

Part 1

Comparative and International Education & History of Education

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“Lessons from Around the World”: *Raison d’être* and Achilles Heel of Comparative and International Education

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to tease out the caveats in the much vogue exercise of drawing lessons from foreign systems of education — the theme of this book, with the final objective that this will point to the parameters appropriate for the discourse and for the reader when reflecting on the topics touched upon in this book. The paper commences with a survey of the historical evolution of the field of Comparative and International Education, demonstrating how the motivation for extracting “lessons” from other education systems has been a key feature of the field, and increasingly so in contemporary times. The caveats to exercise, related to the salience and complexity of context, to the nature of the act of education, and to the undermining of the professional autonomy of the teacher are then pointed out. These parameters should be respected in any discourse on taking education lessons from around the world. At the same time, these parameters present scholars of Comparative and International Education an opportunity to prove their value in the twenty-first century world.

Keywords: Comparative and International Education, education, education reforms, education system context, societal context

Introduction

For its entire history, “lessons” from the education of other countries (or systems or institutions), in terms of best ideas, policies and practices, have been a major source of inspiration for conducting comparative studies of education and for justifying the existence of the scholarly field of Comparative and International Education. Developments in the last thirty years have given this practice a new lease of life. Yet this exercise is at the same time fraught with dangers, as is also pointed out by a growing corpus of literature.

The theme of this volume is *New challenges to education, ‘lessons from around the world’* and indeed where education faces challenges all over the world, many of which are universal challenges or at least common to large parts of the world, it is natural that object lessons will be looked for in other parts of the world. The aim of this paper is to tease out the caveats in such an exercise, with the final objective that

this will point to the parameters appropriate for the discourse and for the reader when reflecting on the topics touched upon in this book.

The paper commences with a survey of the historical evolution of the field of Comparative and International Education, showing how the motivation for extracting “lessons” from other education systems has been a key feature of the field, even increasingly so in contemporary times. The second part of the paper then enumerates the caveats involved in such an undertaking. In conclusion then the parameters for engaging in extracting lessons from other education systems are spelled out.

The historical evolution of Comparative and International Education: Extracting lessons from abroad the *raison d’être*

The historical evolution of the scholarly field of Comparative and International Education is commonly depicted as seven phases (see Wolhuter, 2021). The first five phases till the end of the 1960s, are derived from the phaseology of two leading scholars in the field Harold Noah and Max Eckstein. They named these a phase of travellers’ tales, a phase of the systematic study of foreign education system with the intention of borrowing, a phase of international cooperation, a “factors and forces” phase, and a social science phase. The last three phases, taking the story from the 1960s were named by Roland Paulston as a phase of orthodoxy (this is the same as the social science phase of the Noah & Eckstein phaseology), a phase of heterodoxy, and a phase of heterogeneity. These phases do not represent a sequence, i.e. one phase replacing the preceding, but a progressive expansion of the field, with each phase continuing up to today.

The first two phases are regarded as prescientific phases in the historical evolution of the field. While it can easily be argued that travellers’ tales inspire listeners or readers to take lessons to heart, it is especially in the phase of the systematic study of foreign education systems (and institutions) with the intention to borrow best ideas, policies and practices to improve the domestic education project, that the motivation, actually the prime motivation, of extracting lessons comes to the fore.

While the phase of international cooperation pursued the lofty final goal of the improvement of the state and conditions of the world and of humanity, even in the publication of Marc-Antoine Jullien, the ground-layer of this phase and commonly called the “father of Comparative Education”, he saw borrowing of best education practices and policies between nations as a step towards this ideal (see Wolhuter, 2019). The purpose of his suggested collection of data from the education systems of all nations, and collating these in league tables, is evidence of this.

The “factors and forces” phase, reaching its zenith during the era of inward-looking nationalism between the two World Wars, and taking its cue from Michael Sadler’s 1900 Guildford lecture, predicated on the uniqueness of each national context and national education system, may seem to rule out of bounds any exercise of borrowing. Yet, reading Wesley Null’s (2020) recent biography of Isaac Kandel — central figure in the field in this phase — shows how much the ideal of borrowing the best was a burning ambition in the scholars of the phase. For Kandel the finest product of comparative study of education was for the student to analyse his/her own system of education and, from comparative studies, to add something to

the underlying philosophy shaping his/her own system of education, in an effort towards improving that system (Null, 2020, p. 42).

The social science phase as from the 1960s stands on the unbounded belief in the societal ameliorative potential of education, and that nations can learn and take over from each other as far as education is concerned. The whole theory of modernization, which became the main theoretical framework of the field in the 1960s and early 1970s, is based on the premise of the developing world (as the Global South was then termed) can take lessons from the developed world, also in their education development. In his much cited article on the use and abuse of Comparative Education, one of the main scholars of the phase, Harold Noah (1986) enumerates “help in decision making”, that is drawing lessons from other nations, as one of the uses of Comparative Education. While a fixation on paradigms is often portrayed as the signature feature of the phase of heterodoxy (as from the 1970s), it is not difficult to detect the learning of lessons from abroad as constantly appearing rationale. For example, Robert Arnove’s article on the 1980 Nicaraguan National Literacy Crusade, commences with parading the three exemplary adult literacy crusades in history (Cuba in 1961, Tanzania in the 1970s, and Nicaragua in 1980) as object lessons for other countries desirous of achieving universal adult literacy.

It has been, however, in the past generation (roughly since 1990) that the extraction of lessons from foreign education systems gained new currency in the public discourse of education, and riding on the back of that, new value in the field of Comparative and International Education. The contextual forces which favoured this turn of events include the rise of knowledge economies (giving more value to education as factor in the cut-throat competition between nations), the rise of what Thomas Friedman calls a “flat earth” (that is where the advantages that natural resources have bestowed upon countries have been wiped out by technological progress, in the new world competition between nations will be a function of political environment and expertise), globalization, the neo-liberal economic revolution, and the information and communications technological revolution. International test series such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, and the colossal ranking of universities industry supply the data bases for these exercises. How strong a reference point the league tables stemming from these tests have become in both the public and scholarly discourse of education, is evident from publications such as Michael Crossley’s 2018 Presidential Address of BAICE (British Association of International and Comparative Education) (Crossley, 2019), the edited volume of Alexander Wiseman (2010), and the top selling book of Pasi Sahlberg, *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* (Sahlberg, 2010) prompted by Finland coming unexpectedly out tops of the first round of PISA tests, and other nations scrambling to see which lessons they can take from the Finnish education experience. This has been one of the very rare instances in which a book in the field of Comparative and International Education manage to become a top seller among the wider reading public.

The problematique of extracting lessons from foreign systems of education

In the meantime a steady stream of literature pointing out the caveats involved in attempting to use foreign education systems as a source for lessons to improve the

domestic education project, including, in the recent past, the use of league tables of large international assessments as a starting point of such an exercise (e.g. see Klemenčič & Mirazchiyski, 2019; Meyer & Benavot, 2013).

To commence with, scholars of Comparative Education have long warned, justifiably and by substantiating their claims, the folly of exporting best practices (i.e. take lessons) from one context to another, without factoring in contextual similarities and differences between exporting and importing context. In fact, this has been the trade scholars of the field profess, especially when they criticize such exercises proposed by governments and other authors who, inconsiderately, and based on prejudices write eulogies on particular systems of education. Examples are copious, but there is for example Jonathan Kozol’s *Children of the Revolution: A Yankee teacher in the Cuban Schools* (1978) on Cuban education, and the book review of this volume by leading Comparative Education scholar Erwin Epstein (1979). It is not only with respect to naïve lay (those not versed in the literature of Comparative Education) preachers of borrowing of best ideas, policies and practices that contextual negation can be detected. The societal and education system contexts in which education take place, each are of such complexity — each consists of a host of components, each of these components in turn consists of a long list of elements, and these components and elements can take on an infinitely number of configurations or permutations in a particular education system, so much so, that even in the most meticulous and elaborate of scholarly comparison a complete factoring in of all contextual similarities and differences is an impossible task.

Further to problem the infinitely complexity of contextual configurations there is the problem of the act of education being to at least a significant degree a voluntary act of indeterminacy, of at least two partners: the agency of the educand and that of the educator. This feature of education, often overlook by protagonists of “evidence based” policy or practice, has recently been explicated clearly in the book *The Beautiful Risk of Education* of Philosopher of Education, Gert Biesta (2014).

But apart from the indeterminacy or open nature of education, there is another facet of education which renders the taking of lessons, or of “evidence based policy” problematic. Taking lessons or then evidence based education decision/planning is based not only on objectionable extrapolating $x \rightarrow y$ relations, but it also implies a very narrow, technicist, instrumentalist take on education, and says nothing about the goals or objectives of education. Education has always a teleological side, that is it has an objective in mind in the sense of the formation of character, the internalisation of values, the realisation of capabilities. As Biesta (2020) in his recent critique on conventional education indicates, this side of education is not touched upon, and is beyond the reach, of any technicist “evidence based” policy or practice, or taking of lessons from others. If there is any doubt about this crucial side of education, the question can just be posed: “is all learning education?” — learning to engage in slave trade? Child abduction? Instruction in the executing of criminal activities? On the normative final objection of education, taking over best practices or policies cannot pronounce a judgement or provide any counsel.

Finally there is also the caveat of a system premised on learning lessons from others degenerating into a very prescriptive environment, crowding out all discretionary space and professional autonomy of the teacher. One of the distinguishing features of a profession is after all that the professional is engaged in

work activities of a non-stereotypical nature, where each case requires specific, even unique responses, to be made based on the expertise knowledge and professional judgement of the professional. This danger in a system of evidence based informed (or dictated) practice — besides all the other dangers involved, as outlined in earlier paragraphs — has been pointed out by Biesta (2020) as well as by scholars of Comparative Education, such as Dubeck, Jukes and Okello (2012), these scholars point out how the unique contextual configurations in each classroom alone render national policies of “one size fits all” render meaningless if not outright useless or even dangerous, and necessitate granting teachers the flexibility of professional autonomy.

Conclusion

Thus it appears that despite how much it is in the vogue in the world of today, taking lessons from foreign education systems, is an exercise fraught with danger. It would be foolish to discard all of the world’s experience with education, or to descend what Meadows (2019), in the face of infinitely contextual complexity, calls “context paralysis”, but the parameters set by the specificity and complexity of contextual configurations and the nature of education, should be respected when engaged in a quest to collect lessons from foreign education systems. In here, especially with the first proviso, is an opportunity for scholars of Comparative Education to ply their trade and prove their mettle in the world.

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