“Intercultural and international comparison in the era of globalization: New aims, different levels?”

Comparison at the meso- and the micro-levels, combined methods

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Abstract

Based on my own comparative, empirical qualitative research a) into the strategies of several European education systems to manage language and sociocultural variety, b) into curriculum content in Swiss institutions of teacher education c) into the reception of pedagogical concepts and conceptions across nations and cultures, I am going to discuss the aims and position of comparative education against the background of globalization (that replaces the traditional East-West antagonism which was one of the dominant approaches to comparison until 1990), of the internationalisation of educational trends, and of the trend towards more quantitative data-based comparisons and less qualitative, in-depth studies. My view is a problem-focused, multi-level approach, in which the objects of comparisons can be situated at levels other than the traditional system and policy one. A triangulation of methods appears to be more appropriate than the unilateral choice of quantitative or qualitative methods. Not only one mode of comparison (system-level, present time), but six different modes of comparison are described.

1. The history of comparative education: five stages

Comparative education as a discipline was officially born in 1817 with Jullien de Paris’ fragment Esquisse et vues préliminaires d’un ouvrage sur l’éducation comparée (Jullien de Paris, 1817). Jullien wanted pedagogy to become a „more or less positive science“ (une science à peu près positive). He was the first to use the term « science de l’éducation » (educational science) at least in continental Europe. From that time on, educational science indeed developed more and more as an empirical science which tried to meet the standards set by natural sciences. But this evolution took a long time to become evident. We can distinguish five stages in the methodology of comparative education:

(1) The narrative description of „foreign“ educational systems by travelling experts. The comparison with one’s own system was either implicit or explicit, but not systematic. We can find this kind of “narrative comparative education” in Xenophon’s (about 430 until before Christ), who defined the principles of Persian education as compared to the ones that informed both education in Athens (Lê Thành Khôi, 1981) and in descriptions of Azteque elite schools by Spanish monks in the sixteenth century (Todorov, 1982).

(2) Pedagogical borrowing and lending. This mode was facilitated by Jullien’s ideas, particularly by his standardized questionnaire, which of course was still very simple as compared to today’s more sophisticated devices. Those inquiries did not yet meet today’s standards for empirical research. Jullien advised the government of his country, France, to use this tool to collect data on other educational systems (Prussia
was then considered to have the most effective education in Europe) and to import any feature that might seem successful.

(3) The analysis of educational systems in their cultural-historical context, as exemplified by Michael Sadler’s speech on the national character of education (1900). According to this theory, it was impossible to import or export organizational forms or educational principles. This approach may be seen as an early form of the relativism that was to become a major direction in the Seventies.

(4) A gradual transition from a methodology that is called in German „geisteswissenschaftlich“ to empirical methods (in German: „sozialwissenschaftlich“). This empirical turn took place in the sixties with the first international research into achievement by IEA, then by OECD. At this stage, the focus was on analysis, generalization, and, often, on educational planning. The method of comparison in the strict sense, as described by Jullien, was implemented for the first time.

(5) Since the seventies, the empirical movement has been accompanied, sometimes in a controversial way, by a complex and contradictory world of different methodologies: quantitative, neo-positivist empirical approaches versus neo-relativist qualitative approaches, a socio-historical approach, to name just a small choice of methodologies. A great deal of activity is displayed around meta-theoretical debates and charts have been designed to show how complex the streams of comparative thought are (Nóvoa, 1995).

(More detailed discussion in (Cristina Allemann-Ghionda, 2004).

We might say that the present time is one of postmodern methodological pluralism. On the whole, comparative education was and is mostly interested in comparisons at the system-level; and pragmatic planning interests were and still are strong, perhaps stronger and stronger because of the economic problems that most countries are currently facing in education, and because of the necessity to qualify young people in a way that allows them to find a position in society.

2. The increasing impact of international achievement surveys

However, especially since TIMSS and even more since PISA, the quantitative approach of comparative education is becoming more and more common in the public debate. We can observe reactions by political authorities, maybe not in every country, but in those countries which (a) play a leading role in Europe and (b) have not obtained the results they had expected. One of these countries is Germany.

Many trends in educational policies are global trends. Educational research and teaching in universities is becoming more and more international, often following directives of the educational authorities, as is the case in the universities of North-Rhine Westphalia and other German Bundesländer, and most probably of all the States which adhered to the Bologna declaration of 1999.

At the same time, the discipline “Comparative Education”, which was officially established in the United States in 1900, has tended to decline in North-American and European Universities.

Does this mean that educational science is absorbing what used to be the specific and specialized field of comparative education?

Does this also mean that international organizations such as IAE and OECD are the main research institutions for comparative education, and that there is no need for this discipline in universities?
And, thirdly, does this mean that the focus on assessment, measuring achievement, and the effectiveness of education systems is going to be the only one that matters in comparative education and in education altogether?

3. The value of qualitative empirical and historical research for comparison

From my point of view, there is no opposition between quantitative and qualitative research. These two methodologies have different advantages and produce different kinds of results. There is no time in this short presentation to repeat the arguments for and against quantitative and qualitative approaches, or to make a plea for qualitative research (Cristina Allemann-Ghionda & Gonon, 1996).

The point I wish to make is, that qualitative empirical and historical comparative studies can make a specific contribution when analysing in depth a wide range of educational issues, including the question of the effectiveness of education. They are complementary to quantitative studies.

4. Six modes of comparison

In a paper published in the Harvard Educational Journal, Bray and Murray proposed a model for a multi-level analysis in comparative research (Bray & Murray, 1995). They claim that the level of analysis must be carefully identified according to the research question and scope. For some kinds of investigations, a multi-level analysis may be required. This proposal implicitly suggests that it would be a limitation if comparative education was to refrain from any approach other than a system-based comparison. In this model, the notion of comparison is strictly synchronic. Historical comparisons are not taken into account.

The “global”, “international” and “intercultural”, even “transcultural” nature of many phenomena and processes in education can and need to be analysed in detail, taking into account several levels (Bray and Murray, 1995) and defining clearly which sphere we are talking about: educational theory, educational policy, educational practice, or curriculum and instruction (a tentative translation of the German term Didaktik), which is in a way situated at the intersection of the three spheres.

*Figure 1*
Three spheres of educational thinking and acting

The English translation “Curriculum content” of the German term “Didaktik” shows how difficult translation of concepts can be as a result of different pedagogical traditions and discourses (Hopmann & Riquarts, 1995).

My proposal includes five modes of comparison:

1. **Synchronic comparison.** – Examples: day-school or full-time school in England, France and Germany (C. Allemann-Ghionda, in press); the importance of international arguments in the reform of vocational training (Gonon, 1998); the global harmonization of the curricula of secondary education (Kamens, Meyer, & Benavot, 1996); the strategies of educational systems facing the plurality of languages and cultures (C. Allemann-Ghionda, 2002); comparing the curricula of teacher education from the point of view of their inclusion or exclusion of language and culture plurality (C. Allemann-Ghionda, De Goumoëns, & Perregaux, 1999); intercultural comparison of pedagogical discourses (Morgan, presentation in this session).

2. **Transnational or transcultural** importation/exportation of pedagogical theories and innovations, such as the spread of progressive education as an international movement.
or its targeted introduction for the sake of political re-education (Oelkers & Rhyn, 2000); (C. Allemann-Ghionda, 2000).

(3) Analysing the interaction and contradictions between international, European, national and regional educational policies based on specific research questions and problems, not on systems as a whole.

(4) Analysing educational change resulting from dramatic geopolitical change as happened in Spain after Franco’s fall, in South Africa after the end of apartheid, and in the former Soviet Union after the end of the soviet regime.

(5) **Diachronic comparison** of one aspect of education, for example the introduction of schooling for the masses (Ramírez & Boli, 1994). The systematic historical comparison of pedagogical ideas and traditions is an altogether neglected field, although some global analyses do exist (McLean, 1995); (Schriewer et al., 1999). This may include comparison of concepts such as “Didaktik”.

5. Conclusion

Globalization theories cannot be applied en bloc to all educational problems, all educational systems, all educational theories of the world. Globalization is undoubtedly a process that is irreversible. A merely ideological critique or appraisal of globalization makes no sense in educational science. Comparative education has for a long time been (up to 1990) interested in the antagonism between East and West; some comparativists focussed on the gap between North and South. But today, comparative education has to deal with global trends and with the effects of globalization itself (Watson, 1998). International and intercultural comparisons that include if not the whole planet at least part of it (such as the OECD-member states) become more meaningful if selected questions and problems are compared on a smaller scale and in a deeper way. So a pluralist approach and, whenever adequate and possible, a triangulation of methods seems a better option than an opposition between quantitative and qualitative methods.

**References**


