CHAPTER 17

CONTEXT IN COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The significant contribution and relevance of Comparative and International Education (CIE) mainly depends on how closely it studies the interplay between society and education, considering what is dubbed as the global and the local. Many CIE studies including critical reviews seem to dwell on the topic, purpose, conceptual, and methodological aspects of the field, magnifying what appears to be the global. Our understanding of the role particular sociocultural, economic, and political contexts play in education seems inconclusive. Using appropriate analytical frameworks that delineate society–education dynamics, this study further problematizes the comparative and international elements of CIE area studies, with a focus on context analysis. The critical review considers area studies published over the last seven years in leading CIE journals and answers this question: How and to what extent do CIE area studies operationalize context analysis? The aim is not so much to bring consensus but to further highlight tensions and issues in conducting context-sensitive comparative and international
education studies. The findings indicate that CIE research over the last seven years does not seem to live up to the expectation of producing meaningfully contextualized knowledge. The role of context analysis in CIE research seems ill defined and practiced. Alternative explanations for this and considerations for further scholarship are discussed.

**Keywords:** Comparative and international education; comparative analysis; context analysis; levels and units of comparison; critical discussion

**INTRODUCTION**

The significant contribution and relevance of Comparative and International Education (CIE) as a field mainly depends on how closely it studies the dynamics between society and education, considering what is dubbed as the global and the local (Arnove, 2003; Bray, 2007; Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2007; Crossley, 2009, 2012; Kubow & Fossum, 2007; Little, 2000; Parkyn, 1977; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014; Steiner-Khamisi, 2009; Torres, 2003; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013a & b). Global–local comparisons are presumed to enable the production of contextualized knowledge. Crossley (2009) elaborated that the issue of context has been central and challenging to CIE studies at all times:

> Concern with context penetrates to the heart of comparative education. It is reflected in much of the early writing within the field, and it remains central to many contemporary intellectual positionings, discourses and developments. Contextual issues are also central to many of the most passionate theoretical and methodological debates that are to be found in the research literature – past and present. Thus questions of context reveal much about the history of comparative education, at the same time as they inspire and shape some of the most challenging research and scholarship at the cutting edge of the field today. (p. 1173)

In practice, CIE studies do not seem to sufficiently examine local, cross-national, regional, and global conditions that impinge on education (e.g., Bray, 2007; Bray et al., 2007; Little, 2000; Parkyn, 1977; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014; Steiner-Khamisi, 2009; Torres, 2003; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013). System-level comparisons seem to overlook within-in system variables (Parkyn, 1977). Studies (e.g., Bray, 2007; Little, 2000; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014; Parkyn, 1977; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013a) further indicate the lack of urbane conceptions of context and hence comparisons remain “superficial and meaningless.”

Although one can remain critical of this conclusion, as the evidence base of several of the aforementioned studies seems unclear, it surely warrants
further scholarship. The limitations of CIE studies generally may inhibit the progress of CIE as a field of study and limit its potential to further inform policymaking and education practice. To produce contextualized knowledge, comparativists are thus urged to strike a balance between the global and the local (Arnove, 2003; Crossley, 2012; Kubow & Fossum, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2009; Torres, 2003; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013a).

Inspired by this clear gap in our understanding, this study aspires to expand on the scholarship on context analysis in CIE studies. The study further problematizes context analysis in CIE area studies through a critical review of published research. The study examines area studies published in two leading CIE journals over the last seven years. This allows for an enhanced understanding of the nature of context analysis CIE empirical studies undertake.

PURPOSE

The Sakurai et al. (2016) study of Asian and European university student learning engagement primarily inspired this study and is thus used as a case study to exemplify the analysis. The Sakurai et al. study is published in Compare, the journal of the British Association of International and Comparative Education. A closer review of the study inspired the author to examine how CIE studies generally deal with context analysis. Using the student engagement study as a stepping stone and as an inspiration, this review study is conducted.

The primary purpose of this study is not to bring about consensus on context analysis as such but to clearly delineate tensions and issues in CIE empirical studies. Although studies (e.g., Bray, 2007; Little, 2000; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014; Parkyn, 1977; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013a) seem to generally indicate the unsophisticated nature of comparative contextual analysis, it is significant to examine how and to what extent studies operationalized the concept across times and regions. The study also suggests new perspective/s for further conceptual development on the topic.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND STUDY QUESTIONS

To provide initial frame of reference in exploring the topic based on extensive literature, several conceptual frameworks are used in this study.
Specifically, the frameworks (a) inform the articulation of the study questions, (b) guide the development of themes for synthesis, and (c) support a holistic discussion of the findings. The conceptual frameworks are succinctly explained below.

There exists rich CIE conceptual literature on the interlinkages between the global and the local. However, our knowledge of the modalities and the magnitude of contextual analysis vis-à-vis global-level analysis in CIE empirical research seems inconclusive. Five core interrelated conceptions, which presumably characterize successful CIE context analysis, scaffold this study. The studies this study reviews are examined to understand how and to what extent they deal with the five conceptions.

The overarching conception is that regional, national, and local responses and contributions to globalization vary and “a dialectic is at work between the global and the local” (Arnove, 2003, p. 1). Wiseman and Anderson (2013) further explain the nature of the dialectic between the global and the local:

As much as the field of comparative and international education is about identifying and understanding global trends and international educational phenomena, it all rests upon understanding the balance between globalization and contextualization. In particular, the ways that the local contexts and situations that shape education interact with the pressures and effects of increasingly globalized social, political, cultural, and economic factors is an often debated area in comparative and international education. It is also important to recognize the ways that global phenomena are interpreted in local contexts, which are uniquely defined by culture, location, and social communities. (p. 21)

Based on this and other CIE conceptual literature, several interrelated conceptions that presumably define or characterize context analysis are identified below. Successful context analysis could be broken down into the following constituent and interrelated parts.

Levels of Context Analysis

The primary task of operationalizing context analysis could be thinking in terms of its levels. To successfully study globalization and contextualization (Wiseman & Anderson, 2013), comparativists need to embrace in their analyses “local, national, regional, international, and global spheres of influence” (Little, 2000, p. 294). Ideally, multilevel analysis is needed to have “multifaceted and holistic analyses of educational phenomena” (Bray et al., 2007, p. 8). These levels of analysis take into consideration the following dimensions and elements.
Dimensions and Elements of Context Analysis

Contextual comparative analysis needs to then take into consideration the unique historical, sociocultural, economic, and political contexts for education (Klerides, 2009; Manzon, 2009; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013, 2014). Also part of “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” (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014, p. 6). Considering the nature of the education phenomena under study, similarities and differences along these dimensions and elements have to be identified and explained.

Context Specificity versus Universality

Some dimensions or elements of context are unique and some others may be general or common. Successful analysis has to make a careful distinction between the two. Little (2010) made this point quite clear:

There is also a need for a more refined understanding of the context-specific and context-universal nature of the underlying drivers and inhibitors of education practices, policies and philosophies. The search for difference and similarity, diversity and unity, and uniqueness and universality is central to our intellectual endeavor. (p. 851)

This requires comparativists to focus on “the deconstruction of dominant world views” (Crossley, 2009, p. 1177). In so doing, an approach oriented more on process and issue is thought to be more effective than one which takes putative and nontransitory approaches.

Context as Matter of Concern versus Matter of Fact

Another significant issue in context study relates to assumptions about what counts as social reality and approaches to study it. A distinction has to be made between social reality (dimensions and elements of context as its proxies) as unitary/objective/stable versus. plural/subjective/shifting constructions. As Sobe and Kowalczyk (2014) explained:

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. (p. 6)
An issues-oriented and inter-subjective perspective renders a more critical evaluation of education policies and practices (Kubow & Fossum, 2007). This approach needs to also include power dynamics into the analysis.

*Context as Discourse*

The last significant point relates to the discursive nature of context analysis. The expectation is that CIE contextual analysis takes a discursive approach, as context is heavily linked to power dynamics in society (Crossley, 2009; Klerides, 2009; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014). Klerides (2009) points out that “it is important to start the study of these non-economic concepts (those that relate to socio-cultural and political elements) from their understanding as discourses and as products of discourse, and to examine the complex dialectic linkages” (p. 1244). This does not, however, necessarily require all CIE studies to use critical approaches championed by critical theory, a meaningful discussion of how power and knowledge dynamics trickle down to education policy and practice adds insight.

In sum, the aforementioned conceptions of context analysis are considered as sensitizing concepts only, allowing room for further problematization of the concept based on data. The goal of this study is to examine how and to what extent CIE contextual analysis takes into consideration these conceptions. The study aspires to answer the following questions.

- How and to what extent do CIE area studies examine levels, dimensions, and elements of context?
- How and to what extent is context analysis considered as a matter of fact versus a matter of concern?
- How and to what extent does context analysis take a discursive approach?

These questions directly emerge from the conceptual frameworks. The methodological choices made to answer the study questions are explained next.

**METHODOLOGY**

This section outlines the methodological approach this study takes and the methods used to select publications. The techniques used to synthesize the studies are also subsequently explained.
Approach

The main thrust of this study is to examine how and to what extent CIE studies consider contextual analysis. A critical review of published research is preferred to a meta-analysis, which makes preference to (quantitative) studies with focused hypotheses (Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002). Although meta-analysis seems more powerful in reviewing quantitative studies based on some carefully selected criteria, it is not found to be relevant in this study. Examining methodological and theoretical issues related to CIE context analysis over time and space, and finally discovering patterns and trends based on an analysis of quantitatively-driven studies only is impractical for several reasons. First, contextual analysis is sensitive to ideological/political, economic, and/or sociocultural values and norms, which could be more successfully studied qualitatively. In such cases, “a narrative literature review might be the best one can do” (Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002, p. 491). Second, even quantitative studies on the topic did not formulate and test similar or at least focused hypotheses, a requirement for meta-analysis. Consequently, a (qualitative) critical review is considered more practical in revealing key substantive, theoretical, and methodological issues embedded in extant research literature.

This study is not a systematic review either. A systematic review follows the general rule of exploring a field according to appropriate keywords and using a comprehensive and replicable approach. Due to the demanding nature of the work, whole-text reading versus skimming and scanning over study titles and abstracts, only purposefully selected core literature is considered. A comprehensive review of all CIE publication outlets is a practical rarity.

The critical qualitative review is conducted in four stages. First, a list of potential research literature sources is identified. Second, the criteria for the identification of relevant studies are developed. Third, methods of synthesizing studies are identified. Finally, actual searches for relevant studies are conducted. These stages are succinctly explained below.

Literature Sources

The CIE field recently enjoyed a burst of knowledge dissemination outlets. Only peer-reviewed academic journals are considered for this study for their popularity, accessibility, and currency. Books of all kinds, dissertations, theses, conference proceedings, databases, and professional web sites are not included. The nature of the work, which demands whole-text analysis, also requires careful delimitation over literature.
Journal Selection

Due to the large number of journals in the field, it is necessary to be selective. The criteria used include the following: one, journals need to have, in their titles, **comparative** and/or **international education**. This does not necessarily mean though that other journals that do not bear these words do not publish comparative analysis. Two, as the focus of the study is on context analysis by area studies, it makes more sense to include journals based in different countries/regions than to include journals from a single country/region. In cases where there are more than two journals in a country/region, a journal with the highest impact factor, popularity, and longevity is given priority. Although CIE journals naturally publish research conducted in any part of the world, there might be some focus across regions and countries.

Three English-only journals are considered for practical reasons only. This criterion painfully excludes journals publishing in other languages. As English is the lingua franca of CIE as a field, English journals arguably safely represent CIE scholarship.

Four, journals should have complete volumes/issues available for the 2010–2016 period. Some recent studies (e.g., Bray, 2007; Bray et al., 2007; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2009; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013) indicated the unsophisticated nature of CIE contextual analysis. This study aspires to test this assertion by including studies published as far back as 2010. Studies published during this period are presumed sufficient to uncover the nature of context analysis.

Based on the aforementioned criteria, two academically driven, leading journals are selected for analysis. The journals are based in North America and Europe. Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania do not seem to have journals fulfilling all the criteria. The journals selected are Comparative Education Review (US, founded in 1957) and Comparative Education (UK, founded in 1964). Although the journals are based in North America and Europe, they naturally publish studies conducted worldwide. However, it is not claimed that these journals sufficiently represent global CIE scholarship.

Study Selection

Not all the studies published in those two journals are considered for analysis, however. Only studies that meet some criteria are included. One, studies should be empirically driven but could use empirical/primary or secondary
data. Purely conceptual/theoretical studies are not included, as the purpose of the study is to examine how CIE area studies operationalize context analysis.

Two, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies are included for “our collective work is becoming more postparadigmatic and eclectic” (Paulston, 2009, p. 983). Methodological eclecticism that transcends paradigmatic commitments is also getting currency in social research generally (Bergman, 2009; Bryman, 2008, 2012; Creswell, 2003; Creswell, Plano, & Garrett, 2009; Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott, & Trow, 1994; Lund, 2005; Smith, 2005). Contextual analysis, in principle, considers ideological/political, economic, sociocultural conditions, which call for the application of multimethod.

Three, even though single-country studies seem to characterize the field recently (Wiseman, Davidson, & Stevens-Taylor, 2016), this study includes studies that explicitly deal with cross-country or cross-region comparisons. Single-country studies seem to be not comparative enough (Steiner-Khamsi, 2009), but they tend to be, by their very nature, richer in contextual analysis than cross-country/region studies. However, it is more significant to examine how and to what extent the latter negotiate between universality and contextuality. Consequently, this study considers those studies that explicitly compare two or more countries/regions. Based on these criteria, search for relevant studies was conducted volume-by-volume, issue-by-issue.

**Synthesis**

Generally, the study questions and conceptual frameworks guided the synthesis of studies. Themes, which reflect substantive, methodological and theoretical significance, are identified for categorization and concept formation. The conceptual frameworks are used only as sensitizing concepts; new themes/concepts could emerge from data. The themes for initial analysis are classified into ones that are demographic and substantive. Each study included for review is examined using these themes as yardsticks.

**Demographic Themes**

These themes provide background information about the characteristics of the studies included in the review. Arguably, such demographic information is crucial as far as we are interested in the quality and significance of the findings reported in extant literature. Research method, data type, and countries/
regions the studies considered are the background information thought to enrich discussion of findings later.

Research method is among the many issues of significance when it comes to quality work. It actually defines what science is and what is not. The findings of previous studies would be useful only when one considers issues related to their methodological rigor. For this reason, studies are summarized in terms of their research process as revealed by their research methods. The nature of data also defines the nature of contextual analysis. It is important to identify the kinds of data previous studies analyzed. Studies are classified based on whether they relied on primary versus secondary data.

Another demographic theme is the countries/regions from where previous studies collected data. The place where a given study is conducted is again crucial for issues related to external validity or generalizability, as different sociocultural, economic, and political realities may render different contextual analyses. As this study examines context analysis by area studies, it is important to know the particular countries/regions compared as background information.

**Substantive Themes**

These cover the most important focus of the study and are directly aimed at answering the study questions. Selected studies are classified or summarized based on the following:

- Units of comparison/analysis (the education topics studied).
- Levels of comparison (global, regional, national, and local).
- Elements of context analysis (sociocultural, political, technological, and economical).
- Whether context analysis is considered as a matter of fact versus Concern.
- Whether context analysis explicitly draws on power relations in societies (discourse).

The analysis and synthesis were conducted in two stages. First, a master table maintaining the aforementioned demographic and substantive themes as headings was constructed to enter information about each study. Under each heading, concise and clear information was inserted based on information gained from each study. Second, to facilitate understanding, tables were constructed based on the master table and themes were summarized concisely. Due to the effectiveness and efficiency of the tables, there was no need to maintain the master table in this study.
It is expected that each study may not contain explicit information about all the themes. To overcome this particular challenge, studies are closely read start-to-end and effort is made to “extract” implicit assumptions. This was more so in relation to the last three substantive themes mentioned above. If information about one or more themes is missing, that is clearly indicated in the table. Although there certainly is a degree of subjectivity on this, it does not affect the overall conclusions of the study.

Once all studies were summarized this way, patterns and/or trends as well as unique cases are identified for further interpretation. Where appropriate, frequencies and/or percentages are used to highlight pattern or dominating themes across all the studies. Although the focus of the study is on “drawing the bigger picture” concerning context analysis, the Sakurai et al. (2016) study of Asian and European university student learning engagement, which primarily stimulated and inspired this study, is described against relevant and significant themes. The major findings are presented next.

**FINDINGS**

This section outlines the major findings of the review related to the demographic and substantive themes explained above. A total of 72 empirical studies are selected from both journals. Of the 72 studies, 41 (57%) are published in Comparative Education Review (CER) and 31 (43%) in Comparative Education (CE). Some core characteristics of the studies are presented in Tables 1–3.

Table 1 presents statistics (in percentages) about some characteristics of the studies. A little more than half of the total number of studies published in both journals (54%) are quantitative and the rest qualitative. A significant difference exists when studies are compared by journal; 78% of those studies published in CER are quantitative against only 26% in CE. Conversely, of the studies published in CE, 74% is qualitative against 22% in CER.

Another interesting point relates to the nature of data the studies considered for analysis. In this case, both journals reveal the same finding: 74% used secondary data such as those collected by third parties. Only 26% of the studies actually depended on first-hand empirical data.

When level of comparison is considered, both journals tend to focus on (83%) cross-national comparisons against individual-level comparisons (38%). Those studies published in CER used cross-national comparisons at a lesser extent (76%) compared to those published in CE (94%). On the other
hand, CER studies considered more individual-level (student/teacher) comparisons (49%) than their CE counterparts (23%).

To see whether there is a clear pattern or trend in these findings across times/years regardless of journal type, the time periods are approximately equally divided into two and themes are counted. There are a total of 37 studies published between 2010 and 2013 and an equivalent number (35) are published between 2014 and 2016 in both journals. As Table 2 indicates, there does not seem to be substantial difference between the time periods related to the number of (1) quantitative and qualitative studies and (2) studies that used primary and secondary data.

As this study concerns context analysis by area studies, it is logical to know where previous studies collected data from. Table 3 outlines how many times countries (across six geographic regions) are considered by these CIE studies. Of the total 72 studies, 92%, 78%, and 46% of them collect data from Africa, Europe, and Asia, respectively. Oceania and North America seem to be less covered. It should, however, be clear that these statistics consider only studies that explicitly mention countries; as Table 1 shows, there are several large-scale international studies that cut across all regions.
Central to context analysis are the education phenomena CIE studies consider. This study indicates that the units of analysis (the actual topics the studies examined) seem as varied and prolific as the field of CIE itself. To identify if there is any clear pattern or trend, effort was made to code studies in different ways. Some 22 studies (31%) covered such topics as student attainment, testing, assessment, and achievement whereas 13 (18%) studied education governance, management, inequality, and inclusion. Learning content/curriculum, teacher education, and teaching attract 13 (18%) studies whereas policymaking gets only 12 (17%) studies. Generally, there does not appear to be a clear pattern and trend when it comes to the topics CIE studies considered.

### Table 3. Areas/Locations Covered.

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The biggest challenge in CIE studies concerns how and to what extent they (1) make explicit references to the dimensions/elements of context, (2) consider context as a matter of fact versus concern, and (3) relate contextual analysis to general power relations in studied societies. One, almost all the studies considered in this review ascribe to be sensitive to sociocultural, economic, and political spheres of influence on education. The assumption is that certain philosophies/ideologies, norms and values, governance models, and economic principles at the national/society level affect education policymaking and practice.

They do this in different ways. Some studies include, in their introductory sections, background information about these dimensions of context, implicitly assuming their relevance to meaningfully understand their findings. Although the information appears general and reflects dynamics at the national level, it appears to be relevant to put into some context the major findings of the studies. The limitation with this approach is the absence or lack thereof of clear link between contextual information and the findings. The reader is supposed to make the link. In such cases, context is considered as a general frame, a prelude.

Other studies attempt to consider context analysis at the interpretation/discussion section. Without any prior presentation of information, these studies try to give meaning to their major findings by bringing in sociocultural, economic, and political information at the national level. The assumption is that education phenomena are the function of conditions and factors at various levels. In such studies, context is used for sense making.

The other way is using contextual information as a disclaimer. After findings are discussed in isolation and conclusions are drawn, studies finally bring in, without clear explication of how it materializes, limited information about the dimensions or elements of context that might have affected the results. Studies implicitly warn readers that their findings and conclusions do not take into account relevant and adequate information.

The second and related concept is considering context as a matter of fact or concern. Nearly 90% of the studies in this review implicitly or explicitly consider context (sociocultural, economic, and political environments) as if it is objective, nontransitory, and factual. Even those studies that are classified to have a matter of concern approach do not seem to provide adequate and explicit discussions of the dynamics under consideration. It is unclear how sociocultural, economic, and political dimensions interact with each other and with education. Generally, this finding does not distinguish between quantitative and qualitative studies. It is safe to conclude that most CIE studies consider context as a matter of fact versus concern.
A related point is whether CIE context analysis considers power dynamics in societies and how that trickles down to education policy making and practice. Nearly 90% of the 72 studies reviewed do not explicitly include this in their analyses. Although studies routinely narrate how global and international forces affect national and local realities, they do not reveal the discursive nature of the dynamics. Even some of the eight studies that include some element of discourse analysis fail to explicitly explain how and to what extent social reality, as defined by the dimensions/elements of context, is a discourse and a product of discourse. They simply argue for the unidirectional nature of certain global education movements.

To better illustrate some of the major findings of the review, an example case study of the quantitative type is briefly described below, followed by discussions of the major findings and tentative conclusions of the study.

The Student Engagement Study

Although Sakurai et al.’s (2016) study is published in a different journal than the journals considered in this review, it is useful to succinctly describe the study, focusing on its comparative aspect. It reveals some of the challenges and issues in launching CIE studies.

Sakurai et al.’s (2016) study aims to (1) examine how teaching–learning environments relate to international students’ approaches to learning, self-assessed success, and stress, and (2) compare Asian and European international students studying at a Finnish university along those outcomes. An extended discussion of theories on learning–teaching environments, study strategies, and stress is made. The study provides information about students’ levels of study, age, gender, fields of study, English language competence, and length of residence in Finland. An existing inventory was modified and used for collecting data. Advanced statistics (e.g., factor analysis, path analysis using AMOS, and t-test) are used to analyze data. Asian and European international students are compared in those parameters.

Generally, it is found that Asians hold slightly more positive understanding of teaching methods and engage more in organized study than their European counterparts. The discussion/reflection part of the study challenges the view that Asian students prefer surface approaches to learning to deep learning. The study, as a passing remark, indicated that home backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, institutional characteristics, and individual differences could influence actual learning. Other than citing these based on theoretical literature, it is not explained how these differences manifest in student
No information is provided about Finland, its education system, the university the international students study, students’ home countries or their sociocultural, economic, educational, and political dynamics. The level of comparison is regional and yet, the similarities and differences between the regions are not explained, and dimensions/elements of context analysis are not analyzed. Generally, the comparison is not problematized and is ripped of context. This study is purely comparative and international but does not attempt to put findings into perspective. These and other findings of the review are discussed below.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This section brings together the major issues presented in the previous section and relates them to the conceptual frameworks. Possible alternative explanations as to why context analysis is the way it stands now are provided and implications for further study are identified.

CIE research published in *Comparative Education* and *Comparative Education Review* over the last seven years does not seem to live up to the expectation of the production of contextualized knowledge. As the findings section reveals, studies are purely international and comparative but are seriously limited in their problematization of relevant contexts related to the topics studied. Specifically, comparisons are mainly limited to national and individual levels; the dialectic between the dimensions/elements of context are not explained; analyses assume that social reality is factual, at a standstill and is objective; similarities and differences between comparison cases are not identified and adequately explained; and it is unclear how governance structures trickle down to education policymaking and practice. It is used as a prelude to introduce studies, an input to enrich or complement selected findings or arguments, and/or a disclaimer following study conclusions. Overall, context analysis in CIE research is ill defined and practiced.

These findings of the review corroborate with the findings of previous studies that indicate the insufficient examination of both local and cross-national conditions and factors that impinge on education (e.g., Bray, 2007; Bray et al., 2007; Little, 2000; Parkyn, 1977; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2009; Torres, 2003; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013). This limitation of CIE studies may inhibit the further progress of the field and may compromise its contribution to policy making and education practice.
Why does this happen to be a perennial challenge to CIE research? This review seems to point at some alternative explanations at philosophical, conceptual, and practical levels as to why contextualized knowledge production is this much challenged. A brief explanation of these might help to closely see the nature and extent of the menace.

The World Society Culture

Studies reviewed in this study seem to implicitly and/or explicitly hold the assumption that globalization and internationalization routinely affect and sometimes dictate national education policymaking, planning, and practice. This seems the main reason why most studies dedicate pages for describing and explaining global and international policy movements. The analytical frameworks the studies used clearly mimic the kind of discourse world society theories narrate. Consequently, there seems limited appetite to meaningfully capture the very contextual conditions that interact with education. National education systems’ response to the global seems what matters most to most studies. This view cannot, however, withstand conceptual/theoretical scrutiny, as the global and the local do interact with each other insurmountably.

Theoretical Inadequacy

Generally, the field of CIE seems to have rich literature on comparative education and how to do comparisons, albeit much of it is an amalgam of conceptions from the social sciences. Specifically, conceptual literature on context analysis tends to be patchy and is often discussed in relation to disentangling the interplay between the global and the local. Previous studies (e.g., Bray 2007; Little 2000; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014; Parkyn, 1977; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013) indicate the lack of urbane notions/conceptions of context and hence, comparisons remain “superficial and meaningless.” The lack of conceptual clarity on context analysis could thus be part of the reason.

Methodological Givens

As explained in the previous section, respectively, 78% of CER studies and 74% of CE studies are quantitative and qualitative. Because of their focus
on identifying pattern and making broad generalizations, quantitative studies do not seem to capture contextual details, something required in successful context analysis, which is why most of the studies chose only national and individual levels of analysis. Such studies attempt to statistically control some factors thought to affect the phenomena of investigation. On the other hand, by design, most qualitative studies (published in CE) focus on limited aspects of education phenomena, avoiding rich analysis of context at several levels. That is why 94% of CE qualitative studies took national as their level of comparison. The logics and natures of quantitative and qualitative research seem to be part of the equation.

Practical Significance

There are also some practical matters that compete with successful context analysis in CIE research. As this study shows, most of the studies published in CE and CER (74%) entirely relied on secondary data collected by third parties such as the OECD, the EU, the World Bank, international and regional testing regimes, and government agencies. These international databases are incalculable opportunities for comparativists to fetch massive amount of data that would not otherwise be easily available.

The challenge in using secondary data for context analysis is but manifold. Databases may not have adequate information about the various levels and dimensions of context. As this review indicates, only the national and individual levels of analysis tend to dominate comparative research. There lacks information about state/provincial, district, and school-level conditions. Also, databases leave the impression that social reality and/or the education phenomena under study are objective, stable, and factual. Databases do not seem to adequately mirror the dialectic nature of relationships existing between education and society. A related challenge is that databases are not constantly updated, and hence the many CIE studies that rely on them look like historical studies failing to adequately capture what is recent and current. Due partly to these practical challenges, comparativists do not seem to sufficiently unravel tensions and issues in policymaking and practice. Research design is being dictated by the type and amount of data made available by international actors. Studies are purely international and comparative but fall short of rich contextual analysis.

Generally, the conceptual frameworks used in this study appear germane to map out the contours of context analysis in the field of CIE. Bringing together the various conceptions allows to at least clearly problematize
context analysis. To invite further theoretical work, the conceptual frameworks are succinctly explained below. It is highly suggested to develop a much more refined conception of context that takes into account the contextual nature of context itself.

Successful context analysis needs to meet several characteristics. One, the nature of relationships existing between the global and the local is not unidirectional but dialectic (e.g., Arnove, 2003; Crossley, 2012; Kubow & Fossum, 2007; Milana, 2015; Steiner-Khamsi, 2009; Torres, 2003; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013). Two, contextual analysis can have levels at the local, national, regional, international, regional, and global spheres of influence (e.g., Bray et al., 2007; Little, 2000). Three, contextual analysis has such dimensions as sociocultural, economic, political, technological, and/or historical conditions (e.g., Klerides, 2009; Manzon, 2007; Wiseman & Alexander, 2013, 2014), and such elements as norms, power relations, regulative principles, technologies, and strategies (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014).

Successful context analysis considers that the dimensions and elements of context have certain attributes or qualities. One, some dimensions or elements of context can be unique and some others generally general or common. Successful analysis has to make a careful distinction between the two (Little, 2010). That is why identifying and explaining similarities and differences between comparison cases is often revered in CIE research. Two, for society is in flux, the dimensions or elements of context can better be viewed as intersubjective, emergent, transitory, and are in a dialectic relationship with each other and with the global (e.g., Kubow & Fossum, 2007; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014). Three (the dimensions or elements of) context are heavily sensitive to power dynamics in society (e.g., Crossley, 2009; Klerides, 2009; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2014). A typical example could be to consider how and to what extent national (political) governance and education interact with each other.

The aforementioned conceptions tell a point, that the production of meaningful contextual knowledge needs to strike a balance between scientific rigor and practicalities including research logistics. Whatever degree of balance is reached on this, there has to be a refined conceptual/theoretical framework to better guide the analysis of context in CIE research. This study concludes with what Sobe and Kowalczyk (2014) once explained:

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. (p. 6)
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**REVIEWED STUDIES**


Teelken, C., & Deem, R. (2013). All are equal, but some are more equal than others: Managerialism and gender equality in higher education in comparative perspective. *Comparative Education, 49*(4), 520–535.


