

Comparison and Context: The Interdisciplinary Approach to the Comparative Study of Education

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The symposium on *Rethinking Culture, Context, and Comparison in Education and Development* brought together several groups of noted scholars. Of those, I would like to focus on two: those that utilize a disciplinary lens versus those that apply an interdisciplinary, or rather multidisciplinary approach to the comparative inquiry of education [1].

A very brief sketch of institutional history may be in order here, given that the Department of International and Transcultural Studies sponsored the symposium in spring 2013. For several decades and until 1997, the program in International and Comparative Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, was situated in a department titled "Philosophy and the Social Sciences" alongside all foundation studies or disciplines of education: anthropology and education, economics and education, history and education, philosophy and education, politics and education, religion and education, and sociology and education. Students were able to study comparative education in combination with one of the seven disciplines in the department. An eighth program was in that department labeled "International Educational Development" (nowadays subsumed under the name International and Comparative Education) that drew from methods and theories of inquiry from *several* disciplines. By definition, the program in International Educational Development (IED) is, to this day, interdisciplinary. At some universities, the international and comparative programs were associated with area studies and offered a concentration in a geographic region. Similarly to developments at other universities in the United States, starting in the 1960s the program in International Educational Development attracted a much larger number of students than the discipline-based programs. The number of graduate programs, the size of professional associations, the reach of academic journals but also jobs associated with the field of International and Comparative Education expanded rapidly over the last twenty years. Due to a series of reorganizations at the college level, the Department of International and Transcultural Studies now hosts two reputable programs: the large interdisciplinary program of International Educational Development and a smaller program in Anthropology and Education. As such, the IED program closely collaborates with faculty and students that are spread out throughout the college and the wider campus at Columbia University.

Said this, the stark contrast between anthropology and comparative education, which anthropologist Herve Varenne suggested during the closing panel of the symposium, rests in my opinion on a false dichotomy. The debate should be, in my opinion, between disciplinary versus interdisciplinary approaches to the comparative study of education. I argue that the method of comparison relies on an interdisciplinary approach in order to understand and generalize findings on similarities and differences between educational practices, beliefs, and systems. As I will argue throughout this essay, sample size (N) matters a great deal in this debate.

From N=1 to N=3: Joseph Tobin's Contribution to the Comparative Project

It used to be common in anthropology to carry out studies in multiple cultures. Joseph Tobin refers in his contribution to the work of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, as well as his own mentor Robert A. LeVine who advanced the "comparative project" in anthropology. What a comparative inquiry requires is indeed thinking "simultaneously about space and time" (Tobin,

in this issue) as opposed to the more common ethnographic method of examining a culture across sites, levels, and time. Over the course of my academic career, the work of Clifford Geertz has been influential to the extent that his conception of ethnography as local history has led to the merging of several departments of history and anthropology. Thus rather than using a sample size of one (N=1), Tobin expands his sample to three (N=3) in order to carry out a comparison.

His video-cued ethnographies of three cultures (or, as I will explain later, of three nations) represent a landmark anthropological study in which he examined preschool education across not only across time (1983 and 2003) but also across space (USA, Japan, China) and groups of actors/informants within the various spaces (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). Unsurprisingly, his study won great acclaim in the comparative education research community as it represented contextual comparison at its best (see special issue of *Comparative Education Review*).

There are two distinct methodological features that make his work ingenious and different from other ethnographies of schooling. Tobin and his colleagues engaged in cross-cultural comparison without anthropological shame and at the same time masterfully tackled the problem of spatial determinism that is endemic to ethnographies. First, in all the three countries the same issues or critical incidents—previously identified as key issues in preschools—were video-recorded to ensure comparability: classroom routines, separation, fighting, misbehavior, mixed-aged play, and intimacy between teachers and children. By presenting them as cues to stimulate a response, the informants were “forced” to take a stance on these key issues.

Arguably, comparative studies tend to rely to a great extent on forced-response data. Very much to everyone’s dismay, this creates a validity problem: the universe of possible responses is drastically reduced for the sake of comparability. This is not the case in Tobin’s methodological masterpiece because the material is used to open up rather than to narrow down interpretation. The forced-response feature of the study enables a contextual comparison and, combined with the self-reported accounts of the informants (“what would you do in this situation?”), considerably increases the validity of this comparative study. Thereby researcher bias is minimized, yet made transparent and thoroughly reflected throughout the ethnography. Second, a compelling feature of the sequel is the selection of an additional preschool in each country that teachers in that country identified as being innovative. Thus, the second ethnography of 2009 comprised not only video-cues from the same three preschools that were filmed twenty years earlier but also from three new ones that teachers consider, to use Jürgen Schriewer’s terminology, as “reference” preschools: preschools that practitioners in a given context regard as exemplars of “best practices” and worth emulating. Even though the answer to this question heavily depends on who is asking—an American researcher, a trained practitioner, a Buddhist monk, a concerned mother, an international donor, etc.—the question of what practitioners consider a good school is very important in order to understand pedagogical belief systems.

Nevertheless, as pointed out by Isabell Diehm during the discussion at the symposium, Joseph Tobin does not resolve, but in fact exacerbates, the “*attribution problem*” that anthropologists so forcefully and rightfully criticize: they first dismiss the nation as the unit of analysis because every nation is literally “multi-cultural” but then need to resort to “nation” as a social category to describe the differences between the three contexts observed in preschools of China, Japan, and the United States. This is problematic because, due to the disciplinary bias, a context or a case is interpreted as culture, and culture is equated with nation. Thus, the practice of *mimamoru* (translated as “teaching by watching and waiting”), a low-intervention approach that Tobin and his associates observe in preschools in Japan, becomes in his interpretation a *Japanese* educational practice. Similarly, *qiecuo* (translated as “learning from each other by exchanging ideas”) is a practice that Tobin observes not among students but also among teachers in the

three observed preschools in China. In an attempt to show that culture trumps official curriculum, Tobin interprets *qiecuo* as an expression of the broader value of “self-perfection,” a value that vanished from the official grammar of (pre-) schooling in China and yet endured into the present. With reference to Jerome Bruner’s concept of “folk pedagogy,” he identifies this practice as a contemporary “*Chinese early childhood educational practice*” [italics inserted by author] that is taken for granted in China and was preserved despite generations of pedagogical paradigm shifts (see Tobin, in this issue). Despite the sophisticated methodological approach of the video-cued ethnography, it is the ethnographer Joseph Tobin and his associates, who interpret what they observe in a narrow disciplinary manner. Because of their disciplinary affiliation with cultural anthropology, they interpret what they observe in terms of cultural differences. Phrased differently, if they were sociologists, they would possibly interpret the same findings in terms of social stratification and structure. Naturally, each discipline imposes a specific lens on the object of study in an attempt to refine and advance disciplinary ways of knowing (see Kuhn, 1962).

The blind spot of cultural anthropology is the attribution fallacy. It is pronounced when ethnographers engage in cross-national comparison of two or more cases that are situated in different countries. They tend to interpret the differences in terms of national differences and inadvertently end up using a political category (nation-state) to explain cultural differences between their cases. From a comparative methodology perspective, they tend to *contrast* rather than *compare* their cases, and favor the design of *most different systems with different outcomes* over alternative designs of comparisons. The attribution problem becomes visible when adjectives such as “typical Japanese,” “typical Chinese,” “typical American,” or other stereotypes are tried. This attribution trap possibly accounts for the reason why cross-national studies in cultural anthropology have become sparse.

For more than twenty years, multicultural education studies have experienced a fascinating debate over the attribution fallacy. The debate is better known in Europe than in North America. Frank-Olaf Radtke, one of the keynote speakers of the symposium, has convincingly shown how the “studies on countries of immigration” were used as a “scientific stamp of approval” for stereotyping German minorities that had immigrated from Turkey or other emigration countries. The celebration of cultural diversity in schools went hand in hand with studying the “culture” of the other and led more often than not to an “orientalization” (Edward Said) of ethnic minorities. Ethnic Germans, Swiss, or Austrians, for that matter, were turned into cultural objects of study distracting from larger structural inequalities, institutional discrimination and racism that the *system* of education had been reproducing [2].

From N=155 to N=1: Antoni Verger’s Contribution to Understanding the Local Reception of Global Education Policy

Antoni Verger’s study of global education policy is a stellar exemplar of studies in comparative education that examine why some traveling concepts or reforms (e.g., concept of public-private partnership in education, managerialism and teacher accountability reform, etc.) resonate in a given context or in a given case. Figuratively speaking, he reduces the sample size of 155 to one. According to the UN classification, there exist 155 countries that, based on their GDP per capita, are considered “least-developed countries” or developing countries.

Thus, he is leaving the global level (N=155) to study the local (N=1), in particular, the reception and translation of global education policy in the local context. This methodological approach is not uncommon for those among us who study traveling reforms. Precisely because every transfer and implementation process is selective, the question becomes: why are only some aspects of a global education policy borrowed and how are they locally implemented or reframed?

In the early days of globalization research, there used to be a large group of social and educational researchers who were mesmerized by the question of whether educational systems in different parts of the world would eventually converge to one international model of education. What the question captured at the time was a phenomenon that later became known as policy borrowing/lending, global education policy, or traveling reforms, that is, reform packages that policy makers *for a variety of reasons* and only *selectively* adopt. Needless to state, the camp remains divided between those that believe in the salutary effects of globalization and others who highlight the rising inequality between countries, as well as within countries, as a result of the unidirectional flow of finance, ideas, technology, power and standards.

The investigation of “best practices” or “international standards” and the scrutiny of international agencies that bring them to life, administer them, finance them, and use them coercively as programmatic conditionality have become fascinating topics of comparative inquiry. As with all emerging research areas, scholars very soon position themselves with regard to the phenomenon that they study. For those among us who keep issues of power, inequity and world-systems in mind when studying new phenomena,, “standards” benefit the big and powerful, that is, those that have the technology and capacity to implement them. In recent years, a group of us in international and comparative education, showed how the global education industry benefitted from international standards in education. Like public health, education was, until recently, regarded as an activity geared towards enabling the growth of the individual, and for this reason unsuited to standardization or any other kind of cookie cutter approach. As a result, commercial interest in education was limited to areas like “hardware” (i.e., textbooks, computers, infrastructure, etc.) where there was the possibility of making a profit. Clearly, this has radically changed over the past decade: the fundamental shift from inputs to measurable outcomes and standards has been good (for) business. This shift has benefitted the education industry. Similar to textbook publishing, one of the most lucrative branches of the education industry tends to focus on selling tests which generates, year by year, a constant flow of customers who must pass them to succeed. As a result, international standards, 21st century skills, and other supranational notions of curricular content have become the pillars of big business. Given the corporate logic of capital growth, we will most likely see a rapid expansion of tests, not only at critical entry, transition, and exit stages of the education system, but eventually for each subject, and possibly for each grade, in school.

From a business perspective, standards-based education is lucrative because it generates an economy of scale. More specifically, it kills two birds with one stone: first, it enables companies to sell a product (student tests) in large quantity. Second, tests are a “smart business product” because they make it necessary to revise the software of education, that is, all the other items—curriculum, teacher education, textbooks—which precede the act of taking the test. Each of these elements must be reformed so as to prepare the students to pass. As with other value chains, once one link is changed, all the others must be replaced as well. This is the phenomenon we observe in outcomes-oriented reform and the move towards international standards, broadly defined. What we may see in ten, twenty, or thirty years from now are education systems that have adopted, side by side, global reforms from Pearson, IB, Bridge, Cambridge Education, and other business packages in one and the same country.

In the twentieth century, minorities challenged the nation-state for political reasons. In the twenty-first century, global business is the greatest contender. Scholars of critical theory rightfully pointed out that in education, horizontal integration meant in effect assimilation and vertical integration was used to justify the gate-keeping function of education along class, race, ethnicity, and gender lines. Over the past ten years or so, PISA in particular became a global monitoring tool for enforcing the implementation of international standards as defined by a small and exclusive group of OECD experts. As a result, national governments are nowadays

held accountable for the learning outcomes of students in their country. Precisely at a moment in history when neoliberals declared the ultimate defeat of government and the inevitable rise of markets as regulators of educational quality, PISA appeared. Strikingly, PISA has helped governments to reassert themselves as drivers of reforms and guarantors of quality. Among other measures, providing equitable education to all segments of the student population is considered an important feature of effective school systems.

Some global education policies are transferred to developing countries as part of a programmatic conditionality attached to a loan or a grant provided by an international donor (World Bank, USAID, etc.) or an international organization (Soros Foundation Network, Save the Children, etc.). Other global education policies are sold to national or local governments more often than not at a very high price with the argument of spill-over to other non-participating schools. Regardless from where global education policies emanate, the attention of our group of comparative education researchers is on the local policy actors: why do policy makers buy into, or in the case of public-private partnership in education and the global education industry, literally buy global education policy (Verger, 2011; Verger, Novelli, & Kosar Altinyelken, 2012)?

An answer to these kinds of questions may only be given after a detailed analysis of the context. Thus, this group of researchers starts out with observing global trends in education in many countries (large N) but then moves from a huge N (for example, N=155) to a one-country study (N=1). In other words, cultural anthropology is not the only discipline that believes in the importance of understanding culture, context, or systems nor is ethnography the only method of inquiry to understanding a community, a causal web of relations, or a bounded system.

World Culture versus Local Culture Theories

Several scholars in comparative education have astutely described the various paradigms within globalization studies in education. Oren Pizmony-Levy (2012), for example, distinguishes between social researchers that direct their attention to “world culture” and others that explore “local culture” in order to understand globalization in education:

One body of research, which I refer to as *world culture*, argues that education systems are becoming similar due to a top-down process whereby new ideas and models regarding the responsibilities of the nation-state are developed in world society and later adopted by individual nation-states (Meyer et al. 1997). A second body of research, *local culture*, focuses on local conditions that translate and appropriate global ideas into local realities (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Schriewer & Martinez, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). This latter line of inquiry criticizes the former for being narrowly focused on globalization as an outcome rather than a multifaceted and complex process” (p. 602).

Pizmony-Levy’s noteworthy intellectual project is to demonstrate the complementarities of these two bodies of globalization studies using the example of environmental education curricula. He asserts that global convergence and local divergence of one and the same reform (in this case, environmental education) are processes that are not mutually exclusive.

I agree with Pizmony-Levy and would like to add that the differences between the two camps are primarily a reflection of different units of analysis; with one group focusing on global trends, macro-analysis, or world culture and the other on contextual differences or local culture. As repeatedly shown, the neo-institutionalist focus on global trends is endemic to the type of sociological inquiry pursued by John Meyer, Francisco Ramirez, David Baker and their associates. In effect, it is a disciplinary artifact rather than a fundamental difference in how the process of globalization is explained. For neo-institutional sociologists local variations do indeed exist but are considered irrelevant (expression of “loose coupling”) and simply not

worthy of further exploration. Ultimately, for neo-institutionalist theory loose coupling *is* the explanation (Latin: *explanans*) rather than the issue that begs for an explanation (*explanandum*). In contrast, cultural anthropologists but also system theorists are keen and able to further our understanding of how globalization plays out, or rather is framed, understood, and used at the local level. In comparative education, for us, an analysis of the global/local nexus requires that loose coupling is not only acknowledged but also analyzed in great detail and interpreted. How a global education policy is translated at system or local level, tells us a great deal about the culture of the system and the local policy context.

Clearly, one may very well be committed to understanding “local culture” from an interdisciplinary perspective, that is, without having to subscribe to the methods and paradigms of cultural anthropology. In fact, it is important to acknowledge that educational systems are also bounded systems. They are meaning-producing organisms that reproduce themselves with a particular organizational logic, mode of regulation, and cultural practices that are constantly challenged by other (sub-) systems within a society as well as by the generalized other in the form of “world society.” Local policy actors tend to resort to world society and globalization at times of heightened or protracted policy conflict. In other words, from a system’s perspective, global governance is a quasi-external force that is locally induced to generate “additional meaning” (German: *Zusatzsinn*) in situations when there is a need for a quasi-external source of authority that could help forge new coalitions. The strong belief in local agency and the commitment to uncovering the power dynamic in a given policy context is diametrically opposed to interpretive frameworks that view global governance as an external force that reigns (or rather “rains”) over helpless national and local governments.

The same sense of active local agency is involved in Katja Brögger’s analysis of higher education reform in Denmark. She brilliantly applies Derrida’s term “hauntology” (2014) to explain why practices and beliefs from the past endure into the present and have shaped the reception of the Bologna process in Danish higher education. In her intellectual endeavor to understand globalization at an organizational level, she demands that we critically challenge “globalisation’s status as a hegemonic macro-narrative, which often leads to atemporal and ahistorical analyses” and immerse ourselves into alternatives to macro-analysis (Brögger, 2014, p. 3).

In line with these two comparative education researchers, Pizmony-Levy and Brögger, and many others, I have made an appeal to bring culture, context, and system back into the study of globalization. By definition, globalization transcends space and time, and from a philosophy of science perspective, we should refrain from using an interpretive framework that merely replicates the very same processes—deterritorialization and dehistoricization—it intends to explain. The macro-analyses of world culture theory tend to focus on many countries and on long time periods. As Brögger has convincingly argued, macro analyses tend to deterritorialize and dehistoricize the process of globalization. In an attempt to avoid circular reasoning, it is therefore important to explore and understand the context and timing of global policy borrowing in as much detail as possible. The case study lends itself for doing so.

Contextual Comparison from an Interdisciplinary Perspective

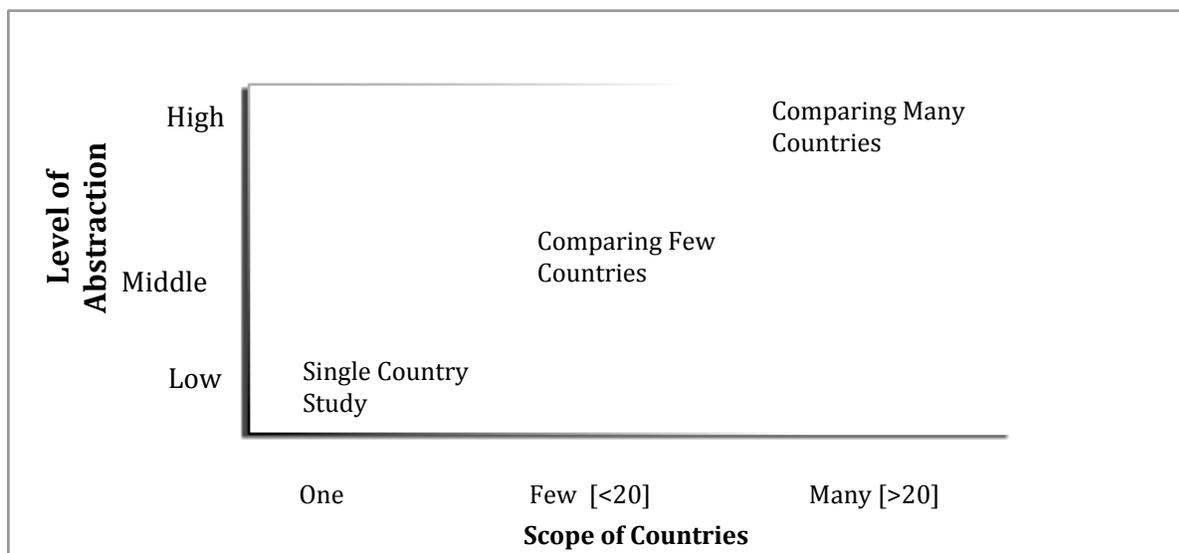
Different from ethnography that is closely associated with the discipline of cultural anthropology, a case study is oblivious to disciplinary boundaries. Comparative social researchers, from Charles Tilly to Todd Landman, refer to the case study as a method of inquiry that operates with many variables and a small sample size, or in the single case study, a sample size of one. The objective of the case study is to understand the causal web and power relations within a bounded system. Needless to reiterate, it is essential to examine the varied actors, sites, and levels of interaction precisely because power is distributed unequally within a system.

The academic question of whether single case studies qualify as comparative becomes moot when considered against the backdrop of studies that pursue contextual comparison (see Little, 2000). Case studies are a *sine qua non* of contextual comparison. It is indispensable to carry out case studies to explain similarities and differences between various units of analysis, whether they are cases, countries, contexts, or systems. Furthermore, a case study must produce a “thick” description” (Clifford Geertz) and is, by definition, both horizontal and vertical. As mentioned above, it draws on many variables and rests on a sample size of one. Therefore, I find the term “vertical case study” to some extent misleading because it suggests that it is possible to produce a case study that is flat or non-vertical (see Vavrus and Bartlett, 2009). Nevertheless, it may be useful as a reminder that the most important feature of case studies is their depth, and ability to explain the causal web of actors that interact in a bounded system.

Whereas the greatest strength of the case study methodology is its explanatory power for a given context, its greatest weakness is its inability to generalize across contexts. For this reason, case study methodology is considered only one of many forms of comparative inquiry. The advantages and disadvantages of case-oriented versus variable-oriented comparative research, as well as between large-N (many countries) versus small-N (few countries) comparison, are accurately presented in Todd Landman’s textbook on comparative methodology (Landman, 2003). Landman systematically discusses the key characteristics of comparative studies that draw on single cases, comparison of a few countries, and comparison of many countries.

Landman presents a figure that illustrates the depth versus breadth dilemma. Figure 1 shows how every increase in sample size results in a greater level of abstraction.

Figure 1. Methods of Comparison



Source: Landman (2003, p. 25)

In my own writing, I used the example of teacher shortage to demonstrate the complementary nature of these three methods of comparison (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). The example of teacher shortage demonstrates that the level of abstraction, reflected in global indicators, creates not only a validity problem, but also an interpretation challenge. For example, the global indicator of teacher shortage that draws on a comparison of *many countries* may suggest a virtually non-existing shortage rate of 0.2 percent in a given country. However, the low rate conceals the fact

that schools in that country must rely on teachers who work double shifts, take on additional hours, or engage in other local practices that help the system to cope with massive teacher shortage. The high level of abstraction found in large-N studies leads to generalizations, as well as speculations or false interpretations.

In a second step, I therefore compared *a few countries or a few systems* and found a divide in teacher salary systems: in some parts of the world, including in the post-Soviet region, teachers are paid by the number of hours they are teaching (Russian: *stavka* system) whereas in other parts of the world, including in North America and Europe, they are paid based on their weekly workload of 35 to 40 hours per week. These two world-systems of teacher salary structure have their own idiosyncrasies or “logic” that explain in great part other policies and practices in the education system including the hiring, promotion, management, and education of teachers. In a third step, finally, we produced case studies using the same comparative framework but allowed for the individual case “to talk back,” that is, were keen on identifying aspects that only applied to particular cases, but not others [3].

As remarked earlier in the context of Tobin’s outstanding contribution, ethnographies but also single case studies suffer from the inverse problem: the attribution problem. Should the findings be attributed to this particular context under study or do they also apply to other contexts? As a result, practices may be falsely attributed to “culture” (or, as mentioned above, to nation) rather than to general processes, beliefs and practices that also exist elsewhere.

Ideally, contextual comparison draws on all three types of comparison. To reiterate the example of the teacher policy studies mentioned above, the insufficiencies of the teacher shortage indicator are found in other global indicators that, by virtue of having to focus on the smallest common denominator across a wide spectrum of countries, gloss over contextual differences. It should be taken for granted that the level of abstraction and, by implication, the magnitude of imprecision and extent of de-contextualization, increases with every additional case, context, country or system added onto a comparative study. In fact, the level of abstraction may increase to the extent that the global indicator becomes devoid of any context-specific or country-specific meaning. It becomes literally *meaningless*.

Field versus Discipline

I began this essay by dismissing the dichotomy between anthropology and comparative education as a false juxtaposition and by proposing instead a reflection on the disciplinary versus the multidisciplinary approach to the comparative study of education. I find it essential that comparative education researchers draw on theories and methods that best explain a phenomenon regardless of disciplinary boundaries. By definition, theoretical paradigms and methods are associated with specific disciplines such as, for example, anthropology, economics, sociology, or political science. Academic fields, such as international and comparative education, borrow methods and theories from such disciplines.

As researchers in international and comparative education we rely on interpretive frameworks and methods of inquiry that, in their original context, were associated with specific disciplines. A multidisciplinary approach is not to be confounded with an approach that suspends or transcends disciplines. A transdisciplinary approach would result in a conceptual vacuum, a theory-free endeavor, or normative research with little explanatory power. It is therefore in the best interest of analytical researchers in fields of education, such as in international and comparative education, to have strong foundation studies or disciplines in education that shape our ways of knowing but also seeing things.

Notes

[1] I use the terms multidisciplinary (involves several disciplines) or interdisciplinary (entails exchange between several disciplines) on purpose synonymously in this essay. I see them as opposites to the term “transdisciplinary” (without or beyond a discipline).

[2] In the 1990s, I was part of a group of scholars, along with Frank-Olaf Radtke, Isabell Diehm and others who advocated for a rights-based approach in multicultural education (Diehm & Radtke, 1999). It was an approach that at the time was called anti-racist education and was at opposite ends to intercultural education that we found to be too apolitical, culturalist and insensitive to social injustices and inequalities (Steiner-Khamsi, 1990).

[3] The UNICEF studies on teacher shortage and recruitment into teaching (ten until now) reflect this triple usage of comparative inquiry. The UNICEF six-country study, *Teachers: A regional study on recruitment, development and salaries of teachers in the CEECIS region*, is especially recommended for a review because the studies were produced in mixed research teams, half of them consisting of local experts and the other graduate students at Teachers College, Columbia University (UNICEF CEECIS, 2011).

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