

Comparing national education systems in the global era

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Introduction: International comparison in education

As global communications thicken, a growing number of students cross borders for part of their education, university staff travel more and international collaborations multiply. Australians in higher education are increasingly aware of education systems other than their own, especially the ubiquitous American universities. Likewise, governments are increasingly mindful of international competitors and cases when they frame policies; and the calculations of vice-chancellors now routinely incorporate global markets and systems of quality assurance, and the strategies of this or that international university comparator.

While the national dimension still matters, no longer are judgements and decisions referenced only to the national context. Global relationships, global comparisons and global benchmarks have all become important. Higher education in Australia – as in all countries – is now framed simultaneously by the local, the national and the global.

But more than one global standard is possible, drawing on the many different cultural traditions. Further, in a global context more than one kind of engagement with other and complex national contexts is possible: shallow or deep. In making international comparative judgements, *the basis of comparison*, including the theories and methods (whether hidden or explicit) which inform comparison, are determining of what we see.

Such comparative judgements create varying policy messages, depending on *how* the judgements are reached. For example if the measure of comparative school achievement is test scores, national systems will tend to focus on improving their test scores. To do this they might need to install American-style standardised tests, and a curriculum to match. This also illustrates the point that when national systems focus on performance as measured in the common comparison, a homogenising logic is installed. Over time all systems tend to become the same. In the 1990s, this kind of homogenising logic entered university evaluation

and quality assurance around the world (Mollis and Marginson 2000).

This article is about how international comparisons in education are made and might be made; and the varying implications of different comparative methods for national policy and university identity. It is also about the dramatic effects of globalisation on the methods used in international comparison in education, and the new potentials that globalisation creates.

Though it has older roots, 'comparative education' has been significant in education policy studies for at least four decades. As with other social sciences, comparative education has been affected by a continuing, fragmented but compelling relationship with the world of government and political-economic power.

The dominant strand of comparative education is largely quantitative, and emerged in the USA in the 1960s, at the same time as the positivist brand of structural functionalism in sociology which influenced it (Hesse, 1980; Morrow and Torres, 1995). Orthodox American comparative researchers accepted positivist notions of linear development, social regularity and equilibrium, and the instrumental role of education in national development as framed in universal theorisations of the relationship between education, economy and society, such as human capital theory (Marginson, 1997, 92-118). At the same time comparative education became linked to American foreign policy and the often congruent work of global agencies such as UNESCO and the World Bank. Much of the research in the field since has consisted of large-scale cross-country data collection financed by governments and global agencies.

The global templates of education systems used in such studies, grounded in social models mostly taken for granted and implicit, are 'Western' and English-language in content and fashioned by an idealised version of (especially) American education. As Benjamin Barber put it almost 30 years ago – and it is more true today – in comparative education, the 'models of development and

modernisation turn out to bear a remarkable resemblance to the evolution of American industrial capitalism' (Barber, 1972, 424-436).

At the same time there are other strands of comparative education. An older school sought to draw out national differences as much as similarities, using philosophical and historical methods. There are contemporary researchers who use qualitative studies to focus on what is distinctive in national sites, or are located in countries where the standardising policy role of global agencies is problematic and 'Americanisation' is a serious concern.

'Sameness' and 'difference' in comparison

Making educational comparisons always involves both 'difference' and 'sameness' (Mollis, 1991). Difference and sameness are philosophical opposites, but these opposites are not necessarily antagonistic or mutually exclusive, either in logic or in the real world.

In the real world an education system can exhibit diversity in one respect and sameness in another, and the relation between the two may be complementary rather than antagonistic. For example, take 'league table' institutional ranking in higher education. The process of ranking rests on the common template used for comparative purposes, and it encourages institutions to converge with each other. Yet it also establishes a hierarchy of institutional outcomes, thereby creating one form of difference.

Likewise, the logic of comparison incorporates both sameness and difference. First, any act of comparison assumes an *a priori* notion of difference, whether difference of degree as in unequal quantities of the same kind of object, or difference of kind as in the contrasting of objects with varying qualities. Second, comparison involves a search not just for variations between cases but for resemblances between them. Comparison is only possible on the basis of common criteria, including the identification of units for comparison, the quantitative and/or qualitative methods used in making comparisons, and the theoretical framework linking the criteria together. Neither sameness nor difference *can* be absolute. If sameness was absolute and the world was one homogeneous place, there would be no meaningful variation, and hence nothing to compare. If difference was absolute, there would be no common basis that would permit comparison. In that sense, each term, sameness and difference, provides the condition of possibility of the other.

It is important to note that the relationship between sameness and difference is not fixed, it is variable. Those comparing national education systems can vary the focus on one element in relation to the other, depending on the theories and methods employed. Qualitative studies are more readily associated with focus on difference, while quantitative work lends itself to projects which emphasise sameness: the fit between the pairings of sameness/

difference and quantity/quality is not exact, but it is suggestive. Fundamentally, how much sameness, how much difference, depends on the purposes of the work.

To illustrate these points, it is useful to look closer at the process of comparison. When we use qualitative techniques to examine phenomena drawn from a common set, the closer we look and the more complex the criteria used in observation, the more that 'sameness' dissolves into different cases. In qualitative studies based on complex case work, where there is always more to investigate than can ever be encompassed, there is a *prima facie* bias to the creation of difference and incommensurability between cases. In terms of logic, this tends towards the elimination of the possibility of comparison itself.

At the same time, comparison can be used to turn 'different' phenomena into similar phenomena. For example, in quantitative cross-national comparisons of educational achievement, though the same numerical data may have different contextual meanings in each national context, in a cross-country table the different contexts disappear. A '7' from Norway looks the same as a '7' from Malaysia regardless of the circumstances in which each '7' was produced. Indeed, even in qualitative studies designed to prepare a content-rich and context-rich description of each national case, there is a moment of abstraction which occludes at least some elements particular to each nation. Here the process of comparison contains a *prima facie* bias towards the creation ('discovery') of sameness. Again, this tends towards the elimination of the possibility of comparison itself.

Ultra-relativism

Though educational comparison requires both sameness and difference, the field of comparative education is bedeviled by work pushing to one extreme or the other, either of sameness (universalism) or difference (ultra-relativism).

The universalist imposes a uniform model on every specific case. The ultra-relativist treats each case as completely different (Epstein, 1998, 31-40).

Ultra-relativism treats different cultures as wholly heterogeneous. It is premised on difference, but an abstracted and ahistorical 'difference'. Bob Young comments that 'notions of cultural incommensurability appear to rest on the assumption that frameworks are totally closed and unchangeable' (Young, 1997, 497-499). But identities were always more fluid than this, and in a global era identities have become ever-more multiple, hybrid, cosmopolitan and changeable (Appadurai, 1996). This suggests that the ultra-relativist position, far from being fashionably post-modern, is increasingly obsolete. Ultra-relativist 'comparative' education obscures what is common to national systems and denies mutual effects in international relationships. This not only blocks comparison, it handicaps understandings of the dynamics of each

system, in which national, international and global elements combine. Ultra-relativism ultimately precludes sympathetic engagement with the object of research. It cannot interpret difference.

The dominant approach: universalism

In contrast, the dominant approach in comparative education, connecting to the requirements of American government and global agencies, is semi-universalist. Here Comparative Education is akin to Hegemonic Education. The underlying assumption is that all education systems are fundamentally the same and if they are not, they ought to be.

The dominant approach encourages sameness across national sites while preserving a limited form of difference. This is expressed as unequal quantities of the sameness, enabling ranking. Comparative league tables of national system performance are prepared either by matching national data sets to each other, or by cross-country surveys. Here the comparativist eliminates all local features, all forms of difference except for measured differences in the particular 'universal' criteria selected for comparison. The result is an outcome deceptively simple: the transparent 'performance' of each national system, though shorn of the richer national context data that would explain each 'performance'.

Thus comparison is reduced to two steps, aiming to: (1) identify similarities between the object of study and another object; and (2) identify a limited form of difference as deficiency, by comparing one education system against another, or an ideal type. This is difference expressed not as qualitative difference, but as unequal quantities of a single quality. This approach to comparison excludes the 'other', and the possibility of discovering 'otherness' or 'alterity', the state of being other or different (Kempner et al., 1998, xiii-xvii). It excludes recognition of what might be called 'deep difference'.

H. J. Noah provides a revealing insight into this universalising positivist strand of comparative education. For him, the primary goal of comparative education is to establish generalised statements about education that are valid for more than one country; 'law-like' cross-national statements on relations between education and society, and teaching and learning (Noah and Eckstein, 1969, 114). To Noah comparative education focuses on 'the careful identification, validation and measurement of variables', maps relations between the variables in each nation and synthesises the national equations into a general equation. 'Country names' are brought in 'only when the ability to make valid generalisations across countries fails' and 'when no amount of within-system (nation) adjustment of either the independent or dependent variables can reduce the across-nation differences in observed relationships' (Noah, 1988, 12). *Only at this point* are national character or historical background introduced into the equation.

Noah contrasts this method favourably with what 'used to be' the primary goal of comparative education, which was 'the most complete description possible of other education systems, and the most telling comparison of one system with another' (Noah, 1988, 12). His own 'comparative' education has no intrinsic interest in specific countries, or in subjecting its would-be universal 'laws' to tests of local relevance and cross-national transferability. This underlines the point that like ultra-relativism, universalism in comparison precludes sympathetic engagement with the object of research. It cannot interpret difference.

In the face of complex questions, the positivist comparativist strives for single models and dualistic yes or no truths. Yet much social theory suggests that in contrast to the natural sciences, the social sciences exhibit a principle of ambiguity. Given the open-ended and ultimately idiosyncratic nature of social life, many events do not conform to rules of universality. When such rules are invoked, the notion of universality is invalidated; or, rather, it becomes not a precondition for scientific work but another contested terrain. To account for this the conventional sociology of education now resorts to quantitative, statistical probabilistic models, in place of laws or law-like explanations. But the underlying problem remains. The dominant strand of comparative education suppresses much that is real from view.

For the positivist comparativist, more complicated analyses seeking to understand the historical nuances and interrelations of things, using multi-disciplinary analyses that are uncertain or problematic, are simply unnecessary (Samoff, 1990). If pertinent in theoretical terms, they are seen to lack usefulness for government, which is concerned with (apparently) well-defined and immediate problems and motivated not by the search for rich explanations, but actions which efficiently resolve those problems. Instrumental positivism in comparative education is intellectually simple and politically pragmatic. It is a striking example of the manner in which the social sciences have learned to speak to power in easily digestible terms, regardless of the cost for our deeper social understandings and larger capacities for action.

This article takes an agnostic position on the relationship between sameness and difference, rejecting the extremes of both universalism and relativism. In comparative education neither sameness or difference can be absolute. Theories and methodologies should reflect this. Against the universalist position, method in comparative education should be orientated towards the interpretation of differences, and the recognition of the 'other'. It is necessary to devise techniques that foreground identified forms of difference, and enable unexpected real world differences to surface within the discourse. Against the ultra-relativist position, comparative education needs to interpret individual differences not as terminal, but in the context of a wider set of variations; recognising that there

are also commonalities that are structured by the relations between 'others' and between 'other' and 'self'.

Between Scylla and Charybdis

In summary: in comparative international education, sameness and difference are interpenetrated and omnipresent: not as uniform 'same-sameness' and 'same-difference' but capable of taking a myriad of heterogeneous forms. The interactions and tensions between the two poles give the field much of its ambiguity, vibrancy, dynamism and varied potentials. This underlines the point that comparative education must avoid privileging either sameness or difference in any lasting sense, using each to interrogate the other, constantly moving between them. Further, because choices of theory and method have implications for sameness and difference – and because the relation between sameness and difference in education can be powerful, for it can affect education policies and shape cultures – then the implications of those theoretical/methodological choices should be made explicit. This would enable comparative education as a field to become more reflexive.

In other words comparativists should put aside the conjuring tricks, the posturing about the one road to 'true' comparison, and acknowledge the field is politically relative.

The impact of 'globalisation'

Into these long-standing debates has stepped 'globalisation'. It is rapidly remaking the terrain on which education, and international educational comparison, are taking place. All social science fields which emerged in the modern nation-building era are experiencing dramatic discontinuities in the global era: comparative education is no exception.

'Globalisation' is characterised by transformations in the economic, technological, social, cultural and political, often separated in conventional analyses (Appadurai, 1996) and little theorised so far in comparative and international education itself. These transformations are remaking the central unit of comparative analysis, the nation-state, and touch all aspects of identity. Relations between sameness and difference, and the self and other, are being reworked. So far comparative education has remained largely isolated from the extraordinary fecundity of contemporary social and cultural theory, still sustaining the concepts, methods and development narratives of the previous era. It deploys the nation-state as its basic unit of analysis much as it did in the 1960s.

First a comment about the term 'globalisation'. In this article it is used simply to mean 'becoming global'. 'Globalisation' is not used in the neo-liberal sense to mean the formation of a world market, though this interpretation is potent in government, the corporate world and popular

cultures. To distance the term here from neo-liberal usage, it is placed in inverted commas ('globalisation'). What then does 'becoming global' mean? It refers to systems and relationships beyond the scale of the nation, at continental, regional and world levels.

'International' trade, inter-national trade, trade between nations, has a very long history (Hirst and Thomson, 1996). Cross-continental religions with universal ambitions date back two thousand years and more. 'Western' academic knowledge dates perhaps from the Renaissance. Nevertheless, in the last three decades or so a further change has occurred, in which global relations have become more extensive and intensive. This change is marked above all by thickening networks of instantaneous media and communication, and the new forms of identity, community and action they facilitate. 'Globalisation' is also characterised by the increasing mobility of people for the purposes of business and labour, migration and study, creating a more complex cultural mix and cosmopolitan and hybrid identities (Babha, 1990; Appadurai, 1996).

In this environment people undergoing new cultural influences use media, communications and return travel to maintain contact with their previous place-locations, their previous selves. Travelling is less a passage from one absolute place-identity to another, more an absorption of additional strands of identity in a setting in which 'selves' are cosmopolitan, linked to multiple cultural groups and centres of activity and simultaneously affected by kin-based, local, national, regional and global markers. Many international students and academic faculty come to assume hybrid identities. While this kind of 'globalisation' excludes the poorest part of the world's population who lack access to telecommunications and whose experience of the global is limited to (and by) images of global consumption, it has a broad and ever-growing impact on other social layers. Held et al. note that 'notions of citizenship and national identity are being renegotiated in response to contemporary patterns of global migration and cultural globalisation ... in many cases the trajectory of these negotiations is far from clear' (Held et al., 1999, 326).

Theorisations of cultural 'globalisation' conjure up an incessant changeability, flicker and fleetingness, derived from the rapid turnover of images and systems. It is important not to fall into a universalistic 'globalisation' which loses locality, contingency and cultural context amid a supposedly transcendent 'world-culture' subject to continuous reinvention. Much of what is described as reinvention is the same practices recycled, attached to a few novel signs. Perpetual reinvention is one of the markers of the neo-liberal ideology of 'globalisation', creating a continuous obsolescence and ever-new products and markets, while basic relations of power remain unchanged. However, in the real world, while there is

novelty and discontinuity, 'globalisation' does not constitute a *complete* break from the past.

'Globalisation' and education

'Globalisation' has immense implications for education. As well as changing the potentials of national government, the incubator of modern higher education systems, 'globalisation' is associated with the growth of international markets in on-site and on-line education, and ever-more mobility and communications. World-wide the number of international students has grown from one to two million since 1980. On-line education, crossing national borders, hastens the cultural inter-penetration of nations and education institutions. In policy, international comparisons that were once the province of a few specialists are often now the terrain on which national policy is conceived and formulated. This raises the stakes in comparative education. E. Oyen remarks:

People flow between countries in ways that have never been seen before, at the same rate that international organisations are established non-stop. Politicians go for comparisons to increment their comprehension and control of national events, though they end up accepting intuitive comparisons to justify a great part of their policy preferences. Bureaucrats make extensive use of national and international statistics in their comparisons, and industry and the world of business constantly compare the social context of national and international markets ... This tendency to globalisation has changed our cognitive map. While some cultural differences tend to vanish, others become more pronounced. Comparative investigation probably has to change, going from emphasising the search of uniformity in the variety, to studying the preservation of enclaves of unity amid an ever increasing homogeneity and uniformity (Oyen, 1990).

It is often noted that 'globalisation' is associated with two contrary trends: a trend to world-wide convergence, homogeneity; and a trend to difference via more extensive and complex encounters with cultural 'others'. Paradoxically 'globalisation's' homogenising systems, reaching into every corner, render heterogeneous difference more uniform than before. Globalisation foregrounds those differences that appear within the frame of global systems, while progressively eliminating the potential for 'others' located outside those systems and opaque to them. Global systems in finance and communications, and most world products, are carriers of particular Anglo-American national traditions. For example, four fifths of all electronically-coded information is in English (Held et al., 1999, 346).

Despite 'globalisation's' dual potential for homogenisation and difference, it would not be hard to mount the claim that homogenising aspects are presently uppermost in education. The neo-liberal argument for school reform by John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990), grounded in the unique circumstances of locally-controlled US public

schools, became required reading in policy circles everywhere. In the Anglo-American countries, courses for international students in business and information technology are forming a global elite steeped in American language and business practices. The World Bank (1994) model for higher education reform -mixed public and private sector provision and funding, corporate-style competing institutions, and the transfer of responsibility for educational quality from government to institutions - has become a widely adopted benchmark.

The means of transmitting this model are global, the reach of the model is global, yet the model has a local first world, 'Northern' and particularly American identity. Global hegemony in comparative education does not mean the methodological extinction of the national dimension and its replacement by abstract universalism, so much as the world-wide elevation of the educational practices of one nation (or rather, an idealised version of those practices). Other nations do not vanish, they are subordinated.

Outside the USA, educators often experience the homogenising side of 'globalisation' as a strong 'Americanisation' which threatens to overwhelm all forms of identity not minor variations on global themes. Nevertheless, the notion of 'globalisation' as an *automatic*, universal, unstoppable Americanisation should be resisted. Appadurai (1996) comments that the newly mobile identities are not so much determined by hegemonic culture as chosen by their subjects. There is still room to move. There is also the possibility of plural global systems. A strong version of Americanisation is one set of possibilities. More fragmented and diverse kinds of 'globalisation' constitute other possibilities. Likely we will experience a mix of the two, varying by sector, with unitary 'globalisation' strong in sectors such as finance. Where educational practices will fall is as yet uncertain.

Comparative education in the global era

In relation to the cognitive map used in comparative education, the implications of 'globalisation' vary, depending on the theorisation of 'globalisation' that is adopted, and also on the approach taken to comparative education itself.

As discussed earlier, comparative education has never been innocent of the global, in that its positivist form has contributed to the homogenising 'globalisation' of national systems. Of course orthodox comparative education will not acknowledge its own global effects (let alone acknowledge the content of those effects): positivist science is, after all, neutral! An Americanising global mission is concealed within a pre-global methodology, and the global dimension appears as merely an appendage of American national identity.

No doubt there are practical reasons for avoiding the issue, and these have blocked the theorisation of the

changing global/national relationship. It might suit the positivist comparativist to opt for more of the same, so that comparative education continues to test national education systems against global templates and advise national governments on how to reach ideal global forms. It might seem convenient to leave the nation-state at the centre of the methodology, thereby protecting agencies such as the World Bank from scrutiny and debate while maximising the pressure on 'sovereign' national governments to conform. Yet this position is becoming increasingly untenable, given the empirical weight of global agencies and supra-national regional groupings such as the European Union, not to mention the globalisation fever in social science and cultural studies.

For comparative international education, the immediate issue posed by 'globalisation' is its relativisation of the nation-state. Governance remains national in form, and nation-states continue to be central players in a globalising world. Nevertheless, the nation-state now operates within global economic constraints, and is often the agent of global forces. While it retains the potential for self-determination and global influence, it no longer provides a sealed political-cultural environment. This is a great change, and it suggests the need for research on the global agencies, and other global institutions and relationships; investigation of the new geo-political-educational structures of power in a globalising world; the study of international education including on-line education; and the implications of new forms of governance and identity other than the national. In turn, these sites of research call up the need for a post-positivist comparative education.

'Globalisation' creates both sameness and difference, and the relationship between them is open-ended and contingent, reinforcing the earlier point that comparative education should not privilege either sameness or difference in a lasting sense. Similarly, comparative education should be framed so as to encompass both hegemonic culture and the alternative voices, and move between the macro and the micro, and between the qualitative and quantitative. To exercise this strategic intellectual freedom, it is essential that to a significant degree comparative education is beyond the control of government or global agencies. Within the field, the strand of independent research needs to be enhanced.

Such independent research is able to acknowledge that in terms of its explanatory power, the positivist method has entered an irreversible crisis. First, the crisis of epistemologic universalism: the inability of universalist arguments to account for relativistic partial truths grounded in gender, class or culture. Second, the crisis of universal explanation: the inability of one model to encompass all aspects of the real, and the need for complex multi-variable models to enable complex understandings. Third, the crisis in the relationship between History and Sociology. Fukuyama's statement about the

end of history signified positivism's abandonment of social history, in the neo-liberal era. But to dispense with history is to lose not only the explanatory power of the past, but the sense of possible futures, of becoming.

The new cognition required by comparative education rests on scepticism about grand narratives, data collection and data analysis techniques, without falling into the nihilism of gross relativism.

This new cognition takes into account the uniqueness of the object of study, the historicity of the life world, and the heterogeneity of social subjects and their evolving identities. It draws on a broad range of academic disciplines, with attention to the junctions between history and sociology (Braudel, 1972; Tilly, 1984; Marginson and Mollis, 2000), and takes a flexible approach to theory. At the same time it subordinates methods to theories, rather than *vice versa* as at present. It encompasses both quantitative and qualitative methods, tending to subordinate the former to the latter rather than *vice versa*. It is reflexive: it understands the implications of the practical role of comparative education for its theories and methodologies, and *vice versa*.

This article will now touch on three elements of this new cognition: the ethics of sameness/difference and self/other in comparative education; theories, methods and disciplinary frameworks; and elements of a research agenda for the global era.

Ethics for the global era: difference, the self and the other

When modern education systems were being built, democratic reformers focused on the spread of educational opportunities. They favoured universal and homogenous systems that weakened old exclusions and hierarchies. With difference understood as inequality, the goal was to reduce difference (Tedesco and Blumenthal, 1986, 9-28). With cultural diversity a tool of elite power, the goal was a common culture, with its double-meaning of 'universal' and 'popular-democratic'. But in a global era, homogenising systems of unprecedented cultural power are able to break down subaltern identities *without* lifting subaltern status or material position. This suggests the old democratic agenda should become pluralised, and that one of its axes should be reversed.

Oyen's point was that the need is not for sameness amid variety, it is to sustain the capacity for difference: the right to cultural self-determination, the universal human right to identity. This raises the question of the conditions under which the right to difference is promoted. In comparative education, it invokes relations between self and other.

The forgoing argument suggests that in comparative education in the global era, the approach to sameness and difference needs to be grounded in an explicit ethic of relations between self and other (this refers not just to

individual self/others, but cross-national and cross-cultural relations between institutions, between national authorities, etc.). Research in comparative education should not privilege the self over the other, or *vice versa*. Rather, it should be concerned to recognise the other, and explain difference. While all national education systems should be transparent to external scrutiny, these systems also have the right to self-determining identity, including the cultivation and expression of national or regional differences. This suggests that the *a priori* bias towards global models should be replaced with an *a priori* bias against claims to hegemony and in favour of cultural diversity. Negative 'othering' is replaced by empathy with the other.

To argue for a greater capacity for diversity is not to take the ultra-relativist position that all imitation and sameness are 'wrong'. For example cross-national educational convergence in participation rates, levels of public spending and aspects of institutional modernisation may well be welcome. However, the issue of concern is the *cultural contents* of curricula, pedagogies and socialisation in education. All else being equal, greater cultural diversity between national systems is a sign of a more potent self-determination. From this perspective, a key question for comparative education is the pedagogical, cultural, political and economic preconditions necessary for, say, indigenous identities in education; or the conditions for national policy-determination in a globalising environment.

This kind of research requires a capacity to engage with the identity of the other via deep comparison, without the collapse into ultra-relativism. Deep comparison requires a capacity and willingness to change the self, opening the possibility of partial hybridity. Understanding of the other is never complete, but this is true of all relationships. Young argues that:

The appropriate remedy for xenophobia and ethnocentrism is not a culturally relativist embrace of all cultures ... but the development of bi-cultural or hybrid awareness, followed by more pluralistic perspectives (Young 1997, 504).

The guiding principle is equality of respect. The comparative educationist willing to incorporate part of the object of study into her/his own identity – and thus able to make the transformation of subjectivity a fruitful part of the process of comparison – can engage more effectively in and draw more profound lessons from the research. This requires recognition that the self lies, as Young puts it, 'somewhere between, on the one hand, heterogeneity and total plasticity' and, on the other, 'the entirely homogeneous, harmonised single self of the myth of character' (Young, 1997, 499). The self and other are each open to change, but they are also each valued and sustained. Appreciation of the other does not have to rest on deconstructing the other, or dissolving the self.

Opening the self in this manner can be uncomfortable, even laden with risk. For the positivist, the process of

distancing oneself from the other (from the object of study) is defensive, the assertion of an unchanging inviolable self. The hegemonic comparativist expects all identities and practices to be open to transformation except his/her own. A fixed self is preserved, at the expense of understanding the other, undermining the comparative project. In contrast, when 'deep comparison' is used then no one system has hegemonic or privileged status. All education systems can be relativised for analytical purposes, without exception. Questions can be raised about the education system from which the comparison is being made, as well as the system or systems with which it is compared. Questions of relative status and value are open for the duration of the project.

One way to actualise this 'deep comparative' perspective in cross-national comparison is via *reciprocal* methodologies. Instead of a solo researcher comparing another national system against her/his own system, two researchers each compare the other system against their own system. They then collaborate in identifying similarities and differences between the two nations, using a hybrid set of criteria constructed in mutual consultation. Subsequently, in the process of validation, they return to the bilateral and reciprocal. As Young states, 'an interpretation is verified by the other, in the new mutual intercultural ground that the communicative exploration of meaning creates' (Young, 1997, 503).

Theories, methods and disciplines

To produce a comparative thought we elaborate a set of linked characteristics within a system. The linking system, the 'prism' used in the research, determines the richness of the outcome. In constituting this 'prism' which aims to throw light on the object, theories, methodologies, empirical observations and quantitative analyses all constitute useful inputs. *Any* tools that can assist the task of explanation should be available. There is no one single path to understanding, whether *via* discipline, theory, method, or the schema of their integration. Recent perspectives in the Sociology of Education envisage reality as ever-changing, with a number of dimensions or layers which constitute independent spheres but share intertwined dynamics. The acid test is not the internal consistency of the intellectual system *per se*, still less the capacity of that system to produce numerical data, but its capacity to generate *better explanations*, however defined. As Dow notes in relation to political economy, within the overall research program, a wide range of tools may be employed to secure a common purpose of inquiry (Dow, 1990, 146-147).

To those who argue that the choice of theory or method is driven not by its purpose but by its alleged 'universal' applicability as a privileged source of truth, it can be argued that no *one* approach can produce all relevant 'truth', that different theories and methods are associated with different truth effects and all truths are partial truths,

and that we are not so rich in our understandings of comparative education that we can afford to neglect insights from a range of approaches. This is not to argue that all theories, methods and disciplines are interchangeable, equivalent or 'equally valid'. On the contrary, it is to argue they are incommensurable and hence *cannot be* equally ranked truths.

Hitherto in comparative education, debate about analytical tools has mostly centred on methodology. For the positivist, claims to superior research are underpinned by statements about quantitative rigour, so that the path to knowledge is reduced to the maintenance of internal logical consistency in research design, and fidelity to the empirical protocols. While theory is never absent, it is mostly implicit, buried deep in various methodological positions. However, theory tends to be determining, whether or not it is made explicit. In a reflexive field the contents of theory *are* made explicit; and all theories, methods and research protocols are open to interrogation. A field unable to reflect on its own theoretical preconceptions is ultimately doomed to obsolescence.

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods is problematic only when the categories are opposed and mutually exclusive. While quantitative tools are indispensable for certain kinds of explanation, such as those tabulating elements common to different cases; qualitative tools enable data to be situated in their real life context, foregrounding difference and isolating problems of transferability between cases. The two kinds of method can be worked in conjunction, in the same research project. This is not to argue that qualitative and quantitative methods are 'equal' or equivalent to each other. Qualitative methods are able to encompass a wider spectrum of sameness-difference than are quantitative methods, which by definition emphasise singular quality, sameness.

In comparative education the argument for a plurality of foundation disciplines is widely accepted because of the range of disciplines already used in comparative work. Yet few comparative researchers themselves employ a genuinely multi-disciplinary approach. The field largely consists of competing singular approaches: it is multi-disciplinary, but not multi-disciplinary. Multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches – for example by combining history and cultural anthropology, with the sociology of education and political economy, joining the identification of particularities to the process of comparison – enable a richer set of methods and insights, and hence enable a greater complexity in the research. At the same time, this poses the problem of which foundation disciplines, and of the conceptual architecture used in their integration and mutual interrogation.

A research program: global comparative education

In conclusion, the article draws attention to five implications of the global dimension for a reformed comparative education.

A global framework of analysis

First, 'globalisation' suggests that nation-to-nation comparisons should be located in a larger analytical framework, noting tendencies to convergence and other global effects, and noting also that these effects are contested and uneven, and vary between nations, regions and institutions. At the same time, in nation-to-global-standard comparisons, such as large scale cross-country data sets, the cultural content of global standards (which mostly reflect one or another set of national practices) should be made explicit. There is also a new necessity for comparisons in which the pan-national region is the key unit, including the EU, NAFTA, and MERCUSOR in the 'Southern Cone' of the Americas.

Further, the global dimension itself is now a key site for comparative and international research: the role and effects of global agencies, and their relationship with national governments and non-government agents; the manner in which global effects feed through national effects and *vice versa*; patterns of cross-national influence including regional effects; global inequalities in resources and educational power. There are already some relevant studies, such as Martin Carnoy's path-breaking *Education as cultural imperialism* (1974); and more recent work by Karen Mundy (1998), Phillip Jones (1992, 1997), Miriam Henry et al. (1999) and Marcela Mollis (1999/2000). Still, further critical-empirical study of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank and similar agencies; and of the shift from the socio-cultural UNESCO to the economically-defined-World Bank as the primary global agency in education; would be illuminating. Other research sites are suggested by global trade agreements such as GATT; and the politics of cultural harmonising and respect for cross-national difference, in education and other sectors.

A new geo-political cartography of education

Second, *the traditional comparative map of the world*, in which all nations are formally similar and ranked according to their level of development on a single scale, *is more inadequate than ever*. It eliminates global phenomena, it fails to explain power relations between nations, and between national and global, and it hides qualitative national differences. This suggests the need for a new geo-political cartography tracing the flows of global effects, and the patterns of imitation, difference, domination and

subordination in education policy and practice. Many new questions are on the agenda:

Are the categories of 'third world' and 'North/South' relevant? Does the 'centre/periphery' framework provide a useful structure for understanding hegemony in education policy? Is there more than one hegemonic centre of power? For example, does the European Union have a major role to play in global developments, and what is its relationship to Anglo-America? Given the spread of English-language communications what is the longer term scope for other global systems from China, Japan or the Islamic world? What are the prospects for Spanish as a second global European language?

Cross-border international education

Third, the growth of cross-border international education foregrounds it as an object of research in itself, only partly encompassed by studies of particular national practices. International education sits between global, inter-national and national systems.

This opens a host of inquiries, from hybrid subjectivities among mobile students; to the attributes required for educators, institutions and systems in a nationally-interpenetrated educational world; to comparative policies on languages and bi-lingualism; to the patterns of international research collaboration and competition; to the spread of commercial practices in international education and the resulting tension with pedagogical practices and national cultures; to the mushrooming of on-line education communities and their relationship with national regulation, and so on. Research in international comparative education needs to encompass the cross-national recognition of education qualifications (Harman and Meek, 1999), the emerging pan-national systems of accreditation and quality assurance (Van Damme, 1999), and cross-border electronic distance education, which partly evades national regulation altogether.

New forms of place-identity in education

Fourth, as noted 'globalisation' opens up a new potential for forms of place-identity other than the national. The singular methodological focus on the nation has downplayed supra-national cultural and religious identities (Shamsul, 1999) and obscured intra-national regional variety in educational participation, resourcing and outcomes (Fry and Kempner, 1998) despite some research in this area (Parrado, 1998). This near exclusion of the regional is unsurprising. The modern nation-state has been a mechanism for achieving national definition, political reconciliation and homogeneity; a set of tools for *overcoming* diversity. Now, the global relativisation of the nation-state allows regional and cultural diversities to resurface, in education and other sectors.

Nevertheless, and despite the fact that groups such as indigenous people draw support from the global level, in the overwhelming majority of cases it is only where national infrastructure provides protection from the homogenising effects of 'globalisation' that diverse identities are furthered. For example, minority cultures are stronger in Western Europe than in African countries that lack the resources and policies needed, including policies on languages in education and government to facilitate indigenous identities.

The impact of the global at national level

Finally, *a further set of research problems are generated by the impact of the global dimension at the national level.* Modern education systems are still organised locally and nationally, subject to national regulation, and powered by a nation-building mission, albeit an often fragile one (Marginson, 2000). The trends to mobility and cosmopolitanism have major implications for policies on the preparation of citizens in education.

Another set of research is suggested by patterns of global policy borrowing and imitation, which suggests the need for a methodology for studying conditions for successful transfer of educational policies and practices. For example, the 1994 World Bank model of higher education urges systems to move to mixed public and private funding. Not all nations can draw on a domestic capital base sufficient to underpin major private funding: no other nation, with the possible exception of Japan, has the American capacity for tuition financing, corporate research, and donations from alumni and foundations. Comparative education could research the varying capacities of individual nations to meet this and other global policy norms. In turn this would allow the development of a more nuanced, variable model of public and private financing.

A further research agenda triggered by 'globalisation' is to directly examine education policy borrowing itself: to map in and between nations the forms and instances of isomorphism and convergence, and their opposites, self-determination and diversity, in education systems and institutions. (Marginson and Considine, 2000). Here the key policy issue is whether, to what extent, and within what limits, nationally-determined education practices are viable. What are the conditions necessary to sustain national and local self-determination and difference in the global era? Clearly, the answer will vary by nation.

To take the extreme case, educational self-determination is not an issue in the USA. In that country there is a robust national agenda. It is not contradicted by 'globalisation' which is partly constituted *by* that American agenda. But in many other parts of the world, 'globalisation' appears in conflict with national identity, and self-determination is a burning issue. The problem of Americanisation creates a principal dividing line in the academic field of

comparative education. Within the USA itself there is as yet little *internal* critical reflexivity in relation to the global effects of national American practices, effects mediated not only by government but by universities also. Nevertheless, this problem is at the heart of both the dyad of sameness/difference integral to comparison, and the power/knowledge effects of comparative education in the global era.

As such Americanisation is a principal policy and research site for independent scholars inside and outside the USA, and provides coordinates for dialogue and debate in academic forums. Though comparative education is an American-dominated field complicit in the global-as-convergence, its theories and methods can also be redeployed to explain hegemony, difference and self-determination on a world scale.

Comparative education could do this more effectively if there was genuinely equal sharing between the traditions in the field, manifest in a multi-lingual approach. Diversity of tongues shapes the diverse and multiple phenomena accounted for by comparative education: that linguistic diversity is not the norm is symptomatic of Americanisation. Significant communities in comparative education in Spain and Latin America, Europe and China are under-translated and under-published in English (Altbach, 1991). Data from Held et al. show that 'it is books originally written in English that are overwhelmingly the object of translation into other languages' not *vice versa* (Held et al., 1999, 346).

In comparisons which cross language barriers, comparative researchers ought to be conversant with the languages and cultures of all of the nations under study, precluding 'intellectual tourism'. To the extent that comparative education is focused on difference as well as sameness, on local specificity as well as global standards, we should expect more curiosity about what non Anglo-American voices are saying, and greater sensitivity to the rights of the other.

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