

Vertical Case Studies and the Challenges of Culture, Context and Comparison

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The Teachers College Symposium invited scholars to rethink culture, context, and comparison in educational research. In his response to these questions (this volume), Joe Tobin promoted comparative ethnographies to understand how social, cultural, and political processes play out across multiple locations and time periods. He urged careful empirical studies of how and why globally circulating ideas are made manifest in local practices. Specifically, Tobin recommended diachronic, video-cued multivocal ethnographic methods. In such an approach, video excerpts function as interviewing cues, prompting educators to reflect on what is shared and what is variable in educational practices that differ by time or location, as well as how cultural beliefs and practices were shaped by economic and political forces. Thus, Tobin and his colleagues invite participants themselves to explain the impact of culture on their own practices, and they fruitfully mine the basic human impulse for comparison in order to elicit contrasts in practices.

Antoni Verger's response (this volume) focused more on policy making. He considered the epistemological and methodological implications of the deterritorialization of education policy processes, particularly how multiple scales interact during the policy adoption stage. He suggested that scholars should examine more carefully the role that ideas play in policy decisions and policy outcomes, and he asked "what types of ideas might be most influential in these types of processes, how and in what contextual circumstances."

In this brief intervention, I offer a distinct but compatible reaction to the challenges of considering culture, context and comparison in educational research. I draw upon work I have done over more than a decade with Frances Vavrus, developing what we have called the "vertical case study" approach. In this piece, I first describe the "axes" of the vertical case study. I then explain how the approach addresses the dilemmas of culture, context, scale, and comparison in ways that complement the approaches recommended by Tobin and Verger.

The Axes of the Vertical Case Study

The VCS approach unfolds along three "axes"—the vertical, the horizontal, and the transversal. First, this approach insists on simultaneous attention to and across micro-, meso-, and macro- levels, or spatial scales, which constitute the verticality of comparison. Too often qualitative work reifies social, political, and economic processes as "forces" or "systems" with explanatory power. There has been a tendency to take the macro for granted and focus exclusively on a single-site locality rather than carefully exploring how changes in national and international institutions, discourses, and policies are influencing social practice at the school level. In contrast, I aver that attention to the ways global processes are shaped by and in turn influence social action in various locales is essential. "The local" cannot be divorced from national and transnational forces but neither can it be conceptualized as determined by these forces.

In addition, the VCS approach recognizes that space itself is socially produced (Massey, 2005), and every "level" is an instance of the "local." In other words, the World Bank or one country's ministry of education are also "local" contexts, with their own complex social, cultural, and material relations. However, as shown in work by de Sousa Santos and colleagues (2007; see also Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012), the World Bank's "local" often becomes globalized and loses any

sense of the cultural or historical specificity of norms and values. As Kathryn Anderson-Levitt (2012) explains,

Most anthropologists define culture as the making of meaning, with an emphasis on the process itself as contested. It follows that world culture is locally produced in social interaction, and that meanings are then reconstructed in the global/local nexus. Power matters, particularly the hidden power to make resources for meaning making widely available, and to make them attractive and scientifically persuasive. How actors succeed in claiming particular ideas as global and how the locals strategically respond are questions where anthropologists can contribute to understanding the global/local nexus and the exercise of power within the world polity (p. 441).

Discussions of “world culture” too often fail to consider the role of social interactions and power in the processes of establishing and maintaining such norms across locations. Relations of power elevate certain local views of the world to the level of the global. An analysis that compares these multiple “locals” and problematizes the uptake of certain discourses, processes, and policies and the enrollment in networks is critical to the VCS approach. For example, as described in *Teaching in Tension* (2013), I had the privilege of working with a group of talented scholars from Tanzania and the United States to examine how learner-centered pedagogy is promoted by influential organizations, how it was adopted unevenly by the Tanzanian government, and then how it was implemented in six Tanzanian secondary schools. In Chapter 1, Vavrus, Bartlett, and Salema map the promotion and expansion of learner-centered pedagogical approaches across Africa in the wake of the 1990 Educational for All conference and the 2000 adoption of the Dakar Framework for Action. The chapter documents the historical succession of educational policies and discusses how structural adjustment, political shifts, and significant levels of World Bank funding for primary and secondary-level educational reforms paved the way for the adoption of LCP. In Chapter 6, Bartlett and Vavrus detail how the national assessment system contradicts learner-centered approaches, thus stymying pedagogical changes at the local level. Further, in Chapter 9, Webb describes how the national Tanzanian language policy poses specific challenges to student engagement and LCP.

Second, the horizontal dimension of the VCS approach emphasizes the importance of comparing how similar policies unfold in distinct locations that are socially produced and “simultaneously and complexly connected” (Tsing, 2005, p. 6). The horizontal element takes two primary forms. First, scholars might trace people, policies, or practices across sites. For example, in chapter 3 of *Teaching in Tension*, Bermeo, Kaunda, and Ngarina consider how teachers’ previous experiences in pre-service teacher education, continuous professional development, and informal teacher learning affect whether and how teachers implemented learner-centered education. Alternately, the “horizontal” element may prompt a series of comparative case studies of how a similar phenomenon manifests across different locations. This type of horizontal comparison juxtaposes cases that follow the same logic to address topics of common concern. For example, in *Teaching in Tension*, the researchers decided to compare the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy across six secondary schools in the Arusha and Moshi regions. In Chapter 4, Bartlett and Mogusu consider how the Tanzanian teachers who participated in a pedagogy workshop understood learner-centered pedagogy, what they identified as its benefits, and how they implemented it when they returned to their schools. In Chapter 5, Vavrus and Salema consider the material constraints on implementing LCP. In Chapters 7 and 8, Thomas and Rugambwa examine how teachers understood and addressed, pedagogically, concerns regarding inclusion and gender, and how the specific school environments supported or constrained pedagogical moves.

Third, the VCS emphasizes the importance of transversal comparison, that is, of historically situating the processes or sets of relations under consideration and tracing the creative appropriation of educational policies and practices across time and space. The transversal

element reminds us to study across and through levels to explore how globalizing processes intersect and interconnect people and policies that come into focus at different scales. The VCS approach expands the locations of research while showing how actors are related through specific historical contingencies that connect disparate social sites and social actors. In this way, transversal analysis enables one to show how “places are traversed by unequal relations of power and struggles to contest these relations” (Mahon & Keil, 2009, p. 4). In *Teaching in Tension*, the transversal axis involves tracking policies, like Education for All, and pedagogies, such as LCP, as they become enrolled in different networks and come to act on and through others, such as national or regional education officials, teachers, students, and parents. This transversal analysis bears in mind that levels or scales are social fields that are historically produced rather than static planes to which ‘the local’ or ‘the global’ are consigned.

Vertical Case Studies: Culture, Context, Scale, and Comparison

The vertical case study model is consistent with and complementary to the approaches recommended by Tobin and Verger for addressing dilemmas of culture, context, scale, and comparison. The comparative ethnography promoted by Tobin is exemplified by the horizontal axis, whereby scholars consider how social, cultural, and political processes play out across multiple locations. The recommendation for diachronic comparison is inherent in the transversal axis, which traces the evolution and appropriation of educational policies and practices across time. Tobin’s diachronic, video-cued multivocal ethnographic methods offer ideal techniques to meet these two goals; they might be complemented by other elements in the VCS toolkit, including surveys and participant observation. To Tobin’s comparative ethnographic approach, the VCS adds a reminder of the importance of studying ‘vertically,’ across levels, to consider how decisions in international organizations, diverse national bodies (such as curriculum, assessment, and language policy bureaus of the ministry of education), regional education authorities, and local schools mutually constitute and influence one another.

This vertical axis, therefore, heeds Verger’s call to consider how multiple scales interact during the policy adoption stage, and how ideas (such as learner-centered pedagogy) become influential. In doing so, the approach endeavors to escape the “global/local” dualism that has marked so much work in the field, even as it seeks to raise new questions about how policies and pedagogies developed locally in globally influential institutions get appropriated and remade across sites. Further, by insisting on a horizontal axis, the VCS approach reminds scholars to consider, empirically, how ideas may be differentially influential, depending upon cultural, social, political, and material conditions. Finally, by drawing on the anthropology of policy, which examines the on-going processes of policy *appropriation* (e.g. Hamann & Rosen, 2011), the VCS approach questions the stage-wise approach to policy and instead considers policy as practice. It considers how global policy studies could be supplemented and strengthened by even greater attention to the ways that policy is *appropriated and practiced* as it ‘flows’ transnationally and travels transversally.

In sum, the vertical, horizontal, and transversal axes represent one methodological approach that rejects older notions of culture as geographically-bound and responds to processual, practice-based notions of culture. The approach recasts considerations of context to engage multiple scales simultaneously, while foregrounding the empirical benefits of systematic comparison in educational research. In this way, Vertical Case Studies offer a fruitful avenue for reconceptualizing the dilemmas of culture, context and comparison in the field of International and Comparative Education.

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