CHAPTER 10

WHAT IS COMPARATIVE EDUCATION?

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ABSTRACT

In his interview as part of the project to mark the 50th anniversary of the Comparative and International Education Society, Steve Klees offered sound advice to young scholars entering the field of comparative education, “Understand our debates, understand there are no right positions in our debates, and understand your own position in our debates and engage in the debates.”

In this chapter, the author argues that in recent years those theoretical debates that are central to comparative education have been ignored, or at least played down, resulting in a lot of work that is “atheoretical.” In this context, “atheoretical” does not mean that the work is not based on theoretical assumptions but that those assumptions are not thoroughly examined. Consequently, certain positions are adopted by default, seen as “natural.” This has not only affected comparative education but also is endemic to the field of educational research more generally, where methodological debate has been simplified to a choice between quantitative or qualitative methods.

This chapter will examine the epistemological, ontological, and sociological decisions that must be the foundation of any educational research, illustrating the points with key debates in the field of comparative and international education.

Keywords: Theory; methodology; selection; perspective; ontology; epistemology; debate
INTRODUCTION

There is a naive and obvious answer to the question of what constitutes comparative education. It is that comparative education brings together data about two or more national systems of education, and comparing and contrasting those data. The aim of that activity is to look at similarities and differences, and, using the inductive method, identify the regularities that will always be found in educational organizations. This naive answer, which will shortly come to be seen as inadequate, brings together the two most common types of responses to the original question. As Maria Manzon (2011) makes clear, attempts to define the field have generally involved defining either the content or the methods of comparative education.

The content of comparative education is the variety of educational systems around the world. However, this fails as a definition of the field, as “education,” in its broadest sense, involves every cultural activity that is designed or intended to pass on the cultural heritage of one generation to the next and perhaps even includes anything that accidentally supports that passage. This is to say, the content of education is everything that people do or might do, and consequently comparative education, is everything that occurs in the cultural sphere around the world.

To put that in context, physics could be defined, in terms of its content, as the properties of all physical material in the universe. On the other hand, chemistry could be defined as the properties of all physical material in the universe, while biology could be defined as the properties of all physical material in the universe which has been, is, or could be involved in processes of life (which does not narrow the subject down very much). This is to say, a definition of a field of study that describes the content of that field as “everything” is not necessarily wrong, although it is not very helpful as a definition of the field either.

For this reason, defining the field in terms of method looks more promising, especially since some methods might also imply that the field has some desirable status, such as being “scientific,” “objective,” “useful,” or “pragmatic.” However, as debates in the 1960s and 1970s made clear, there was no consensus among scholars about what should constitute the correct method or methods of comparative education. The problem is analogous to that of defining the field in terms of its content; a successful definition works because it rules something out as not being comparative education. And while scholars were willing to advance their chosen method as preferable, they stopped short of saying that any method was excluded, or that the fruits of that method should not be considered legitimate comparative education. In the end, scholars will take up whatever method looks promising when seeking a solution to their particular theoretical conundrum. They are “bricoleurs” (Derrida, 1978, p. 285).

Faced with this difficulty of defining the field, and distinguishing what should count as comparative education, Steve Klees, in response to a question put to him as part of the 50th anniversary video of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), “Comparatively Speaking” (CIES, 2006) offers the following advice to those entering the field:

- Understand our debates;
- Recognise there are no right positions in those debates;
Understand your own position on those debates; and

Engage in the debates.

This offers an alternative way of defining the field of comparative education, or any other field, in terms of the debates that give it life at a particular moment. This can be visualized as a dynamic approach to defining the field, where the focus of concern moves between and circles around certain foci of interest, in much the same way as a complex system follows a strange attractor, periodically circling back in quasi-periodic motion, but never exactly following the same path. It also explains why revisiting the simple question, “What is comparative education?” can give rise to changing responses over time.

Taking another example from the video “Comparatively Speaking,” Harold Noah discusses whether comparative education must involve data from at least two national systems of education. He notes that many of the articles published in *Comparative Education Review* are single-nation studies that could just as well have found a home in a journal of political science or area studies. Following (or anticipating) Steve Klees’ advice, he declines to come to a firm conclusion, but his discourse on the topic makes clear that the journals and professional associations of comparative education constitute an important arena for working out those debates. One answer to the question “What is comparative education?” is that it is what is published in the journals of comparative education. Certainly, that has been an approach to examining how the field has changed, by comparing the volume of different types of articles over the decades. But in addition to being a rather circular argument, that what counts as comparative education is what appears in *Comparative Education Review* and other journals, it also ignores or underplays the fact that any individual scholar can make a determined attempt to reshape the field or provide a corrective to current trends by contributing to the debates in those same journals.

Whether a single-country study is comparative education has never been settled decisively, and scholars of comparative education return to it periodically. However, the question is never exactly the same, as each attempt to answer it will add to the body of scholarship in the debate, and shape how future generations address it. Perhaps that is why the question, “What is comparative education?” can remain alive and stimulating throughout the career of a scholar, precisely because it requires a different response at each stage of development (of the field, of the individual, or of the debate in which it is part).

So if Steve Klees is right, and it is the debates that define the field of comparative education, the answer to the question requires at least an attempt to identify the debates that are seminal to the field.

**DEBATES OVER CONTENT**

In looking at the debates about content of the field of comparative education, I am less interested in what the elements of the field should be, whether, for example, schools, curricula, teachers, and textbooks to be studied, and more interested in how those elements should be treated or considered. Should they be seen as
naturally occurring phenomena, having some kind of permanent and independent existence, or should they be seen as contingent and open to discussion?

That is not to say that there have been no important debates about whether informal educational settings should be included, or whether too much attention has been focused on formal education institutions at the expense of the study of shadow education. But such debates can normally be clarified by adding an adjective and extending the field to include that which had previously been ignored. But what I want to examine as debates about the content of education is more directly involved in the concepts that are used to understand the field – which concepts can be directly apprehended as part of the field of study, and which are abstractions from direct experience. This is the ontology of the field. Of the things that we could be looking at, which are primary and have an unquestioned right to be part of the field and which are secondary and more in need of explanation, and their inclusion in more need of justification? Put another way, which concepts are to be part of the explicandum, and which part of the explicans? Those elements that are to be part of the explicans must be given some priority, to be seen as in no need of further explanation.

By way of example, we might consider the difference between psychology and comparative education. Psychology and comparative education both examine human behavior in all its rich variety. But the debates differ because psychology, at least notionally, seeks structures in human thought and behavior that are common to all people. Psychologists of different traditions will explain behavior in terms of ego, id and super-ego, or openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism, or some other scheme, but the intent is to find explanations that are universal. In contrast with this, comparative education generally seeks to recognize contingency, the influence of local culture, and differences of approach in different national or regional settings.

Of course, this is an over-simplification, and the debate about whether comparative education can or should seek universal explanations is alive and well, but the difference of focus is an important one. A psychologist will seek to explain cultural differences in terms of mental constructs that function across cultures, where the comparative educationist will seek to explain mental constructs in terms of their cultural context.

I do not expect to carry this debate unopposed. George Bereday characterized the field of comparative education as one in which scholars who had previously learned the tools of their trade through an induction in a discipline such as psychology, sociology, history, or economics, applied the concepts and methods of that discipline in comparative education. This is a position echoed by Martin Carnoy in “Comparatively Speaking.” But I do draw attention to the debate and would argue that an important aspect of scholarship in comparative education should be that when supposedly universal concepts, such as GDP, power–distance, collectivism, extroversion, race, or gender, are introduced into an explanation, their status should be discussed, and whether there are important cultural differences in how they are viewed should be examined.

The most important expression of this debate in terms of its impact on our field is whether the individual person or the social group or class should be given
priority in explanations. In the former case, the actions of groups, institutions, and nations will be explained in terms of the choices and actions of individuals – in the most extreme cases leading to the “great man” version of history. In the latter case, the behavior of individuals will be explained in terms of the social group, class, or nation of which they are members. An extreme version of this is to be found in Tolstoy’s explanation of the French march on Moscow. Eschewing the idea that history was driven by great men, especially Napoleon, Tolstoy argues that the whole French nation was moving east, and that Napoleon chanced to be at the front.

Archer (1995) regards both of these extremes as mistaken. She called the effort to explain the actions of individuals in terms of the group they belong to “upward conflation”. And she called the effort to explain social movements and the behaviour of groups in terms of the choices of individual agents “downward conflation”. However, each researcher must take a position on how individual preferences lead to collective outcomes, and how collective pressures lead to individual cases. This still leaves a good deal of latitude for debate, as the actions of groups are rarely the simple sum of the actions of individuals, and groups (and mobs) may end up acting in ways that no individual member would have wanted.

Another way of framing this discussion is whether we should, as investigators in the field of comparative education, recognize the power of social structures or the agency of individuals.

**DEBATES OVER METHOD**

There is a parallel debate in terms of epistemology, and how we can know anything. Ernst Cassirer (1953) describes the history of philosophy as a conflict between rationality and authority as the source of knowledge. In this competition, the individual rationalism of Plato, or at least Socrates, is pitted against the hierarchical and collective authority of Aristotle. Each of us has to make up our own minds on the basis of our internal reason, or we have to accept the wisdom of our chosen source of authority.

In practice, of course, none of us rely entirely on our own reason, and much of what we claim to know we have taken on the basis of authority, from teachers, from books, and from the common sense of our community. But the question Cassirer raises is whether, in settling our position on a specific question, reason is only to be trusted if it produces results that conform to the dictates of authority or whether the pronouncements of authority have to stand the test of reason.

The tension between the two approaches to knowledge finds its expression in academic conventions that require that any argument be supported by appropriate references to previous authority, but that what is said is also original, has never been said before, and can be confirmed by the application of reason. That is to say that any piece of work has to incorporate two contradictory approaches to epistemology, although where the accent falls will be a matter of decision for the author.
This takes us to one of the core issues of comparative education research, namely, whether some group of people have privileged access to categories that can be used to explain their experience. The comparative educationist seeks an explanation of some cultural phenomenon. Is she permitted to import external concepts and frameworks from economics, sociology, or psychology, or is she bound to defer to the explanations that the people involved in the behavior offer themselves? Is it ever acceptable to stand as an outside observer and describe what is happening in a social group or must the people involved in that group assent to how they are described and the categories that are used to describe them?

Of course, these issues of ontology and epistemology do not arise only and exclusively in comparative education. Similar debates can be found, to some extent, in the physical sciences, and arise in many aspects of the social sciences and humanities. How is it possible, from a limited number of observed instances, to draw conclusions about universal properties? How can we know that by treating all objects as having common features, of dealing with point masses and other geometrical abstractions, we will arrive at accounts that are useful in dealing with all possible actual bodies? As science has faced such difficulties of epistemology, it makes some sense to try to take a shortcut and fashion the social sciences, such as comparative education, on the model of the physical sciences. There is, of course, the added complication when dealing with people that have their own idea of what they were doing.

When Kepler framed his laws of planetary motion, he did not expect to be interrupted by Mars claiming to be the celestial representation of the god of war, and arguing that its motions through the heavens should not be reduced to an insignificant and mechanical ellipse. But if I interpret my actions in terms of my class position, and how I respond to other people in terms of their social class as I perceive it, and an observer comes along and wishes to interpret my actions in terms of race theory, gender theory, economic theory, or any of a host of available general theories that might be used to account for my behavior, then he might expect me to have fairly strong views about the theories that are being applied. So making a science out of a social science is much more complicated than simply mimicking the methods of the physical sciences. And whether we think that comparative education is, or should be, a science, the question still remains, as all researchers seek to describe what they see in terms of generalizations at some level or another.

But this recognition does not remove the difficulty, as the extent to which we focus on abstract generalizations or focus on unique specificities is a methodological choice. Michael Crossley emphasizes the importance of specific context, but even he will use some generalizations to identify his area of interest, such as “small states,” for example. At the other end of the spectrum, UNESCO collects data on various indicators, such as the number of children enrolled in the first year of elementary education, without any obvious concern as to whether enrolling in elementary education means the same thing in Germany as it does in Ecuador. And these are positions that cannot be based on empirical evidence, as they define what is to be considered empirical evidence.
From time to time, our general categories are called into question, especially when they are seen carrying overtones that are unintended, unhelpful, or offensive. The expression “third world” has now more or less completely disappeared, to be replaced by “underdeveloped countries” (emphasizing that they had been actively underdeveloped by colonists) and subsequently by “developing countries” (emphasizing that they are in the process of development). This is not merely an exercise in changing labels on pre-existing categories, or of ensuring political correctness, but actually creates categories that may be difficult to translate. The extent to which different frameworks of categories can be, or should be, translated is itself a source of difficulty and debate.

**UNDERSTANDING OUR DEBATES**

The foregoing is not supposed to be an exhaustive review of the debates in comparative education, much less to present a decisive argument on one side or the other of those debates. It is merely intended as an indication of the complexity of those debates. Any scholar must come to his or her research having made a number of decisions about what is, and what is not, to be part of the phenomenon to be studied. There are decisions to be made about what sort of an object or event society is; what sort of a creature a person is; what might be expected to motivate him or her; and how we gain knowledge about the events, people, and organizations that we observe.

Not everything can be studied at once. Whether a person should be seen as a rational planner, a pleasure optimizer, or a piece of flotsam drifting on the sea of events, might conceivably be the object of study in some research. In other research, an arbitrary decision will have been made as to exactly how a person’s actions are to be understood. There is, of course, nothing wrong with making such arbitrary choices, as without them nothing much could be studied at all. But researchers should show an awareness of those arbitrary choices that they have made, and offer at least some explanation of why those choices are plausible in the present study.

In the 1960s and 1970s, our field was alive with discussion at all levels about what should count as appropriate methods of data collection and what should count as relevant data. Since then, such discussion has become less prominent, prompting the thought that more unsupported assumptions may be being smuggled into studies than formerly. In a move that is by no means restricted to comparative education but is spreading across the social sciences, there seems to be a view that the methodological decisions to be made are simple; there are only two methods to be chosen between – quantitative and qualitative. And it may be possible to avoid even that simple choice by adopting a “mixed method approach,” which is a mixture of the two available methods, and “triangulation,” which tests the methods of one against the other to demonstrate that they both lead to the same conclusion. In this manner, debates about method can be dismissed as though there were no debate at all about the content or methods of comparative education.
We can see a reflection of this debate in the explanation given by the editors of *Comparative Education Review* (CER Editorial Team, 2017) that they allocate quantitative or qualitative papers to reviewers who specialize in those areas, in an effort to give a paper the best chance of being accepted. Of course, as one would hope from the editors of such a distinguished journal, their classification of methods is more sophisticated than merely quantitative or qualitative, and they mention several species coming under each heading, but one can see the traces of the simple division of ontology and epistemology into two categories in their presentation.

The key question here is not whether quantitative methods are better than qualitative methods, or vice versa, but that the debate should exist. It is the debate that keeps alive the uncertainty about the categories that are used and encourages us to think that methods are made, rather than found. It is debate that reminds us that the categories that we have taken for a study, that have proved useful for the time being, should not be reified, but should remain tentative, open to question at some future date. The debate is a useful prophylactic against premature acceptance of phenomena and events as “natural.”

**ENGAGING IN OUR DEBATES**

Far from relishing the debates that have periodically revitalized our field, we seem to be experiencing a tendency to close off debates, to presume that some categories are essential and some irrelevant, and to engage in what might be described as a kind of “identity methodology.” Prominent in this tendency is the rising popularity of Ubuntu as methodology, as indicated by the attention it has received in recent CIES conferences.

There is a long-running debate in comparative education as to whether the nation-state, the country, is the appropriate unit of comparison. Cultural influences do not stop at national borders, and transnational influences can have an impact in many jurisdictions. This is particularly true in parts of the world where colonizers drew national boundaries without regard for the culture on the ground. But it can also be seen in parts of Europe, Switzerland being a prime example of a country that has several different cultural influences.

My own view is that the nation-state is the only proper unit of comparison, as it is the nation-state that passes laws on education and other social issues (or delegates those decisions to local government), and signs treaties relating to the nation’s obligations of observing human rights or other aspects of international law. But my argument here is not whether the nation-state is the right unit of comparison but the importance of the debate; the presence of the debate should remind me that such categories as countries are socially constructed and provisional, and that I might meet cases where the notion of the nation-state is difficult to interpret (such as China, for example).

Notionally, it might be argued that Ubuntu is an approach that would advance and promote such fluid notions of categories, and speak against dichotomies. Ubuntu is a vague philosophy that is argued, is specifically African, and promotes collective
understanding. In one definition, the explanation is given that Ubuntu indicates that I am because we are. A person's identity is co-constructed with other members of one's social group, and an individual cannot be fully human on his or her own.

However, in a special issue of *International Review of Education*, Assie-Lumumba (2016) argues her case in terms of a dichotomy between Africans and Europeans:

> The handful of formally educated Africans, in defiance of their colonial masters and the philosophy of the general colonial administration and policy of education, played a leading role that was in total contradiction of what the system had intended colonial schools to produce. (p. 19)

By solidifying the categories African and European, and professing to know what all Africans thought and what all Europeans intended, Assie-Lumumba ignores the most important lesson of any comparison, that within-group variance is always greater than between-group variance. And it is only by ignoring the variety of European and African positions that this dichotomy can be maintained.

Elsewhere, Assie-Lumumba (2017) argues that the communal experience of Africa is to be contrasted with the individualism of Europe:

> This perception is different from the anthropocentric and individualistic dimensions of human beings as conceptualized and lived in the dominant Western social paradigm. In the African ethos and practical life, this connection with others is essential. (p. 14)

It can only be argued that the European tradition is individualistic and depends on the idea that the individual is the expression of what is inside him or her, if one is willing to ignore Dewey, Mead, Vygotsky, and Marx, although for some reason, Marx seems to be African for the purposes of discussion.

There are, of course, very positive aspects to an Ubuntu approach. Assie-Lumumba cites Kane (1969), who argues that adopting a European style education involves some gains, but also involves some losses:

> But, learning, they would also forget. Would what they would learn be worth as much as what they would forget? I should like to ask: can one learn this without forgetting that, and is what one learns worth what one forgets? (in Assie-Lumumba, 2016, p. 18)

This is an insight that might be seen to apply to all education, formal and informal. Education is the bridge between what a young person has been and what they will be, and becoming educated inevitably involves a loss of childhood, and whatever values may have been associated with that childhood.

Having recognized that something quintessentially African was lost through European education, Assie-Lumumba argues for the reinstatement of what has been lost in education. What has been lost is a rich oral tradition, and above all, indigenous languages which embody a more social view of the world.

The problem with this argument is that the European tradition, which reaches its height in the European tradition of education, is a written tradition. By writing things down and leaving a record, Europeans developed a tradition of criticism and critique which led to improvement and increasingly ambitious attempts to understand the world. To achieve that end, they had to standardize their written languages, suppress minority languages and dialects, either actively
or by neglect, and create a system by which such knowledge could be stored and retrieved.

It would be foolishness to maintain that this tradition is exclusively a European one. Writing originated in Africa, Mesopotamia, or Asia and came to Europe relatively later on. Untangling the origins of knowledge is a complex matter at the best of times, and when we are addressing the origin of written records, for which there are scant written records, the problems are insurmountable.

Having inflicted standardization on themselves as the price for universal access to books and education, European colonizers and especially missionaries presumably saw no particular reason for restraint when confronted with other cultures with oral traditions, and set about developing writing systems so that those cultures could be recorded. What does it now mean to talk about returning to education in indigenous African languages? The written form of those languages has had an important European input. Will education seek to restore the oral tradition that predated colonization?

The goal of Ubuntu is “decolonizing the mind.” It is not clear what this means, as trying to trace the origin of every piece of knowledge that one might have, through Europe, back to the Islamic scholars of Spain and thence to Asia or Africa would be a very major task, and not one that holds out a very strong prospect of success.

If Ubuntu was alone in the field of comparative education, it would presumably do little harm. But it is an exemplar of a tendency toward reinstating “indigenous knowledge” or “indigenous knowledges,” although, again, what is intended, beyond a polemic against European dominance of knowledge creation, is not very clear. There are certain policy decisions that seem to be held up as universally good, and even unquestionable. Early childhood education is best conducted in the child’s mother tongue. Human rights provide the best, or possibly the only framework for understanding conflict situations. Indigenous cultures and languages need to be preserved at all times and in all contexts.

The significance of this move toward valuing the indigenous and decolonization is marked by the production, in May 2017, of a special (blue/supplementary) issue of *Comparative Education Review*, on “Contesting Coloniality: Rethinking knowledge production and circulation in comparative and international education.” In that volume, Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell (2017, p. S4) argue that:

> When such influential figures as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, and more contemporary scholars such as Luhmann, Foucault, Bourdieu, Giddens, and Beck, are shown to lack an understanding of coloniality and thus have a flawed and parochial understanding of modernity, the scholarship in CIE that has used their theories is also called into question.

This makes very clear that it is the origin of ideas, rather than their quality, by whatever measure that may be indicated, that is of importance. This is to come down firmly on the side of authority rather than rationality in Cassirer’s account of history.

Later in the same article (Takayama et al., 2017, p. S12), they quote Paulston’s description of US aid logic; subtract the receiving country’s system from
the American ideal and what remains is the aid project. They comment that “Paulston’s discussion of the model, ideal, and subtraction is logically indistinguishable from Kandel’s call for adaptation to local culture, condition, and needs.” What is missing from this account is that Paulston offers this as self-critique and describes it as the starting point of his departure from this model of study. It seems that narratives can influence the interpretation of evidence, and not only in the undecolonized mind. Again, the stark dichotomies are maintained at the expense of nuance, with no distinction being drawn between the purposes of those who provided funding and the purposes of those who took advantage of the opportunities such funding offered.

In the same volume, Stein (2017, p. S41) argues for the development of knowledge ecology in which different types of knowledge would be valued for the interventions that they enable within a particular context, rather than for their ability to “objectively” or “authentically” represent reality across all contexts. Within this ecology, multiple knowledges might coexist without a battle for hegemony or a demand for synthesis, because each is understood to offer context-specific, partial, and provisional gifts, just as each has attendant limitations and ignorances that it must bracket in order for its internal logic to work.

We have been here before. This is the supposed “incommensurability” of paradigms that was proposed by Kuhn (1962). Each “type of knowledge” represents a gestalt, or coherent whole, so that once inside that framework it is impossible to see another in its own terms. We have also been here before in comparative education, with Epstein and Carroll’s (2005) strident critique of the ultra-relativism offered by Rust and Paulston. Postmodernism has morphed into postcolonialism, but holds out the same goal of a variety of coexisting knowledges which have nothing to say about each other. Except, of course, that Stein obviously does not mean that. If she really felt that different types of knowledge were incommensurable, she would have no grounds for criticizing the “Euro-supremacist” type, with its claims to objectivity and universality. One can hardly complain about the search for universal accounts being part of the Western tradition; it is part of the gestalt, and one takes it or leaves it.

One can complain that the Western supremacist view has been disseminated and supported by violence or economic coercion, and one can as easily do that from inside the Western tradition as from outside it. One can, that is to say, complain about what Stein (2017) calls the framing of the Western tradition. But to complain about its content, from this perspective, is illogical.

It is this dependence on illogical and sometimes contradictory arguments that is the most corrosive aspect of these arguments. As I have commented elsewhere in the context of enforced bans on smoking in public (Turner, 2007, p. 154), I might be in favor of such policies, while still objecting to the logic that is used to support them, which depend upon the kind of question to which there is no possible answer: When did you stop oppressing the weak and marginalized of this earth? Ubuntu is an approach that unifies and creates communities, and seeks more complex understandings through a holistic approach, and yet it seems to be acceptable to characterize colonialism as a conflict between two entirely
homogeneous groups: Africans and Europeans. There are indigenous people, and there are the other kinds, whatever that may be.

This is part of a growing trend toward the view that authentic scholarly research can only be conducted by insiders. Research in the “South,” must be conducted by people from the “South.” One can abhor a state of affairs in which people from the “North” treated others as mere objects and collected data to develop research programs that served their own career ends, without any consideration of the impact this might have on their “subjects,” and yet still not accept the theoretical proposition that research can only be conducted by insiders. One of the attractions of comparative education, and one of its main advantages, is that the distance of the outsider can sometimes add a different perspective, provide an alternative view.

In the balance between authority and reason, we have moved too far in the direction of authority, giving privileged voice to those who are on the inside. Our field is imagined as a set of competing paradigms, each unable to converse with the others, each only properly understood by those who have made a leap of faith to enter that paradigm. This extreme relativism was described by Popper (1996) as “the myth of the framework.”

A weaker form of relativism accepts that individuals are the best witnesses on the subject of their own attitudes. This makes it possible to do rather lazy research, so long as it is couched in terms of the attitudes of the sample population. If we want to know the attitudes of teachers on topic X, Y, or Z, nothing could be easier than designing a questionnaire or interview schedule, and reporting what they say when asked for their attitudes. If they are the best witnesses, their comments cannot be challenged, and no interpretation is necessary. If comparative education were like that, then any hope of describing the field at all would be forlorn.

But actually we expect (not always wisely) the outsider to interpret for us, to go behind what is actually said, to explain how he or she understands the findings. The researcher, as outsider, should be making an effort to translate between paradigms, to develop a theoretical understanding that is not available to those who are fully immersed in the situation. The outsider, perhaps more than the insider who can develop an intuitive feel for the situation, needs clearly delineated theories and frameworks to navigate the phenomena under review. To this extent, all comparative study is a debate.

The question that we need to address, if we are to understand our debates fully, is, what can we learn from the debates that we are not having? It is possible that the debates of the 1960s and 1970s disappeared because they were resolved, in which case we should be able to summarize the conclusions of the field, and arrive at a clear definition of comparative education as it is now to be practised. But it is more likely, and I will argue here, that what has actually happened is that one side of those debates has come to predominate by default. And the task of comparative education, to clarify and illustrate those debates, has been let drop.

To take one example of a debate that is not being had, I return for the moment to Cassirer, and his argument that epistemology has been a struggle between
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rationality and authority. In that debate, we seem to have settled fairly firmly on the side of authority, in the sense that who presents a statement counts for more, and is given more attention, than whether it is of any value in itself. We need to hear from the voices of the marginalized and excluded. Well, of course we do, but that is not the only criterion of what is worth hearing.

Themes of recent CIES conferences often refer this reshaping of knowledges and making spaces for multiple voices as though the fact that a voice has not been heard necessarily means that it has something new or valuable to say. Marx suggested that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. This was a criticism of society and the fact that only certain privileged people had an opportunity to express themselves fully. But Marx’s point was a political one, not an epistemological one. The power of the ruling class means they have a louder voice. And to correct this, marginalized groups need to be given a louder voice. But that does not mean that what the marginalized people say is necessarily wiser, or truer, or is given a pass on critical examination. Our debates on epistemology should allow for the other side of the debate as well. Indigenous knowledges have traditionally been given too little attention. But more recently, we have passed into a phase when indigenous knowledges are given too little critical attention. We patronize, rather than respect, marginalized groups if we do not accord them the exposure to harsh critique that they deserve.

I stand with Steve Klees, that what is important in our field is the debates and that wherever a discussion seems to be passing by default we should actively look for the contrary argument. Instead, I regret to say our field has been overrun by a number of fashions that have their origin outside comparative education, sometimes outside academia and sometimes in overtly political expressions. As an example, we might consider the case that all human societies and in all places are to be governed and understood in terms of universal human rights. End of debate.

The debate ends because it is assumed that there is a source of universal human rights, which is and always has been accessible to those who can see things aright. So what of those milestone documents that chronicle the progress of human rights? Magna Carta, the Constitution of the United States of America, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UNESCO Declaration on the Rights of the Child: Are they nothing more than the codification of rights that already existed, or do they provide a reference point for individuals to claim those rights? There is a debate to be had here about the ontological status of rights, and the epistemology of how we know about them and can claim them. To talk about rights in some abstract way, without linking them to the mechanisms by which they can be asserted, is to disempower those who are most likely to need to assert their rights all over again.

The abstraction of discussion of human rights reaches its peak in the concept of “global citizenship.” A person cannot be a global citizen; she is the citizen of a specific nation-state. Many of those nation-states have fine constitutions that enshrine the rights of the citizens of that state. But it is the instruments of the state, especially the courts of that state, that provide the route by which a citizen can assert her rights. If a parliament or a court does not exist in which those
rights can be upheld, then the assertion of a right in a constitution is worthless. And those institutions are almost entirely at the national level, not the supranational or global level. There are notable exceptions, in the European Court of Human Rights and the International Court of the Hague, but they are of minor significance to most people in the world.

The greatest value of comparative education, in my view, is that it makes it almost unnecessary to argue for the importance of debate. No sooner has one come to an understanding of how and why something is done in a particular way in a national education system than a counter example will arise in another system. Properly understood, comparative education challenges the foundations of how we think about society, people, and educational institutions. Our debates are our contribution to clarifying those ideas and testing them in the most rigorous way.

I have argued that there is a trend in recent years, although it may have been going on for longer, to let some of those debates go by the board. The result is that comparative education suffers. Comparative education needs more debate. Not debate for its own sake, but debate that helps to clarify ideas, that tests ideas, and ensures that only the fittest survive. It is time that we reinvigorated debate in our field to ensure that the worst ideas are culled, irrespective of how loudly they are voiced or by whom or with what authority.

**CONCLUSION**

Debates are vital to the field of comparative education and to its definition. The debates are not unique to comparative education, but comparative education raises those debates in a critical and almost unavoidable form. Comparative education provides counter examples, difficulties of defining categories, problems over evidence, and so on, in sharper and more acute ways than fields of study where a consensus over definitions can more easily be assumed. This is one of the fascinations of comparative education.

A loss of vigor in those debates is, therefore, a threat to the future health of the field. Moreover, knowledge of the history of those debates can provide a useful perspective on the field. All fields of knowledge are subject to fashions and trends. The hard sciences are no exception, and what counts as explanation in the physical sciences has changed over the last 300 years or so, during which scientific progress has been recorded in the Annals of the Royal Society. At the beginning of that period, the great inventor-scientist was seen as a practical man (usually man) who could design a clever piece of apparatus or perform a convincing experiment. Somewhere around the beginning of the nineteenth century, this view of the inventor–scientist shifted, and theoreticians were given pre-eminence. Similarly, though slightly later, physical explanations moved away from direct mechanical accounts to include field theory and action at a distance, a notion that Newton had regarded as the utmost nonsense.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that our field also shows trends and patterns over the years in what is held to be valuable and of interest. It seems that
even the World Bank is moving away from the dogma it held to for decades, based on the rate of return analysis, that investment should focus on the early years of education (Independent Evaluation Group, 2017). They are now embracing the idea that investment in higher education is needed, not least to meet the need for places created by successful investment in basic education. Of course, this is the World Bank, so one does not expect them to change to a new policy without incorporating some new nonsense, in this case the idea that higher education is of value only if it contributes to employability. But the simplistic acceptance of the analyses of economics of education appears to be in decline.

It may seem ironic that Paulston should appear as the villain, representing positivism in one paper (Stein, 2017) and representing ultra-relativism in another (Epstein & Carroll, 2005). Or that I should take Klees’ vision of debates in our field as my starting point, and then argue that we have taken a human rights approach for granted, while Klees (2016) offers a human rights approach as a corrective to human capital. But this is an indication of the complexity of the debates and of the need to see each argument in context. It also explains why it is especially important when, for example, Cowen (2017) draws attention to debates that we have not been having or perspectives we have ignored.

Understanding our debates should also give some clues as to which aspects of our field are lasting, and which are merely passing fashions.

Engaging in a debate does not always and in all cases mean presenting both sides of the debate in some kind of pseudo-balance. But it does imply an awareness of where those debates are, and a special sensitivity over explaining and/or justifying choices that are made in the process of developing an account. Above all, the existence of those debates should serve as a reminder not to be too reliant on simplistic explanations, and not to place too much reliance on categories that are, as they must be, abstractions from events.

REFERENCES


