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Book review

Review article: Comparative education: Initiating novices into the field

Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods, M. Bray, B. Adamson, M. Mason (Eds.), Comparative Education Research Centre, and Springer, Hong Kong (2007). 432 pp.+Index (CERC Studies in Comparative Education, 19), ISBN: 962 8093 53 3

The last paragraph of the 15th and final chapter of this volume, penned by the three editors, declares that their book “has presented an overview of the types of tools in the toolbox and of major contextual considerations which should influence the choice of tools. If the book has encouraged its readers to think more carefully about the field [of comparative education] and about its strengths, challenges and potential, then it will have achieved its purpose” (p. 379).

In my view, the aspirations and ambitions expressed by Bray, Adamson & Mason are admirably borne out in this 19th number in the series of comparative education studies produced by the Comparative Education Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong, a Centre whose name and affiliates have now become synonymous with quality scholarship and research. In what follows, I will outline some of the reasons that justify my largely positive review of this important volume, which, thanks to its dynamic, informed, and critical engagement with the field, will stimulate students and experts alike.

Let me start by saying that I approached the book from the perspective of the academic leader of a Masters course in comparative education offered by the University of Malta through its *Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational Research*, of which I am founding-director. One of the study units introduces the field of comparative education, and prepares the ground for a series of other study units focusing on research methods, on such substantive areas as policy-making, globalisation, and development, and on a consideration of regional comparisons looking at the European Union, and at the Arab states. The introductory study unit is usually taught through workshop and seminar sessions that draw on a wide selection of readings from a variety of sources, and students are encouraged to design their own pathway through the course by choosing which readings to focus on, within a given set of parameters to ensure mastery of a required knowledge base. Experience has taught me, however, that it is useful to have a common textbook with which all students are expected to be familiar, and which serves to anchor the discussions throughout the seminar presentations.

Such a textbook for this particular introductory study unit, however, has proved to be hard to find—at least in terms of what I think would be suitable for my students. Many of the comparative education volumes that are on the market adopt either a thematic approach, or are country- or region-focused. The former generally offer in-depth accounts of a particular theme or problematic (e.g.

equity, privatization, assessment, teacher education) from a comparative perspective, but generally leave it up to the reader to inductively reflect on the comparative methodology used, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it could be improved. Volumes which are country- or region-focused tend to provide a great deal of information about education systems within geographical or political boundaries, with the reader being invited to compare and contrast structures, processes, inputs and outcomes *as a result of* the reading experience, with the editors of the book, in some cases, assisting the process of reflection through writing introductory and/or concluding chapters that do some of the comparative work for the reader.

Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods is refreshingly different. We do have three ‘framing’ chapters in Part 1 (titled “Directions”), and two ‘concluding’ chapters in Part 3 (titled “Conclusions”), which in some ways follow the conventions of edited volumes of this kind by defining the field of comparative education, its purposes and methods, its disciplinary lineages, its protagonists, and the kinds of insights that can be obtained from doing comparative educational research. However, at the heart of the volume are eleven chapters that are bundled together in Part 2 of the book, under the title “Units of Comparison”. Here we have chapters that look at the challenge of comparing places, systems, times, cultures, values, educational achievements, policies, curricula, educational organisations, ways of learning, and pedagogical innovations. As the editors rightly claim in their concluding chapter, which is also a synthesis and a drawing together of a number of threads that we find throughout the volume, “no previous book has undertaken commentary on units of analysis in quite the way that has been presented here. Even seasoned scholars in the field may feel that the juxtaposition of these presentations widens horizons and expands insights” (p. 376). For the students who are being introduced to comparative education for the first time, the systematic focus on diverse units of comparison is extremely helpful because they can more easily understand the value of different forms of comparison, the methodological challenges that each entails, as well as the benefits, in terms of deepened understanding of educational phenomena, that the exercise can lead to.

There are several other reasons—other than the organisational structure of the book—which make this volume suitable as a text for students of comparative education. Let me here mention five of the more important of these.

Firstly, the editors are careful, through their introduction as well as the different chapters they author or co-author, to help the novice understand that s/he is embarking on a mode of inquiry that has a history behind it, and that this history, together with the various debates that have marked its passage, and as it has been shaped by its diverse ‘champions’ over time, has contributed to the study of education and its multi-faceted relationships to society. It is consequently a history that has drawn from the whole range of

human sciences—possibly with the exception of psychology, as David A. Watkins points out in comparing ways of learning (Chapter 13)—and that there is both an intellectual challenge and a keen sense of intellectual excitement in becoming a ‘comparativist’. By generously but in no way pedantically acknowledging the contributions of previous scholars of comparative education, and indeed by showing how their work was often ensconced in the dominant epistemological and ideological world views of their time, the editors effectively initiate the readers into the field, inviting them to not only become familiar with its many achievements, but also to maintain a constantly critical attitude given the contingency and diverse interests driving the production of knowledge. Chapter 3, by Patricia Potts, is particularly strong in relaying the message that social knowledge is ‘made’ rather than ‘found’, and that while it is “dynamic, unstable and contingent [...] this reduces neither its scope nor its value” (p. 81). So too is Chapter 7, with Mark Mason arguing that “comparative education is best conceptualised as a critical social science, incorporating an emancipatory interest focused on the distribution of power and its associated attributes: economic wealth, political influence, cultural capital, social prestige and privilege, and the like” (p. 196).

Secondly, the volume introduces—and in several cases, provides an extended discussion of—a range of themes and theoretical frameworks that any postgraduate student of education has to be familiar and engage critically with. Epistemology, positivism, knowledge interests, theories of the state, globalisation, neo-liberalism, policy analysis, policy implementation, policy travel, development, and culture, for instance, are discussed in several chapters in the volume. Theoretical approaches such as structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, neo-Marxism, feminism, critical theory, world systems theory, cultural studies, dependency theory, post-colonial perspectives, and post-modernism are also frequently referred to, particularly in relation to the kinds of lenses they provide to apprehend and explain educational phenomena. In relation to research methodology, over and above two very sound chapters, one by Gregory P. Fairbrother discussing quantitative and qualitative approaches to comparative education (Chapter 2), the other by Patricia Potts on the place of the self in comparative education research (Chapter 3), there are several other authors that discuss etic and emic perspectives, ethnographical and anthropological research strategies, grounded theorising, symbolic interactionism, autobiography and life history, case study approaches, discourse and text analyses, as well as quantitative and mixed methodologies, which, when used intelligently rather than unreflexively, can yield important insights. In practically all the chapters, the discussion is careful to consider several sides of the same argument, inviting the reader to reflect on the basis of the evidence provided, so that methodology is not presented as simply a technical accomplishment, but one that involves an engagement with philosophic and normative dilemmas into different ways of knowing—a stance that is openly adopted by Lee Wing-On in Chapter 8, for instance. Particularly commendable, from my point of view, are the measured claims that are made, both for the field as a whole, and for the outcomes of comparative research. Readers are constantly reminded, therefore, that education is not an ‘exact science’ that provides us with ‘hard data’, but rather an interpretive, hermeneutic exercise that, at best, helps us reflect critically on the representations that diverse groups of actors—including policy makers, politicians, practitioners and researchers—propose through their ‘texts’—be these written, oral or visual.

Thirdly, throughout the book, there is an extensive and insightful use of an impressive range of case study material and of examples of comparative research. While authors do not shy away from addressing thorny epistemological, political and methodological problems that are part and parcel of the

comparative education enterprise, they are careful to ground their discussion in examples, thus enhancing clarity and understanding. Just to take one example—namely Chapter 4, where Maria Manzon focuses on the challenge of comparing places (be these sub-state, state or supra-state entities, or within or across political or geographical borders)—the author discusses such political, economic and geographical units as the EU, NAFTA, APEC and the MENA region, and reports on research that compared the relationship between education and development in the four ‘Asian tigers’ (i.e. Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore), Teachers’ Resource Centres in Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe, teachers’ perceptions in Brazil and the UK, lower secondary education in 15 EU member states, performance in reading and mathematics achievement tests in the US and 11 other countries, policy-making in 26 Swiss cantons, regional disparities in educational provision in Northeast Brazil and Northeast Thailand, history curricula in Hong Kong and Shanghai, policy innovation in different districts in India, curriculum implementation in junior high schools in Israel, the internationalising of curricula in two schools in Singapore and Australia, reading lessons in France, Guinea and the USA, the influence of national culture on pupil attitudes, classroom practice and learning outcomes in England and France, and teachers’ work in England and Denmark. What is important about these examples of comparative research is that they are not presented for their own sake, but rather to help the reader understand broader issues about the challenges of doing comparative work, and how such challenges can be handled, if not overcome. Furthermore, the examples provided across all chapters are not limited to Europe or to English-speaking countries, but rather cover a very broad range of states and regions that have contrasting access to resources, and have very different histories and cultures. While most chapters have examples from—or at least refer to—the Asian region, and to China especially so, the volume does not lose its international dimension, and the critical comparative scope is sustained throughout. From my perspective, the broad coverage of countries and regions is important not just for the sake of variety—which could easily become a cheap way of titillating students through exotic cultural and geographical references—but because they serve to fulfil what I consider to be the key function of comparative work: to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar (a phrase that, incidentally, appears several times in the volume—e.g. p. 107; p. 377), or, in other words, to ‘trouble’ and ‘problematize’ our normal, common-sense ways of thinking, and to burst the bubble of the quotidian and of the taken-for-granted.

Fourthly, and linked to the latter point is the fact that, for students enrolled in my Centre who tend to think of themselves as ‘European’, a volume produced out of Hong Kong, by predominantly Hong Kong-based scholars, whose considerable international experience is nevertheless grounded in an in-depth and first-hand knowledge of the Asian world generally, and China in particular, is a novelty. It is a novelty inasmuch as throughout most of their studies, they would have been exposed to books and articles written by European (and especially English-speaking) and North American scholars in the main, with the referent being European educational and social systems and realities, not to mention Eurocentric norms, that include, for instance, the way history is periodicised. There is much value, I believe, in exposing students to scholars and researchers from another region, in that it helps to de-centre their cognitive orientation and mental mapping of issues and approaches, to destabilise routine associations and understandings, and to become more alert and critical through being obliged to consider different social and cultural environments. Mark Mason’s insightful contribution on the comparison of cultures (Chapter 7) is particularly relevant in this context, and his careful articulation of differences between cultures is safeguarded

from the twin traps of essentialism and reductionism through his careful, sociologically-informed construct of culture “in all its complexity in a world characterised by increasing degrees of plurality, multiculturalism, interdependence, hybridity and complexity” (p. 169). Clive Dimmock is equally nuanced in his cultural and cross-cultural approach to the comparison of educational organisations (Chapter 12), an approach which, in his view, provides the needed explanatory power through its ability to generate “multi level, flexible, dynamic [accounts], allowing deep and surface analysis... [about] informal as well as formal parts of organisations” (p. 285). Heightened awareness of, and sensitivity to, alternative ways of being and alternative forms of life is a *sine qua non* for students who are approaching comparative education for the first time, and indeed is one of the main educational benefits of the latter.

Fifthly, the volume is pedagogically sound in other ways as well: it seems to have been written specifically with students in mind, not only because it is careful to illustrate arguments with several examples, but also because it is jargon-free on the whole, and quite accessible to those whose mother-tongue is not English. There are far too many volumes out there where authors whose native language is English assume that their readers master the language perfectly: with English becoming the *lingua franca* of much scholarly activity (a point that is discussed at some length by Yang Rui in Chapter 10, which focuses on the impact of globalisation on education policy-making, and on the dominance of Anglo-American knowledge), the number of students who have to struggle not only with understanding new concepts, but also to do so in a language they are not wholly proficient in, has increased exponentially. It will be a relief for my students to be able to read clear, accessible prose that, at the same time, does not compromise when it comes to acknowledging the complexity of the issues being addressed. This is not a skill that comes easily to many—indeed, it is quite an achievement to be able to be simple without being simplistic, and to take the time to explain without appearing to be condescending—and I am tempted to think that many of these authors have honed such a competence through their own experience of teaching non-native speakers of English. The clarity comes through in more ways than one: each chapter, for instance, helpfully starts off with a conceptual mapping of the arguments that will be dealt with, and concludes with a synthesis that draws all the different threads together in ways that ensure that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is not only a useful strategy and structure in terms of enabling a critical and attentive reading, but also provides an excellent model for students to emulate when they come to writing their own term papers. Yet another stylistic aspect that is to be commended in the volume is the strong editorial hand that has clearly served to guide the contributing authors, and to ensure that the chapters are not a collection of disparate papers, which is often unfortunately the case with edited volumes. Authors refer to each others' chapters, helping the reader make links between different contributions, and to see the volume more holistically as an organic project in terms of its overall purpose and rationale. This organicity is moreover emphasised due to the framing of the volume with reference to the well-known Bray & Thomas 'cube', which sets out in a useful visual manner the value of multi-level analysis. Indeed, the chapters in the second section of the volume are an attempt to take the 'cube' apart, and to examine its component parts in some detail, with section three putting it together again in the light of the critiques and comments made. The leitmotif of the Bray & Thomas cube, therefore, gives the whole volume an agreeable sense of unity of purpose and of direction—which is as commendable as it is rare in an edited volume of this kind—without, however, strait-jacketing the authors in terms of content or style. Indeed, students are exposed to different sorts of academic writing, ranging from the

more personal and even autobiographical (e.g. Chapters 3 and 13) to the more formal and 'detached' (e.g. Chapter 6).

The volume, therefore, works well at a number of different levels, and in addition deals with a very comprehensive set of issues, themes, and topics, both substantive and methodological, so that a post-graduate student in search of not only knowledge, but also inspiration as to the focus of his or her own research project can find much to emulate here. Students will certainly benefit from the insights offered in relation to that key question that is, directly or indirectly, posed in each chapter, namely: when is comparison meaningful? They will be pushed to consider other options beyond the traditional locational, trans-national unit of analysis to the kinds of comparative work that are more feasible for individual researchers to carry out, such as intranational or home international comparisons, or of education systems that have a different function within a given social context, such as denominational and state schools (cf. Chapter 5, by Mark Bray & Jiang Kai), or of the same education system as it functioned over time (cf. Chapter 6, by Anthony Sweeting). They will moreover actually learn *how* to carry out comparative research, with the different chapters providing a sound basis from which to move on to more intensive and targeted training in research methods. Chapter 9, authored by T. Neville Postlethwaite & Frederick Leung, is a case in point, with both authors sharing their considerable international experience in providing a blow-by-blow, “do's and don'ts” account of how to go about comparing educational achievements across countries—even if students are unlikely to ever engage in this kind of research in the short term, except perhaps as assistants and apprentices on national projects. So too is Chapter 11 by Bob Adamson & Paul Morris, which not only provides a comprehensive and critical overview of the nature of curricula, and a range of theoretical approaches that help readers make sense of what is ultimately and inevitably a political selection of knowledge, but also a set of pragmatic frameworks that facilitate the exercise of curriculum comparison, together with the research methods that are typically used, and examples thereof.

For these and other reasons, then, my endorsement of this volume is unequivocal. While it works best as an introductory primer to the field, seasoned scholars will find much in it that is useful and relevant—not least the critical syntheses of some of the most relevant comparative education research that has had an impact on the field, the invitation to be more innovative in the use of research tools, and the challenge to dare to go where few other comparativists have gone (such as focusing on pedagogy and pedagogical innovations in a comparative perspective—an invitation extended by Nancy Law in Chapter 14).

Naturally, I do have a number of quibbles with the collection, some of which might be worth highlighting. Several of the authors, including the three editors, are expatriates in Hong Kong. This has some relevance to the way they do comparative education, to their perception of the field, and to their way of representing self and others. As is intimated in a number of chapters in the volume, one's location in geographical and social terms necessarily impacts on the complex interplay between the subject and object of the feat of knowledge production. A more forthright, self-critical and reflexive engagement with their own identity and its impact on their scholarship would have resonated, and been in tune with the anti-positivist politics of knowledge that runs, much like a leitmotif, throughout the volume. Despite its strongly international outlook, its attention to what Mark Bray calls 'geomorphic shifts' (Chapter 15), and its not insignificant achievement of establishing Asian comparative education scholarship as an alternative focus of world attention, the referent of the volume remains staunchly 'western' and Anglo-Saxon: there are few sustained discussions of the comparative education field in Africa, the 'transition countries' that

were part of the Soviet Union, or the Middle East and North Africa, for instance. Importantly for me, the way comparative education is conceptualised in this volume does not seem to be inclusive of the *political* ontology that can drive the field: as I have argued elsewhere, and specifically in relation to the project of establishing a comparative education focus for the Mediterranean, the issue of whether or not comparisons are meaningful in any epistemological sense becomes less important than the effort to construct and imagine a space, and find a new standpoint from where to gaze at phenomena and to apprehend it in new ways, by refracting it through a different, even unexpected lens.

These and other criticisms do not detract from the indubitable value of this volume, which I am prepared to wager will go through a number of editions given the staying power and longer shelf-life of a set of readings that articulate matters that are of perennial concern to comparative education, and where the examples and case studies are primarily meant to illustrate and ground the issues raised, rather than to inform readers about what is happening in education here or there. Volumes that aim for the latter quickly and inevitably find themselves out of date, given the rapid pace with which reforms and innovations are adopted internationally. In

concluding Chapter 15, Mark Bray sums up some of his concerns about comparative education, which, he says, “continues to tolerate considerable descriptive work of a low intellectual calibre... [and] contains considerable undisciplined thinking, in which vague ideas and poorly thought-out methods of analysis are tolerated alongside more rigorous work” (p. 360). By providing us with this impeccably edited volume, Bray, Adamson & Mason have done comparative education an enormous service, showcasing some of the best work that has been done in the field’s young history, setting a benchmark for the kind of work that will consolidate and improve its standing, pointing the way forward, and providing an exemplary text that serves to induce the next generation of comparativists into the field.

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