

Exploding the Cube: Revisioning “Context” in the Field of Comparative Education

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This article problematizes some of the ways that the issue of “context” has been treated in comparative education scholarship. We critique the cube approach recommended by Bray and Thomas (1995) as well as the common recirculations of Sadler’s (1900) garden metaphor. Borrowing a set of analytic concepts from Bruno Latour (2004), we suggest that too often in the field of comparative education the issue of context is treated as a “matter of fact” when instead context should be revisioned as a “matter of concern” and one of the central research concerns in our field. We propose the concept of ‘big C’ Context to link ‘little c’ contexts to power/knowledge concerns and the historical discourses that govern what it is possible to think and do.

Despite notable recent efforts to focus research attention on the importance of taking “context” into account (Cowen, 2006; Crossley, 2009; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009), the field of comparative education still remains hobbled by unsophisticated and inadequately theorized notions of context. This article explores the ways that establishing the context of an education policy, practice, institution, or system is caught up in the mobilization of norms, power relations, regulative principles, technologies, and strategies. Ascriptions of context can operate as externally imposed categories that enclose, disable, and deny access to resources, opportunities, agency, and subject positions. In like measure, inscriptions of context can sometimes be enabling, increase access to resources and opportunities, and generally privilege particular cultural groups or particular social settings (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2012). The ethical, social, cultural and political significance of context thus demands that researchers pay careful attention to ways they use the concept of context in their research.

In this piece, we problematize some of the ways that the issue of context has been treated in comparative education scholarship. In particular, we critique the “cube” approach recommended by Bray and Thomas (1995) as well as the feckless and regrettably common recirculations of Sadler’s (1900) garden metaphor. Rather than thinking of “contextualization” or “establishing the context” as activity that takes place at the front-end as part of a preliminary “setting the stage” for a research project, we propose—returning to the word’s etymological meaning of “inter-weaving”—that the problem of context be something that demands the researcher’s attention across the entirety of a research endeavor. Borrowing a set of analytic concepts from Bruno Latour (2004), we suggest that too often in the field of comparative education the issue of context is treated as a “matter of fact” when instead context should be revisioned as a “matter of concern” and one of the central research topics in our field. As part of revisioning context as a matter of concern we discuss big ‘C’ Context as a set of historical Discourses (Gee, 1990) that interweave actors and objects and govern what it is possible to think and do. By little ‘c’ context we refer to the set of named elements that are seen as comprising a given setting. Individual instances of context become intelligible because of Context with a “big C”—which is always much more than environment.

As noted above, honing in on the issue of Context is warranted because of the significance that Context plays in power/knowledge relations. Inasmuch as we can think of the field of comparative and international education as a mode of governance (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003) it is also extremely important to think about the way that, in educational research, the comparative project sometimes seems to be caught between two radically different alternatives (see the discussion in Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2012). On the one hand, there is a certain tendency to universalize teaching, learning, and schooling and to assume that research findings from other places can smoothly be brought to bear on educational problems in any site. In this schema, the comparative method almost reduces to a science of *ceteris paribus*, i.e. a quest to “hold all other things equal,” and figure out how to control for and mitigate “contextual” factors. At an opposite extreme, are post-positivist claims about the “impossibility” of comparison due to the situational specificity of any educational interaction. From this second perspective the science of comparison more often than not is seen to be a modernist artifact that relies on Enlightenment notions of rationality and principally serves to discipline and govern individuals and societies. According to this binary, the field of comparative education either represents a salvational path to best-practices or is a dangerous neo-colonial imposition that imposes a disempowering, externally ordering logic. In our view, this austere scenario can be entirely avoided, and this dualism collapsed, if we revision the ways that comparative education researchers approach the issue of Context.

Context Problems

Michael Sadler’s early-twentieth century writings on educational transfer and borrowing offer an object lesson in the ways that reasoning about Context is implicated in power/knowledge relations. When referring to the importance of local conditions and recognizing complexity, it remains an unfortunate commonplace for comparative education scholars to recycle Sadler’s injunction that education reformers not:

...wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower ... and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. (Sadler, 1964, p. 310)

What is missed in the ad nauseam reiterations of this statement are its fundamental linkages with European colonialism on two levels. The first of these relates to the colonial science of “acclimatization,” a late-nineteenth century zoological, biological and medical field concerned with studying the ways that flora and fauna could be transported around the globe in the interests of optimizing animal husbandry and agricultural production. As Michael Osborne’s work (1994, 2000) shows, along with ethnography, the sciences of acclimatization were pivotal appendages of colonial and imperial projects, concerned, as they were, with how organisms could be successfully moved from one climate to another. Adaptation became an object of scientific study as part of the economic reorganization and administrative measures of the European colonial project. And in Sadler’s formulation we see a historical instance of acclimatization reasoning being applied to the social world with tremendous consequence for determining who was and who wasn’t suited for various educational initiatives (Sobe & Ortégón, 2009; Sobe, 2013)—with the schooling of indigenous and ethnic/racial minority populations being one of the most egregious historical examples of different methods and different standards being applied to particular “kinds” of people based on outsiders’ perceptions of worth, aptitude and potential.

A second level on which Sadler’s quote uncomfortably reinscribes a colonial logic relates to the tradition in academic knowledge production of viewing physical and social space as fundamentally interlinked. At issue here are the ways that the “texture” of space is modeled in relation to governance, control, and coordination. As Foucault (1971) has pointed out, when space is conceptualized as possessing thickness and depth, one often encounters a division

where human experiences are separated from supposed underlying laws and principles. As Sobe & Fischer (2009) have noted,

...when space is conceptualized not as a smooth plane but as non-regular, with varying, uneven depths, principles of differentiation ensue. For example, some areas emerge as sites suited for liberal, democratic participatory politics; others emerge as more appropriately governed through force, authority and the inculcation of habit. (p. 361)

Sadler's organicist argument about "native soil" is enmeshed in a colonialist logic of governance that makes it a highly inadequate model for addressing the issue of Context in conducting comparative education research today.

A more recent schema for approaching context in comparative education scholarship comes from Mark Bray and R. Murray Thomas (1995) who have proposed a three dimensional cube for thinking about the location or site of any comparative education study. One axis is geographical and proposes that research might focus on world regions, countries, provinces, districts, as well as the "locational" levels of schools, classrooms and individuals. A second axis identifies potential demographic factors such as ethnicity, age, religion, and gender as potential cross-cutting focal points for a comparative study. The third axis proposes a set of substantive issues that might be studied in reference to the previous two—anything from curriculum and teaching methods to school financing, political change, and labor markets. A comparative education study thus might focus on one or more "sub-cubes" within this larger three-dimensional cube. In this manner, one might design a comparative study that looks at girls' science education in two countries; or, for example, a study could look at the financing of schools attended by different religious groups in different regions of the same country. In recent work, Bray, Adamson & Mason (2007) have usefully reflected on limitations to the cube, particularly, for example, on the ways that the various filters could be reframed. The geographic filter could be expanded to allow a focus on countries affected by a particular colonial experience (Manzon, 2007) or on countries/regions with religious commonalities. Bray and his colleagues have even proposed that multiple cubes could be arrayed along a temporal axis to afford comparisons across time. While they do recognize significant limitations, including the definitional "slipperiness" (2007, p. 370) that emerges when the units of comparison delineated in the cube are actually deployed by researchers, they nonetheless note, "good comparative education researchers will necessarily consider factors along each of the axes [of the cube] before they isolate the variables pertinent to their hypotheses" (Bray, Adamson & Mason, 2007, p. 371).

We offer a two-fold critique of this methodological prescription and what it puts forward as strategies comparative education scholars should use to account for Context. First, we question the deployment of pre-existing context categories. Second we question, as indicated previously, whether it is adequate to do the work of isolating contextual factors and categories as a preliminary stage-setting component of the research process.

As regards the first critique, Bray, Adamson and Mason (2007) acknowledge that there are different social science paradigms and that scholars interact with and interpret their data differently. While they note that "researchers using a more hermeneutic or inductive approach would probably prefer the sub-categories to emerge from their data" (p. 369-70), we would frame this issue less as one of methodological preference and more worthy of research concern because of the ways that ascriptions and inscriptions of Context are implicated in power/knowledge relations.

One of the best illustrations of the way that Context can be prefigured as a category of analysis lies in its subdivision into various dimensions as in the commonplace usage of concepts like

“political context”, “economic context”, “social context”, “cultural context”, etc. To discuss Context in these terms is to create knowledge about characteristics over which rule can be exercised (Rose, 1999). This phenomenon is clearly illustrated by the “newly discovered island” heuristic employed by neoinstitutional sociologists of education (Meyer et al., 1997) to explain the ways that institutionalized world models define and de/legitimate local agendas. They predict that if a previously uncontacted island were discovered its inhabitants would be pressured to begin organizing themselves according to world models that have their origin in the North America and Europe but have since been spread widely around the globe. The island would be conceptualized as “a society” with “an economy” and “a government”. Meyer et al. note that:

...a few standardized data tables would be sufficient to empower policy proposals. Similarly, any sociologist comes equipped with the capability to propose measures, analyses, diagnoses, and policy prescriptions for the correction of gender inequalities on the island. On a broad range of economic and social indicators, the island would be categorized and compared with other nation states, in the same way that every newly independent geopolitical entity has been processed in the past several decades. (Meyer et al., 1997, p. 150)

In short, standardized categories would be applied and the hypothetical island’s historical, political, economic, and social “context” would enter a surprisingly standardizing machine of academic knowledge production. To splice out Context into different dimensions in this manner is to construct domains of action and surfaces of intervention.

Our central objection to requiring the specification of Context be done before the research actually begins is that this move relegates Context to the background role of simply stabilizing a research object. This approach, which might be called the context-as-container paradigm, fails to account for the relationality of contexts and objects (problems to be studied), and it can lead researchers to make rather dubious causal inferences. In the next section, as we present alternatives to approaching Context using a set of pre-existing analytic categories, we will also examine the relationality of objects and Contexts and how they come to be intelligible and conjoined, and to what effect(s). No less than an explosion of the cube and a reassembly of the pieces is necessary.

Revisioning Context

It seems intuitive or common sense to say that the daily practices of schooling around the globe take place within some context. Questions about the salience of educational contexts cut deeply across debates in the field on the global-local nexus. The material and discursive configuration of what is indexed by the concept of Context cannot be taken-for-granted nor treated as uncontestable. And, as we hope to have shown in the previous section, Context is also heavily—and irrevocably—linked to power/knowledge concerns. The contingent historical quality of the categories used to conduct comparison and to putatively separate objects from Contexts are themselves one of the things that requires attention. This is an undertaking that British philosopher Ian Hacking captures in the idea of locating “ideas in their matrices” (1999, p. 10) and it is this task that we direct attention to with the idea of ‘big C’ Context. Hacking describes this kind of analytic process as involving the paradox of examining how something has been constructed by others and simultaneously recognizing that the researcher’s own lenses and activities also construct, shape, pattern, *and govern* what is under examination.

Much comparative education research, as we have reviewed above, treats context as any number of neatly bound cubes to be arranged at the outset of a project. As convenient as this foundation-building might be, it fails to account for the mutable and entangled demarcations that distinguish context and object from one another. We borrow from a series of distinctions

Latour (2004) makes between *matters of fact* and *matters of concern* in sociological research. Latour conceptualizes matters of fact as “risk free objects” with “clear boundaries” and predictive value, while matters of concern are a risky, “tangled” business (Latour, 2004, p. 22-23) that engages the unexpected and the emerging. Too often Context has been treated as a matter of fact and invoked as a unity that is always already-there, waiting to be observed and described via stable categories.

Approaching Context as a matter of concern draws attention to the *practice* of identifying categories and analytic topics (spatial, temporal, institutional, discursive, theoretical) that intersect, overlap, and change over time. These categories, artifacts of epistemological structures, will inevitably be embroiled in power relations (Foucault, 1971 & 1980) as they produce the rules and standards that govern social practices, creating at once spaces for action, while marginalizing or rendering invisible others. Coming to grips with this should be an essential part of the research process. One step towards this end and towards exploding neatly packaged matter-of-fact cubes is to think of contexts as a confluence of practices and objects coming together and never permanently stabilizing. With other contemporary scholars, particularly a set of scholars working in the field of anthropology (Marcus & Saka 2006; Ong & Collier, 2005; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), we draw on the concept of the “assemblage” to conceptualize this.

Aihwa Ong (2006) tackles the challenge of doing an “ethnography of mutating spaces” by suggesting that we alter what we think of as “spaces”; instead, we might study “assemblages as sites where the dynamic play of strategies resolve challenges by constantly situating and resituating populations in particular scales of regulation” (p. 118). The assemblage then signifies a kind of non-place/non-structured structure that gives conceptual form to the confluence of practices and objects. In Saskia Sassen’s (2008) description, assemblage is theorized as “a contingent ensemble of practices and things that can be differentiated (that is, they are not collections of similar practices and things) and that can be aligned along the axes of territoriality and deterritorialization” (p. 76). The concept of the assemblage has been seen to capture the “heterogenous within the ephemeral” while preserving:

...some concept of the structural so embedded in the enterprise of social science research. Indeed, the term itself in its material referent invests easily in the image of structure, but is nonetheless elusive. The time-space in which assemblage is imagined is inherently unstable and infused with movement and change. Assemblage thus seems structural, an object with the materiality and stability of the classic metaphors of structure, but the intent in its aesthetic uses is precisely to undermine such ideas of structure. (Marcus & Saka 2006, p. 102)

The researcher who takes Context to be a matter of concern, then, is not interested in the traditional “object of study” contained within a context, but is interested in the relationality between objects and contexts: how they come to be intelligible and conjoined, and to what effect(s). In other words, the researcher is interested in the cohesion between objects and contexts, and in the epistemological structures that make it possible to see the objects as objects (problems to be studied) and Contexts as an assemblage of multiple, at times paradoxical, things and practices that come together in particular places at particular times.

In shifting to “contextualization” as the work of studying assemblages, the researcher is able to attend to “emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral in social life and social interactions that are nonetheless ordered and coordinated” (Sobe, 2013, p. 101). Asking what is being “assembled together” in what I am examining is a question the researcher asks across the entirety of a research endeavor. Taking a cue from anthropologist Roy Dickey (1999) we find it useful to return to the etymological roots of the word *context* as they help us see past the

accrued meanings of “background” and “place” and “dimension” that have been added over time. The Latin verb *texere* means “to weave” and *con* signifies “with.” Consequently, *contexere* is “to weave together” or “to interweave.” The notion of interweaving allows us to focus on Contexts as assemblages of multiple discourses, practices, techniques, objects, and propositions that come together in particular places at particular times. Whereas matters of fact depend on the invisibility and taken-for-grantedness of their production, shifting to matters of concern means putting these processes of production under the microscope—and realizing that the researcher herself plays a role and is not a distant, detached observer (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2012).

In closing, we will note that despite our insistence above that objects and contexts are conjoined and entangled within specific assemblages and on the entanglement of the researcher, we do recognize the importance of probing the distinction between an activity, entity, actor and its environment (to use the term in a general manner). As noted above, it seems intuitive that educational undertakings take place within the context of some context. In part, this intuition is addressed by revising Context as assemblage. In another part, it also needs to be addressed by carefully studying the organizing principles and referentiality of social systems and the extent to which they define their own boundaries and represent themselves as operating in a particular environment (Luhmann, 1995). The production of a “background” or “container” that is enabling and/or disabling needs itself to become a topic of research; we need to interrogate the ways that schools and various educational apparatuses construct the contexts in which they operate.

The field of Comparative Education is a mature and important area of academic inquiry with a promising future. In this article, we have proposed a revised theory of Context that takes power/knowledge as both its starting and ending point. The act of contextualization is essential in the field of comparative education, and it means treating contexts as matters of concern while focusing our research attention on the educational assemblages that compose and govern our present and future worlds.

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