

Comparative and International Education: Contemporary Challenges, Reconceptualization and New Directions for the Field

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Introduction

In this article the contemporary challenges faced by the field of comparative and international education are considered in the light of work relating to two recent special numbers of the journal *Comparative Education*, titled "Comparative Education for the Twenty-first Century" (Crossley & Jarvis 2000; Crossley with Jarvis 2001). Underpinning this collective work is recognition of the widespread revitalization of interest in comparative and international education--and of the simultaneous need for critical reflection if the field is to better meet the needs of the twenty-first century. Indeed, together, the two special numbers of *Comparative Education* were designed to stimulate and contribute to a critical and forward-looking debate on the future of the field itself. In tune with the current on-line discussion in *Current Issues in Comparative Education (CICE)*, future submissions on such issues are, therefore, also welcomed from the Editorial Board of that journal. In the light of the contemporary challenges identified, a case for the fundamental reconceptualization of the field is advanced along with a pointer towards some new directions for the future.

Contemporary Challenges

The impact of intensified globalization is possibly the most often cited challenge facing the field of comparative and international education at this point in time. Somewhat paradoxically, interest in globalization has attracted many new scholars and professionals to comparative and international research--but, at the same time, it has generated critiques of traditionally accepted modes of operation and frameworks of analysis. At the heart of this are challenges to the prominence of the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis in so much work carried out within the field. Global forces, it is argued, are dramatically changing the role of the state in education, and demanding increased attention to be paid to factors operating beyond the national level (Watson, 1996). The mechanisms and processes driving globalization (Dale, 1999) are thus prioritized for examination, as is the increased significance of multi-lateral agencies in shaping global policy debates and agendas (Jones, 1998; Mundy, 1999). However, recognition of the fact that the effects of globalization differ from place to place, draws attention back to the nature and implications of such differential effects--even at the national level. Few empirically grounded studies have compared these differences in any sustained way to date--and those that have been carried out have largely focused upon Western industrial societies or the newly industrialized economies of East Asia (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Green, 1997). The impact of globalization on the poorer, post-colonial societies of the "South" has received much less attention, despite the dramatic implications for development processes in such contexts (Mebrahtu, Crossley & Johnson 2000; Tikly, 2001). Here there is much urgent work for the field of comparative and international education in the future.

The challenges posed by globalization, however, also pull in other directions reflecting what Arnove and Torres (1999) have usefully characterized as the "dialectic of the global and the local". To cite Giddens (1999, p.3), globalization is:

a complex set of processes, not a single one. And these operate in a contradictory or oppositional fashion. Most people think of it as simply 'pulling away' power or influence from local communities and nations into the global arena. And indeed this is one of its consequences. Nations do lose some of the economic power they once had. However, it is also has an opposite effect. Globalization not only pulls upwards, it pushes downwards, creating new pressures for local autonomy.

This draws attention to the fact that national and local cultures can and do play a significant role in mediating global influences. From this perspective, units of analysis that pay attention to the local effects of globalization are also prioritized.

This, in turn, adds renewed legitimacy to qualitative modes of research that emphasize grassroots fieldwork, ethnography and the interpretive/hermeneutic paradigms that emphasize micro-level studies of education (in its broadest sense) in context (see contributions to Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997). While much more can be said about the challenges posed by globalization, it is argued that, despite its pervasive influence, numerous other challenges also face the field, and demand attention in their own right.

Related to the latter methodological issues, for example, are very significant paradigmatic and epistemological implications raised by increased sensitivity to culture and context. This is reflected in the impact on the field of post-structural scholarship (Peters, 2001), and of the application and critique of post-modernist and post-colonial theoretical frameworks (Cowen, 1996; Tikly, 1999). In many respects post-colonial frameworks also draw attention to the challenges generated by dramatically changed geopolitical realities; from the decline of colonialism; from attention to culture and identity; and from the turbulent latter years of the 20th century. This is reflected in the field's heightened awareness of the dangers of ethnocentrism, and its recognition of the problematic use of distinctions and terminology relating to, for example, "developed" and "developing" countries, and the "North" and the "South".

For the present writer, the methodological challenges of such developments point most strongly to the need for new forms of international relationships in terms of comparative and international research; to the importance of collaborative research and partnerships between "insiders" and "outsiders"; to research and development work that is more sensitive to local, social constructions of reality; and to strategies that facilitate the strengthening of research capacity within the South (Crossley, 2001).

In many respects, the rationale for this is related to efforts to help "bridge" the gap between educational research and its potential to improve policy and practice. This is, in itself, one of the most prominent challenges faced by educational research communities world-wide (Crossley & Holmes, 2001). The widening constituency of policy-makers and practitioners who have taken renewed interest in comparative and international research are certainly looking for findings that will be of use to them in their professional activities. While this is a complex arena in which there are few simple

answers, the challenges raised by such diversity of audiences are of considerable and renewed significance for the field.

Relatedly, the intensification of international competition, spurred on by globalization, neo-liberalism and marketization, has major implications for cross-national studies of educational achievement, for those engaged in or dealing with the powerful influence of national and international league tables, and for the theoretical frameworks that we employ in our analyses. If the funding of research is increasingly linked to commercial interests, for example, the potential for critical theory, or for alternative cultural perspectives to influence the construction of new knowledge, may be increasingly challenged--even in, paradoxically, the new "knowledge" economy. So questions of power and "whose knowledge counts?" in the process of development arise, perhaps, more strongly than ever before.

To this we could add the challenges raised by rapid advances in information and communications technology (ICT). As many have pointed out, these are many and varied--but it is argued that their implications arise most strongly in cross-cultural contexts, where the "digital divide" is greatest, and both their potential benefits and problems deserve urgent attention.

Growing tensions between the global, the national and the local, thus, so fundamentally underpin all aspects of contemporary society and development, that a similarly fundamental reconceptualization of the field of comparative and international education is required, if we are to more effectively address such issues.

Reconceptualization and New Directions

How this reconceptualization might be advanced is the focus of ongoing work, but a number of pointers to the future can be derived from the above analysis. The international on-line debate stimulated by the present publication, will also, helpfully, keep dialogue very much alive and make an ongoing contribution. Returning to the issues raised in the two special numbers of *Comparative Education*, and to the writer's earlier work (Crossley, 1999), the following themes emerge most strongly.

Firstly, it is argued that it is the comparative and international research focus that is at the forefront of the resurgence of interest in the field - and it is to ways of reconceptualizing research that we must increasingly look in the future. This includes theoretical, methodological, substantive and organizational dimensions. Work such as that by Bray and Thomas (1995) on multi-levels of analysis helps to point one way forward by acknowledging the potential of many different units of analysis. Other pointers may come from pioneering efforts to promote more genuinely collaborative international teams--especially linking different "territories" such as the North and the South, or policy and practice. Such organizational possibilities then have major implications for the theoretical and methodological frameworks that we might employ. Sensitive to the differences between various theoretical discourses, Cowen (2000), however, wisely cautions against a search for the one "right" mode--and celebrates the diversity of comparative educations. Writing within the second "response" special number of *Comparative Education*, Kazamias (2001) makes an impassioned plea for closer linkages between the humanities and the social sciences within our multi-

disciplinary field. For Kazamias, the reclamation of the historical dimension of the field would counterbalance its post-World War II dehumanization, and represent a priority direction for the future. Whatever position we might adopt with regard to the role of history, there is certainly much to be gained from a more effective bridging with the best of past scholarship within the field, even as we look towards the future. This is especially so in a time of renewed growth and enthusiasm - if we wish to help those new to the field to avoid the pitfalls that others have so well documented before them (see, for example, Noah & Eckstein, 1998; Broadfoot, 2001).

While there is not space here to present a detailed or exhaustive account of these issues, other more substantive directions for the future that have significant potential are reflected in Apple's (2001) call for comparative studies of neo-liberal projects and inequalities, and Alexander's (2001) plea for comparative pedagogy.

Conclusion

In concluding here, it is to the contemporary significance of culture and context that the discussion returns. Concern with context, it is argued, is perhaps the most enduring characteristic of disciplined comparative and international research in education. It is also central--but in many different ways--to the contemporary reconceptualization of the field. Context underpins the importance of new comparative work from different cultural perspectives, such as that recently published by Louisy (2001), Hayhoe and Pan (2001) and Bray and Gui (2001). Sensitivity to culture and context is also central to post-colonial theorizing, to the rationale for differing units of analysis, and to many emergent strategies designed to bridge the gap between research and policy and practice. In looking to the future, therefore, it is argued that "context matters" (Crossley with Jarvis, 2001) more than ever as we search--with justifiably renewed enthusiasm--for new directions in the field of comparative and international education.

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