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# Book Review Comparative Education: The Construction of a Field

Article · January 2012

DOI: 10.14425/00.45.74 · Source: OAI

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## BOOK REVIEW

Comparative Education: The Construction of a Field,  
by Maria Manzon (2011), 395pp. ISBN: 978-988-1785-26-8,  
Hong Kong: Springer and the Comparative Education Research Centre,  
The University of Hong Kong.

The book under review is not for the faint-hearted nor for someone looking for a clear introduction to comparative education, what it is and what its parameters are. The expectation is that readers are already familiar with much of the existing literature and many of the arguments that have bedevilled the subject almost since its inception, but certainly from the 1960s onwards. Readers must also be able to decipher and understand certain sociological and philosophical styles of language and jargon, especially those of Foucault and Bourdieu. However those comments are in no way meant to disparage what is both an original and a valuable addition to the literature on comparative education.

The book is based on Dr Manzon's PhD thesis, for which she was awarded the Li Ka Shing Prize at the University of Hong Kong. The prize is not only awarded for an excellent thesis but it is also only awarded to the best of the elite students. The result is, therefore, as to be expected, a thorough, logical and analytical study of where the author thinks comparative education has come from and where it is going but, more importantly, where she thinks it fits into the social sciences. The author seeks to establish whether comparative education is an academic discipline, a methodology, a field or a sub-field of educational studies. To do this Dr Manzon looks at the history/histories of comparative education, the growth of different comparative education societies, the intellectual and academic debates surrounding the subject, some of the books and academic journals, as well as courses in university departments. Also, over several years, she has interviewed key figures in the field to sound out their views and opinions. Inevitably there is much that has had to be omitted.

Comparative education is today, as it has been since the end of World War II, a contested topic with limited agreement as to what it is, what legitimate topics it should cover, and what its parameters are. To help understand these issues Dr Manzon tries to answer the following questions:

'1) Why is comparative education institutionalised as a distinct field [though at page 2 she is not certain whether or not it is a field or a discipline!] when its intellectual distinctiveness seems to be blurred?

and 2) What is comparative education?'

While building on the past this book seeks to move the debate forward. It needs to be stressed that Dr Manzon is largely concerned with comparative education as an academic and theoretical subject. As a result she dismisses international education, global education, multi-cultural education and development education as parts of comparative education although there are many academics in the USA and the UK who would see these as legitimate aspects of comparative education research. She does so on the grounds that the latter components are more to do with practical application and policy and less to do with academia. The result is that she draws very heavily on a few of the more theoretical authors in the field – Cowen, Epstein, Garrida, Halls and Paulston, among others. In so doing she ignores a substantial number of authors from both Europe and the United States who would take issue with her narrow approach. Moreover she relies heavily on the writings and frameworks of Bourdieu and Foucault to help her in her argument of deconstructing comparative

education and of then looking through specific lenses to reach her conclusions. A background in the social sciences/ sociology is essential to get the most out of the book and its arguments.

The book is not just one more overview of the development of comparative education, though this is clearly there, albeit not in the depth of several recent works. Instead it is a detailed and thorough analysis of comparative education through the prism of Foucault and Bourdieu. Herein is part of its originality. Nor does it take a linear approach to the subject. Because it gradually builds up a detailed and highly logical argument there is a degree of repetition. This is regrettable, but inevitable, given the style in which it is written.

In looking at what the author calls 'The Empirical Substance and Mass that Constitute the Field of Comparative Education' she looks at the institutional growth of courses and university departments, the growth of academic journals and academic societies. She draws on other surveys for part of this though her analysis of power structures and ideology make for interesting reading. She argues that the growth of the subject in academic institutions has very much depended on the power structures and hierarchy within those institutions and the influence of key academics. In many instances when those academics have retired a department has often closed down. Her discussion of the development of comparative education journals could have been more detailed and critical but her analysis of national, regional and international comparative education societies makes for fascinating reading and a study of the very helpful appendices elaborates on her findings. She has been in a unique position regarding comparative education societies since she has been a part of different teams examining the histories of these societies in recent years. Interestingly her findings reveal a high level of amorphousness, a lack of clarity and commonality and fluidity in the boundaries of many societies.

In addressing the 'Intellectual Histories of Comparative Education' and the 'Intellectual Discourse of Comparative Education' the author shows how different and changing academic currents within the social sciences- modernism, postmodernism, Marxist conflict theory, dependency theory and structural functionalism – have all helped to shape the thinking behind comparative education. She does so not in any linear way but through examining different currents of thought and showing how these influenced the social sciences. There are at least two other areas of originality within all of this. The first comes from her examination of different cultural and linguistic alternative approaches to comparative education, what Cowen has called 'comparative educations'. She discusses how some of these have arisen as a result of shifts in political ideology and changing power relationships. Thus there are discussions about developments in China, Eastern Europe, Spain and Latin America as well as Africa and other parts of Asia. This makes a refreshing change from discussions about comparative education being dominated by British, Australian and American authors. The second comes from her analysis of what constitutes a discipline [theoretical/ philosophical] and her examination of different areas of comparative studies [eg. law, politics, literature, sociology etc].

While this is a useful and thoughtful addition to the literature on comparative education one cannot but think that the author had already made up her mind that comparative education is a field within educational studies before she embarked upon writing the book. Although Dr Manzon explores the rationale of a discipline she dismisses comparative education as being one. Many hints give the reader the impression from early on in the book that she has regarded the subject as a field, or even a sub-field, of educational studies. Towards the end of the book the author says that 'Comparative education, strictly speaking, refers to the academic *sub-field* of education studies, which analyses in comparative perspective educational systems and processes in two or more national or cultural contexts, and their interaction with their social environments....' [p. 204]. A little further on develops this further: 'Comparative education is strictly speaking an interdisciplinary *sub-field* of education studies that systematically examines the similarities and differences between education systems in two or more national or cultural contexts, and their interactions with their intra-and extra-educational environments,' [p. 215]. Apart from the fact that these statements incorporate aspects of what many comparativists have said over the years there would be many who would question the narrowness of comparative education as only being concerned with 'education systems.' Education consists of

far more than school systems or university systems. The administration frameworks, the underlying political philosophies, the religious and ethnic mixture of societies, the approach to teacher education and the role of teachers in different societies are all key aspects of education systems. The place of the private sector, policies on language or gender also have crucial parts to play and all are subject to useful, nay valuable, comparative insights. But then Dr Manzon would argue that these were peripheral to the 'pure' aspects of comparative education and would more legitimately fit under the umbrella of 'international education.' Many, however, especially in international organisations like the World Bank and the OECD would argue that there is no place for comparative education unless its findings can be usefully used for reform within one or more societies. This was the view of many of the early writers like Bereday, Hans, Mallinson, Holmes and King. There is clearly much in this book that could lead to some interesting and stimulating debates in the future. Let us hope that Dr Manzon's writings will prove to be an inspiration for this to happen.

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