature, Logic and Education. Even Moscow, the Russian capital, could provide good Mediterranean references, quoting the historic circumstance in which it defended
the Catholic tradition when Istanbul became a Muslim capital in 1453. Moscow served as a ‘third Rome’. Are there any other pretenders who are willing to be classified as ‘Mediterranean’ or as belonging to such a specific, monotheistic circle? Should we invite anyone else into this circle? If ‘yes’, who should be invited? Can you hear anyone knocking on the door? Are there any uninvited guests who are willing to be added to our Mediterranean list, our Mediterranean educational and hermeneutic circle?

With some effort, we can hear non-Mediterranean people who are willing to enter – maybe uninvited – our circle, people very different from us and also from each other, like the Senegalese, Sinhalese and Chinese. They are crossing our sea clandestinely, coming from the sub-Saharan region, from the Indian sub-continent, from very far away. This, of course, has nothing to do with Schengen. They are bringing with them their religions, at times non-monotheistic religions, their poetry, their logic and grammar, their aesthetics, things that we do not know. They do not belong to our circle. Should we welcome them? Has the ‘perfection’ of our soul already been reached at this third MESCE Conference in Malta? Are the non-Mediterranean people allowed in only as a mute work-force? Should we, on the contrary, include these human beings within our circle, to reach and render more perfect the ‘soul of conversation’?

I am really more than happy that MESCE is welcoming two colleagues from Senegal and Sri Lanka to its Executive Committee – Professor Buuba Anta Diop from Dakar University, Senegal and Professor Sunethra Karunaratne from the Peradeniya Kandy University, Sri Lanka. They are both outstanding academics and researchers in the fields of Ancient History and Science Education. They are also representatives of cultural traditions that are very different from ours, but which belong to two peoples who are relentlessly marching toward our macro-region. They will be aided in setting up their own Comparative Education sectors in Africa and in Sri Lanka, and at the same time they will aid us in keeping our hearts and minds open to what is going on in the rest of the world.

I conclude my address by declaring that the third MESCE Conference represents a healthy period for comparative education in the region. This is reflected in our desire to remain together and move forward together. Europeans, Arabs, Bosnians, Turks – we feel that we constitute and belong to the same circle which is working well, speaking well and making its presence felt in the Comparative Education firmament. Even if it included people like Mitter, Cowen, Guçluol, Gelpi, Lê Thành Khôi, Gundara, Visalberghi, Telmon, Laeng and Mo’atassime, the pre-MESCE group of scholars started its work modestly in the 1990s, having a quiet presence in the field. Ronald Sultana attracted the attention of other outstanding scholars from other parts of the world, like Philip Altbach, and brought them together in the Board of Editors of the Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies, the powerful academic instrument of scientific production that he founded here at the University of Malta in 1996.
This current Maltese conference marks MESCE’s stepping up to a higher level, from a state of infancy to that of adolescence. I foresee the holding of some important workshops or thematic groups in which experienced MESCE members can serve as catalysers of productive work in their specific fields. Those thematic groups will lead researchers within the structure of MESCE to produce and present their results at future conferences. I have already received consent from Adila Kreso (Sarajevo University) for Peace Education, Peter Mayo (University of Malta) for Adult Education, Buuba Anta Diop (University of Dakar) for MESCE liaisons with the in-coming African Society of Comparative Education, Saro Sapienza (University of Catania) for Law and Education, Melita Cristaldi (University of Palermo/Enna) for Body/Mind Education, Aicha Maherzi (University of Toulouse) for History of Education, Faten Adly (NCERD, Cairo and Vriji Universitaet, Brussels) for School Management and Educational Leadership, and Mehdi Lalhlou (‘Mohamed V’ University, Rabat) for the debate around Euro-Mediterranean co-operation and migration in the Mediterranean. I will be helped by Predrag Matvejevic, Christoph Wulf and Fernando Savater to attempt to generate interest in the field of Philosophy of Education. I am taking this opportunity to issue a call for an expression of interest, during tomorrow’s MESCE General Assembly, to discuss my proposal for a new and more enduring structure. At the same time I sincerely hope that the Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies, under the excellent leadership of Ronald Sultana, would establish a solid agreement with MESCE to become the society’s adopted journal, as is the case with the CIES and the Comparative Education Review.

In my view, the more heretical and inquisitive this Society remains, the more dynamic it will be; the less closed and ‘finished’ the circle remains, the more productive it will be. So my recommendations for the future of MESCE are the following:

1. to continue to arouse enthusiasm as well as perplexity as regards the very idea of the ‘Mediterranean’;
2. to communicate the results of such studies to the usual main target audiences for educational studies – educators/teachers and educational policy-makers;
3. to render the choices made with regard to leadership, participation and venues as representative as possible in terms of regions and other forms of social difference; and
4. to ensure that the ‘Mediterranean Hermeneutic Circle’ is kept open to scholars coming from non-Mediterranean areas of the world.

I trust that this third MESCE Conference in Malta sets us on our way to achieving these goals.