

# Part 1

## Comparative and International Education

### Education at the Crossroads: Comparative and International Education to Show the Way?

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#### Abstract

This paper first surveys the momentous societal changes currently taking place worldwide. This new societal context has placed education at a crossroads, offering unprecedented opportunities and threats, but in any case, it means that momentous decisions regarding education will have to be made. In contemplating the changes in society and deciding on the responses in the education sector, Comparative and International Education as a field of scholarship is uniquely placed to guide society to make informed decisions by the very nature of its object of study and the purposes it pursues. However, to live up to its full potential, several changes in the field are imperative. These include developing a forward or future-looking orientation in the field, giving due attention to education systems per se as well as to the societal outcomes of education, moving away from the fixation on matters about theory and paradigms, and at the same time developing autochthonous theory, and dismantling Northern hegemony and let the Global South comes to its right.

Keywords: Comparative and International Education, Global South, Global North

#### Introduction

Education systems worldwide stand at a pivotal juncture. It is necessary to reimagine teaching and learning for a rapidly evolving world. The XXIII Bulgarian Comparative Education Society Conference explores innovative approaches to prepare educators and students for an uncertain future. The BCES Conference serves as a vital hub for educators, researchers, and policymakers to engage in critical dialogue and collaborative

efforts within the ever-evolving education landscape. The conference provides a space for participants to present their findings and gain valuable feedback, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of the conference theme, *Education at a Crossroads*. Being the opening paper at Thematic Session 1 of the conference, and the first paper in Part 1 of the Conference Book, the aim of this study is firstly to provide a survey of current societal changes that have placed education at the crossroads, then secondly to reflect on the challenges these changes pose to education, and thirdly to reflect on the role of the scholarly field of Comparative and International Education to show the way to craft an education dispensation responding to the call of changing times. This can set the frame and tone for discussions at the Conference and subsequent papers in the book.

## Current societal changes impacting education

A clutch of current societal changes is currently being implemented in education. As an analytical framework, the customary rubrics used in Comparative Education studies, namely geography, demography, level of scientific and technological progress, socio-cultural trends, economy, politics, religion, and life and world philosophy, will be used. As to geography, the most compelling societal feature is the ecological crisis, where not only the survival of humanity, but even the survival of the planet is at stake. A striking metric of the seriousness of the ecological crisis is the Earth Overshoot Day, which in 2024 was 1 August, and has been steadily moving earlier in the past years and decades (Myclimate, 2024).

Salient demographic trends include the population explosion, changing age pyramids, and increasing demographic mobility. On 16 November 2022, the global population total reached the 8 billion mark. While the countries of the Global North are approaching, some even have reached zero population growth rates, the population explosion is continuing in the Global South. These dynamics give rise to changing population age pyramids. The nations of the Global North are characterized by aging populations, whereas the nations of the Global South find the mature section of their population (15-65 years) expanding most of all age groups. Then the people of the world are getting more and more mobile.

As far as science and technology are concerned, the most salient trend is the accelerating progress in science and technology. Particular areas of scientific and technological progress are agricultural development and transformation, biotechnology, information, the robot revolution, and above all, the information and communication technology (ICT) revolution (Harari, 2024). Humanity is faced with Artificial Intelligence, the end of or possibilities of which are unknown at this stage.

Turning to social trends, the domination of the primary social grouping, that is the family, is diminishing. This applies to both roles and styles of living. The secondary social grouping, the workplace, is declining in importance too. With the decline in the percentage of people who have a “job for a lifetime”, and the rise of contract work, temporary work, people working from home, and the rise of the informal economic sector and self-employment, the workplace is bound to decline in importance. On the other hand, tertiary social groupings (that is functional interest groups) on the other hand, are rising in importance, due to trends such as the empowerment of interest groups by the communication and information technology revolutions. Another trend is that societies are getting more diverse (or multicultural, a term which was at some time in the vogue).

Political trends include the demise of the once omnipotent nation-state and the shifting of the locus of power in two opposite directions. The first is upwards towards larger geographic units, namely supra-national and international or global structures, and organizations. The second is downwards towards decentralized and local structures, and eventually right down to the level of the individual. Since 1990, a wave of democratization has spread over the world. However, in the past ten years, there have been ominous trends of a regression of democracy and a rise of populism.

On the religion side, religion has a persistent presence among people, although a changed (compared to the past) presence. Features of the new presence of religion include that many people are religious but do not belong to organized religious structures, people have more personalized belief systems, rather than completely subscribing to the dogma of a religious grouping, and people can be placed on a spectrum between being religious and being spiritual: some people are both religious and spiritual, some people are spiritual but not religious, some people are religious but not spiritual, and some people are neither spiritual nor religious. Over the past thirty-five years, the Creed of Human Rights has assumed the status of a Universal Moral Code for a globalized world (although, in line with the regression of democracy and the rise of populism, there has been some backsliding detectable in recent years).

## Education brought to a crossroads

The above-outlined momentous societal changes have brought education to a crossroads. Historically evolved education systems do not respond to the imperatives of contemporary times. Four examples will be discussed here.

The universal and easy access to knowledge (using the internet) means the historical emphasis on rote learning and building a stock of knowledge seems to have become outmoded. Given the abundance of information and the phenomenon of fake truth, higher-order education objectives, such as analysis, synthesis, critical thought, creative thought, and above all, evaluation of knowledge, should receive more attention. At the same time, the abundance of fake truth and propaganda means that the existence of a stock of basic knowledge for every educand or student cannot be disregarded as being of no relevance or value. How Artificial Intelligence will and should be incorporated into education (teaching and learning) still needs to be worked out, too.

One of the objectives of formal education systems has always been to equip the educand for work. The 2019 World Bank Development Report, entitled *The Changing Nature of Work*, outlines how the nature of work in the world is changing alongside technological developments. Three types of skills are increasingly important in labor markets: advanced cognitive skills such as complex problem-solving, socio-behavioral skills such as teamwork, and skill combinations that are predictive of adaptability, such as reasoning and self-efficacy (World Bank, 2019). Education systems will need to pay heed to these changes and demands for new skills.

However, the objectives of education should be much more than just vocational. The imperative for preparation for life in its fullness has attained new urgency given current technological progress, which, according to some, is rapidly making work redundant. In his recently published book, *Deep Utopia: Life and meaning in a solved world*, Nick Bostrom (2024) explores the spiritual and existential dimensions, ethical and social questions in a world where AI and other technology have made the world redundant; and where individuals must find new ways to derive meaning and fulfillment in their lives.

The question is also, what do justice and social justice mean, what will happiness mean, and what will a good life mean in such a world?

One aspect of education worthy of reconsideration is the relationship between religion in education. In the past sixty years, two salient trends regarding the relationship between religion and education can be discerned. The first is that of secularization: removing religious education from public education. The second is that of integrative religion education: teaching students about the diversity of religions in the world, with the ultimate objective of promoting interreligious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. However, banning confessional religious education from schools lies at odds with the place of religion in the lives of the majority of people on earth, and the principles contained in the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights that education should be directed at the development of the full personality and the principle that parents have a prior right as to the kind of education their children will receive.

## Comparative and International Education

It is in this flurry of the new world that the field of Comparative and International Education finds itself. To reflect on how scholars in the field should position themselves vis-à-vis this new world, it is certainly necessary first to gain clarity as to what Comparative and International Education is all about. While a range of definitions of Comparative and International Education exist, this author (Wolhuter, 2022) has argued that Comparative and International Education can be defined as the study of education from a three-in-one perspective:

- An education system perspective: Comparative and International Education studies education systems.
- A contextual perspective: An education system is studied within its societal context, and is regarded as being shaped by, or as being the outcome of, societal forces, and secondly, the societal outcomes of education systems, or the effect of education systems on societal contexts, are also studied.
- A comparative perspective: Comparative Education studies various education systems, shaped by their societal contexts, and how these systems in turn impact their societal contextual interrelationships, is compared.

In recent years, it has been argued that the field of Comparative Education should be superseded by Comparative and International Education, where International Education refers to the study of education from a global perspective. The significance and purposes of Comparative and International Education are customary – by scholars in the field and textbooks of Comparative and International Education – enumerated as the description of education systems, the explanation or understanding of education systems, the improvement of education practice (both at the level of policy formulation and the institutional and classroom levels), serving other fields of Education scholarship, in furthering the philanthropic ideal (Wolhuter, 2017, 2024). The improvement of practice entails learning from the best ideas, policies, and practices from foreign education systems to improve the domestic or national education system.

Thus, it behooves the field of Comparative and International Education to guide in restructuring the education systems of the world, to rise up to the occasion of the new societal context. However, in order to live up to this promise, a number of significant

reforms need to be undertaken within the field itself. Some of these will now be highlighted.

In the first place, the issue of the aims or objectives of education needs to be foregrounded again on the research agenda and discussion forum of the field. For long, scholars in the field have eschewed this prime element of education systems (Wolhuter, 2008; Wolhuter et al., 2025).

Then, Comparative and International Education has a long “rear-mirror” tradition of fixating on education systems as being the outcomes of historical forces. Given a fast-changing world facing education, a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn is needed, looking at the fast-approaching and unfolding future challenging the education systems of the world.

A third feature hampering the field from living up to its potential of rendering an impact or guiding education reform is the unbalanced or lopsided foci of attention. If the scope of the field can be divided into three broad areas, namely shaping (societal) forces of education system, education system features and dynamics, and societal outcomes of education systems, then firstly, the field has long been characterized what Gail Kelly, Philip Altbach and Robert Arnove (1982) first named as the “black box” nature of the field, namely that scholars pay more attention to things outside the education, that is the societal shaping forces of education (entailing geography, demography, socio-cultural features and dynamics, state of technological development, economy, politics, and life and world philosophy), rather than the features and dynamics of education systems per se and everyday practice in classrooms and schools. Secondly, very little attention is paid to the individual and societal outcomes of education, even though the current global education expansion and reform project is fueled by high hopes as to the potential of education to effect beneficial changes in the lives of individuals (such as higher income generating ability) and the well-being of society (such as to eradicate unemployment or to entrench a culture of democracy).

A fourth feature of the field working against it rendering a demonstrable impact on education, is the, in one way paradoxical feature, of being at the same time fixated on the theoretical or paradigmatic bases of the field, and the absence of an autochthonous theory to serve as framework for the generation, ordering and interpretation of knowledge in the field. For at least since the early 1960s, the biggest single occupation or focal point of research of scholars in the field has been the interrogation and defense and (less often) criticism of theoretical frameworks or paradigms (Wolhuter, 2008, 2015; Wolhuter et al., 2025). At the same time, scholars are subsisting on the theoretical frameworks and paradigms of related fields, notably Sociology, Political Science, Anthropology, and Economics.

A final disturbing feature of the field, also working against it delivering maximum impact on education practice, is that of Northern Hegemony. Northern hegemony is evident in the following strands: criticism of the imposition of one model of development; criticism of foreign aid and international agencies; anti-globalization; criticism of neo-liberal economics and its impact on education; calls for the decolonization of education and of Comparative and International Education; criticism of racism in education and in Comparative and International Education; lack of appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems; and allegations that scholars of the Global South find themselves on an unequal playing field (Wolhuter, 2024). A majority

of publications in the field are marked by a unique authorship pattern, and geographic and thematic foci of research continue to be authored by scholars located in the North.

## Conclusion

Thus, the current world is one of staggering changes, where a new world, hardly imaginable a short time ago, is taking shape. This new societal context has placed education at a crossroads, offering at the same time unprecedented opportunities and threats, but in any case, means that momentous decisions regarding education will have to be taken. In contemplating the changes in society and deciding on the responses in the education sector, Comparative and International Education as a field of scholarship is, by the very nature of its object of study and the purposes it pursues, uniquely placed to guide society to make informed decisions.

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