

Education, Globalisation and the Role of Comparative Research

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ABSTRACT Comparative education has traditionally meant the study of national education systems. But how far is this approach valid today? Doesn't the 'decline' of the nation state make national systems obsolete? Isn't the very idea of a 'system' anachronistic in a world of market triumphalism and global disorganization? The purpose of this article is to explore how globalisation is changing education and the implication of this for comparative study. Why study education systems and why study national education systems in particular? What else should comparativists study, and how? What defines the field of comparative education? These questions are approached first historically and secondly methodologically.

Introduction

Comparative education has traditionally meant the study of national education systems. The field first developed in the early nineteenth century in parallel with the rise of national education, and it took the national system as its main object of enquiry (Noah & Epstein, 1969). The twentieth century comparativists who consolidated it as an academic subject, including Michael Sadler, Isaac Kandel and Nicholas Hans, continued to focus on the classification and explanation of characteristics of different national systems. But how far is this approach valid today? Doesn't the 'decline' of the nation state make national systems obsolete? And isn't the very idea of a 'system' anachronistic in a world of market triumphalism and global disorganization? As Peter Jarvis asks in a recent edition of *Comparative Education*, 'Why should we undertake comparative analysis at all in this Global Village?' (Jarvis, 2000, p. 353).

These are tough questions for comparative educationalists because the concept of the national education system forms the keystone of the whole mental architecture of comparative education. It may be hard to think comparative without it. Nevertheless, the question has been rightly posed and needs answering. The purpose of this article is to explore how globalisation is changing education and the implication of this for comparative study. Why study education systems and why study national education systems in particular? What else should comparativists study, and how? What defines the field of comparative education? I approach these questions first historically and secondly methodologically.

The Parallel Rise of Comparative Education and National Education Systems

Writing about education in foreign countries has a long history, going back in fact to Antiquity. Xenophon described the training of Persian youth for Citizenship, comparing the aims and structures of Persian and Greek education; Julius Caesar, in his *De Bello Gallico* (book vi), commented on the educational aims and procedures of the Druids and attempted some general explanations; and Marco Polo wrote about education in China. In the early modern era, well-travelled literati from Europe frequently wrote about their observations of education in other European countries and even in Asia, just as Asian writers commented on their experiences in Europe. For the most part these were unsystematic travellers' tales—what Noah and Eckstein refer to as a superior kind of journalism (Noah & Eckstein, 1969).

This tradition continued in the nineteenth century with the reports on foreign education by Europeans such as Victor Cousin, James Kay-Shuttleworth and Matthew Arnold, and by American educationalists such as Horace Mann, Orville Taylor and John Griscom. In a sense these were still traveller's tales but they had taken on a new form. They were somewhat more systematic at description and classification, although often still highly subjective; they also now played a significant political role, in the sense of being used for policy purposes. Reports on foreign education systems were used as an early and weak form of 'evidence-based policy making': they sought foreign examples of policies and practises to borrow, and empirical data on the effects of foreign policies and practises as evidential support for policies advocated at home. They were also conscious of the fact that they were studying a new educational phenomenon, the national education system. Marc-Antoine Jullien, often considered the founder of comparative education, set out in his 1817 text, *Esquisse et Vues Préliminaires d'un Ouvrage sur L'Éducation Comparé*, to provide some systematic comparative classification of education systems, based on rudimentary questionnaire surveys.

Comparative education, in its nascent form as a 'discipline' or, as some prefer, a 'sub-disciplinary field of application' (usually of comparative social science), began with the notions of national systems because they were the emergent contemporary reality—the important things to understand. The national education systems which arose in northern Europe and the northern USA from the late eighteenth century were *sui generis*; radically different from the preceding artisanal and clerical forms of learning. As Margaret Archer described them in her classic book, *The Origins of Education Systems* (1979), they were systems of formal schooling at least partly funded and supervised by the state, providing a putative monopoly of education to all school age children in a given nation; and whose different levels became increasingly systemically coordinated and integrated over time.

These systems began with the national networks of elementary schools that were developed with state financial and legal assistance into a universal phenomenon. Post-elementary secondary and technical schooling subsequently expanded from its tiny elite base, to allow a small trickle of upward mobility and give credibility to the Napoleonic maxim of *the career open to talents*. Except in the American North and West, the secondary schools represented a parallel system separate from the mass elementary school system until considerably later, but gradually institutions did become more articulated with one another, and systems emerged which were increasingly regulated by the state. As public schools came to predominate over private and voluntary institutions, governments increased their control over systems, providing the majority of funds, licensing and inspecting schools and teachers, organizing teacher training through growing networks of dedicated Normal schools and, in most cases, overseeing national certification and standard school curricula. These were definitely systems in formation, and they had increasingly central functions within society.

They were also distinctly national, both in the sense of being state-driven and in the sense of meeting needs defined in national terms. National education systems developed, as I argued in *Education and State Formation* (Green, 1990), as part of the long process of state formation that stretched in a great arch from the late absolutist states, through the French Revolution and beyond to the gradual construction of democratic nation states in the nineteenth century. Through these national education systems states fashioned disciplined workers and loyal military recruits; created and celebrated national languages and literatures; popularized national histories and myths of origin, disseminated national laws, customs and social mores, and generally explained the ways of the state to the people and the duties of the people to the state. National education was a massive engine of integration, assimilating the local to the national and the particular to the general. In short, it created, or tried to create, the civic identity and national consciousness which would bind each to the state and reconcile each to the other, making actual citizens out of those who were deemed such in law by virtue of their birth or voluntary adoption.

It is no surprise then that the first comparative educationalists were preoccupied with systems and with nationhood. They organized their classifications of education around national systems; they collected data at the national level where they could; and they sought national characteristics to explain variations between systems. They reckoned, rightly, that the state was a major force in fashioning education systems, and therefore analysed national political forms, as well as other national factors such as language, climate and religion, to understand differences between systems.

Jullien was the first to try to classify the characteristics of different national systems, focussing on institutional forms and processes (Jullien, 1817). Emile Levasseur, a French statistician later in the century, made more systematic quantitative comparative comparisons using data on enrolments (Levasseur, 1896). He also sought to explain variations in country systems with reference to religion, race, climate, and levels of democracy. He found, for instance, as the historian Carlo Cipolla was later to confirm, that protestant northern European states typically had higher enrolments than southern Catholic states (Cipolla, 1969). There was some occasional interest in within-system differences. Joseph Kay, another educational traveller, noted, like Jullien before him, that comparison across regions within states might be fruitful, particularly where there were interesting sets of variations as between cantons in Switzerland (Noah & Eckstein, 1969). However, it was mainly cross-national study of systems that preoccupied these early comparativists.

The major comparative scholars of the first half of the twentieth century, from Sadler, down to Kandel and Hans, were equally concerned with characterizing and explaining national systems, although they did this more rigorously and with more concern for the complexities of causation than their forbears. Sadler was famously concerned with the social contexts external to institutions. He believed, contrary to modern orthodoxies about 'school effects', that these were more important than internal institutional dynamics to the understanding of how the education process worked in each country. Kandel also explored the cultural and historical 'forces and factors' behind system variation, including the roles of State and Church, and the effects of class, race, and social and economic organization.

Both viewed education through the lens of the nation state. According to Sadler, 'All good and live education is an expression of national life and character. It is rooted in the history of the nation and fitted to its needs' (quoted in Noah & Eckstein, p. 41). Kandel, likewise, argued in the preface to his major work, *Comparative Education*, that his work was 'based on the point of view that education systems are dominated by national ends, and that it is the duty of educators and teachers to understand the meaning of nationalism and all the forces that contribute to it' (Kandel, 1933, p. xxiv). Kandel was a liberal internationalist and aware that nationalism could take what he called a 'sinister' direction, although given that he wrote in

the 1930s he was perhaps less alert to the imminent dangers than he might have been. However his approach was imbued with a nation state perspective. There is little discussion in his works of national minorities or intra-state cultural differences. Although he noted 'that there is considerable danger in employing such a generalization as national character' (1933, p. 23) he didn't—for all his scholarship—entirely escape the trap.

These early pioneers treated national cultures and institutions from an historical vantage point, stressing long-range patterns and continuities and what institutional economists now call 'path dependency'. Arguably they veered towards a kind of national cultural determinism and they were perhaps rather less attuned to historical discontinuities and structural divisions of class and ethnicity than they might have been had their scholarship extended more to the works of the founding fathers of sociology. However, when their historical humanist legacy was superseded in the 1960s with a more social scientific approach this was, on the one hand, through the new scientism of Noah and Eckstein (1969) and, on the other, through the pragmatic problem solving-approach of Brian Holmes (1965). These indeed pulled comparative education closer to social science, although somewhat at the expense of historical depth, as Kazemias has noted (2001). However, much of the new comparative education remained narrowly empirical—either positivist or policy-reform oriented—and still adrift from much of the more theoretically nuanced work in other comparative social science disciplines.

Perspectives also remained largely national. The national system remained the main unit of comparison, although the focus now was as much on outcomes as causes. Increasingly, as governments became more obsessed with measuring national performance, and as the IEA and other bodies obliged with major international surveys of achievement, comparative education was drawn into a kind of cross-national Olympics—ranking education systems in terms of their effectiveness. Countless monographs from the OECD, CEDEFOP and other bodies also focused on the description and classification of national systems. Apparently, the more internationalised education research became, the more it focused on comparing national systems.

So what happened in the remaining decades of the last century to cause us to ask whether education systems may now be in decline and cross-national analysis obsolete? The brief answer is globalisation.

Globalisation and Education

The process of accelerated globalisation, ongoing since the early 1970s, has had a fundamental effect on education, although not in the ways that are often argued.

It has not yet, for instance, substantially eroded national control over education. It is true that supra-national bodies have increasing influence in some areas. The OECD and World Bank have some impact, particularly on weaker countries, through their relentless global marketing of favoured educational policies, often backed by substantial financial clout. Within Europe, the Commission is undoubtedly keen to extend its sphere of influence, not least in its attempt to support the creation of a European Knowledge Economy through Lifelong Learning. However, education still remains officially a matter of national competence, which few Member States are willing to cede. The fact that the Commission is obliged to advance its agenda through voluntary rather than regulatory means, through the so-called 'Open Method of Coordination', only underlines the point.

Governments still seek to manage their national systems—indeed, in some ways, more actively than before with ever proliferating targets and audits. They know that education remains one area where they still have some control. As Robert Reich (1991) has pointed out, despite the waning of the 'national economy' and despite the internationalization of

most of the factors of production, human skills remain relatively immobile and national. Governments increasingly see them as state resources to be deployed in the battle for competitive advantage in the global market. They are not about to give up this prerogative. Nor can they entirely ignore the need for the original Durkheimian function of education in transmitting national cultures and promoting social cohesion. This may be more difficult in modern pluralistic societies, where national and group identities increasingly part company from what is left of the saliency of statehood and citizenship (Delanty, 2000). However, as the centrifugal forces of globalisation relentlessly disrupt and fragment societies, governments simply cannot afford to exempt education systems from their responsibilities for promoting social cohesion. There are no other public agencies left which can do it (Green, 1997).

Nor are education systems all converging on a single model—despite the influence of transnational agencies and the proliferation of policy borrowing. New global policy rhetorics—like lifelong learning—are certainly emerging, but in practise they are interpreted and applied in quite different ways in different places, as my earlier research with Wolf and Leney sought to show (Green, Wolf & Leney, 1999). Education systems in Europe, for instance, vary considerably in their degrees of centralization and market penetration, their approaches to selection and early specialization in secondary schooling, and their dominant forms of upper secondary provision.

However, in certain key respects, globalisation does alter the prospects for traditional national education systems.

Most important is the impact of globalisation on the demand for skills and qualifications. With increased global economic competition, advanced economies can no longer compete with low wage economies in cost-competitive manufacturing and retain their living standards—hence the rush towards the high value-added sectors which constitute the so-called knowledge economy (Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001). There has been much hype about the miraculous new virtual or ‘weightless’ economy. The new economy sectors never provided that many jobs—the software industry in the US, for instance, still employs less than a quarter of the number employed by General Motors—and there was never a prospect of it shifting everyone into highly skilled, highly paid work. Now, with the bursting of the IT bubble, Charles Leadbeater’s prescription (1999) for ‘living on thin air’ seems rather foolish. However, it is still the case that, on balance, work is becoming more skills intensive, and there is increasing pressure on individuals to gain higher qualifications or risk marginalization in the job market (Ashton *et al.*, 1999). Hence the demand on governments to provide more learning opportunities intensifies.

However, governments are caught in a double bind here. As global economic competition escalates demand for learning, so it diminishes government capacity to meet that demand. Global market pressures force governments to keep control of public spending to avoid uncompetitive tax levels, which will deter foreign investors and drive domestic firms and jobs abroad. The European Union, following the same global market logic, reinforces the point through its notorious ‘Growth and Stability Pact’ which obliges Member States to keep their budgets deficits below 3% of GDP. These dual effects—of rising demand for skills and qualifications and diminished national state capacity to deliver them—create an international market for education increasingly attractive to private sector investors.

Higher education is to date the most internationalised and commercialised of the educational sectors. As international demand for them rises, so university research and teaching become internationally traded commodities offering potentially rich returns to those institutions which compete best in the global market. Facilitated by new educational technologies, and supported by supra-national bodies such as the European Commission, international higher education teaching and research have grown exponentially and look set

to continue to do so. In most countries, up until now, this has involved mainly welcome additional revenues for public sector institutions, but the potential for private sector involvement is clear: even in 1999 the OECD estimated the value of trade in higher education services at \$30 bn.

The US private sector has already cashed in on this in a big way. Not only are many of the leading universities private businesses, but there has been a huge growth in the commercialisation and corporate branding of university life, so that most American campuses are festooned with advertizing logos and their faculties stuffed with corporate chairs. Nike alone have sponsorship deals with more than 200 campus athletics departments. The threat to academic independence from the 'gagging' deals that often go with corporate sponsorship of research and entire campuses hardly needs emphasising. The iniquitous 'non-disparagement clause' which went with Reebok's sponsorship of the University of Wisconsin is well known because students and faculty campaigned against it, but there must be many less blatant cases which never come to public attention (Klein, 2001).

School education is neither so internationalised nor so open to global commercial exploitation as higher education for obvious reasons. The majority of children will not cross borders to go to school and internationalised virtual schooling is not an option where child minding and socialization remain primary purposes of schooling for both parents and states. Nor have the profit opportunities seemed good enough to date to attract major corporate investment into the delivery of home student learning, although this is now growing. Edubusinesses such as Edison and Tesseract in the US have not been notably successful in running public schools and school districts because they have found it difficult, not surprisingly, to maintain standards and turn a profit at the standard levels of per student funding (Fitz & Beers, 2002). In Britain, Education Action Zones have received relatively little private sector investment and only handful of failing education authorities and schools have been taken over by for-profit businesses. However, the number is growing. Tower Hamlets LEA has recently been handed over to the trading wing of SERCO (Regan, 2002).

Creeping forms of privatisation are increasingly evident, particularly in English-speaking countries. Charter schools, less tied by regulations and standards than the public schools, offer better opportunities in the US for profitable edubusiness, along with textbook and teaching aid production, most notably with Channel One's TV broadcasts reaching over 8 million school students which smuggle in advertising with current affairs programming. In the UK the major form of privatisation to date has come with the commercial contracting out of services such as school meals and cleaning, and with the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) which involves private sector financing and operating of public service facilities which are rented back by the state. By November 2000, there were 71 such education projects planned worth some £680 m and involving 673 schools (Fitz & Beers, 2002). But there is also increasing involvement of private companies like Nord Anglia in mainstream delivery activities such as curriculum development, school inspection and school improvement.

Britain has been more active in the privatisation of services than most countries. Nevertheless, as Fitz and Beers conclude in their recent study, 'the privatisation of public education . . . has so far moved at glacial speed' (Fitz & Beers, 2002). However, one should not underestimate the commercial potential and political temptation that may push in this direction. While the European Union maintains the Stability Pact's punitive stance towards public spending, European governments will be tempted to find ingenious ways to plug public service gaps with private investment, as the UK government does with the PFI which conveniently takes public investment off balance sheet. Equally, at a time of dwindling capital investment opportunities, potentially lucrative markets in services are increasingly attractive

to investors and corporate pressure for the opening up of these markets persists. International agencies are responding. While the terms of WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) still remain somewhat ambiguous in relation publicly provided services, there can be no doubt that major interests lie behind the move to extend the international market in education provision.

Increasing privatisation of education is likely, as Geoff Whitty and others (Whitty, 2002; Whitty et al., 1998) have argued, to increase inequalities in educational outcomes. Markets, and even quasi-markets, tend to work like that. This is not the place to debate the evidential basis for this argument, but at least one point needs to be stressed here in relation to UK educational politics. Britain has a widely acknowledged history of class division and inequality in education. The results of the recent OECD PISA study, confirm those of previous IEA and IALS studies, that relative to a range of comparator countries, we have exceptionally wide distributions of educational outcomes. Indeed the international test evidence from PISA for 15-year-olds shows us amongst the most unequal countries in the sample of OECD countries, where typically countries with narrower distribution have higher average scores (OECD, 2001; Green, 2003, forthcoming).

This level of inequality may be detrimental to the economy, producing a highly polarised labour market, which arguably in turn encourages a high skills/low skills dualism in competition strategies, and lower overall productivity than in many competitor countries (Brown et al., 2001; Crouch et al., 1999). There is also growing evidence that it is detrimental to social cohesion.

Recent work conducted by John Preston, Ricardo Sabato and myself for the Wider Benefits of Learning Centre certainly points in this direction. Using IALS data on adult literacy scores across countries to estimate skills distributions, and standard Gini coefficients on income inequality, we have confirmed the findings of Nickell and Layard (1998), using different methods, that there is a strong correlation between skills distributions and income inequality across countries. Taking this a step further, we have developed a combined factor for national level social cohesion (using World Values Survey data on aggregate levels of trust and other measures of civic cooperation), and find, again, a strong correlation cross-nationally between skills distribution and social cohesion. As figure 1 shows, excluding Norway and Germany, there is a strong and significant correlation of -0.765 between social cohesion and education inequality variables (see Green et al., 2003).

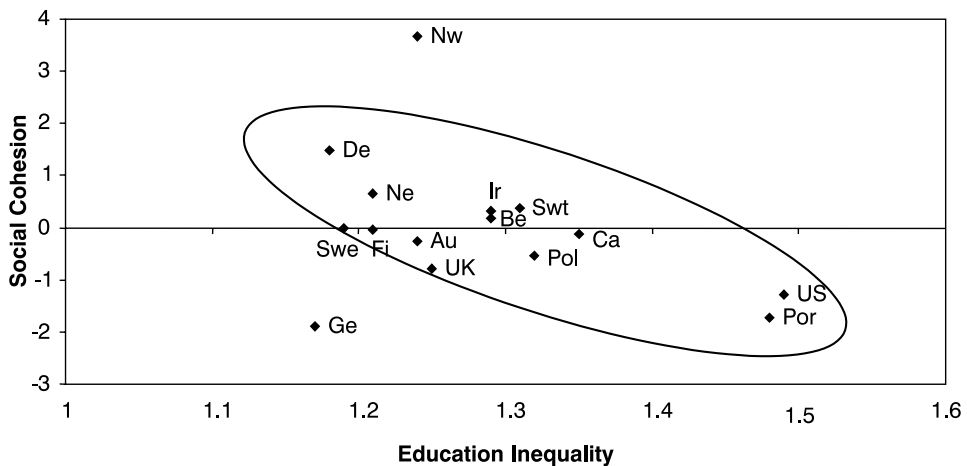


Figure 1. Relationship between social cohesion and education inequality

More educationally equal countries tend also to be more cohesive on these measures. Clearly these correlations say nothing about the direction of causality, and we would judge that this runs both ways and involves a range of different factors. Nevertheless the results are highly suggestive—sufficiently so in fact to prompt OECD and World Bank researchers to undertake similar analyses. By applying our methods to PISA data they achieve similar results and, perhaps surprisingly, draw similar conclusions: in terms of national policy: improving skills distribution matters as much as raising average levels (Duthilleul & Ritzén, 2002).

Globalisation, then, does not reduce national interests in education, nor the desire of governments to serve them. However, what it does do is raise the demand for skills and qualifications whilst reducing state capacity to meet them. The most ubiquitous national response to all this is, in fact, Lifelong Learning—that most globalised and chameleon of educational discourses, which both masks and legitimates multiple policy changes, including privatisation. As competition and technological change drive up the employer demand for skills, and as individuals increasingly compete for career-enhancing certificates, so governments have to find new ways to meet the demand. Lifelong Learning is an ingenious solution, made possible in part by the new learning technologies. By declaring learning a lifelong and ‘life wide’ process—occurring everywhere from the school to the home, the workplace and the community—governments are able both to respond to individual demands for more diverse learning opportunities which mesh with their modern lifestyles, and to shift the costs, which they can no longer bear, onto employers, individuals and their families and communities (Green, 2000).

This, more than any other development, challenges the notion of the ‘education system’. We have been used to thinking about education in terms of schools and colleges and other institutions. In years to come these may well cease to be the main locus of learning activity. To this extent the idea of the educational system does become marginalized. We will have to start to think more about informal learning, workplace learning, and learning in the community and home (Broadfoot, 2000).

Implications for Comparative Education

So what are the implications of globalisation for Comparative Education? One conclusion we could draw is that cross-national comparison is now redundant. Ulrich Beck has taken this view (Beck, 2000). Social science, he says, has for too long been the creature of the nation state; since the founding fathers’ first treated society and state as co-extensive, the state has operated as a kind ‘container’ of all concepts and data. Now in an age of globalisation, says Beck, a ‘nationally based sociology is becoming obsolete’ (p. 73). The message is clear: social science should abandon the ‘methodological nationalism’ of its intellectual past rather as Marx claimed to cast off his ‘erstwhile philosophical conscience’ in abandoning Hegel. The new mission should be to analyse world society and transnational space.

This is a tall order for comparative education. Like social science in general, and indeed probably more so, comparative education as a field has its origins in national thinking. From Jullien, Levasseur and Sadler, through to Kandel, Hans, Mallinson and King, comparative education has taken the national system as its main object of enquiry and ‘national character’ as its main explanandum. This exclusively national way of thinking is now surely outdated. Explaining educational structures and outcomes in terms of national character and culture was always a somewhat essentialist exercise, in danger of reifying national culture as some irreducible and homogenous property. Now, with growing social diversity, the globalisation of culture and the creation of transnational cultural spaces, this approach will surely not do. Comparativists should cease taking national states as the only—or even main—units for comparison.

There is certainly a case for more studies of education and learning across sub-national regions and communities—like the so-called ‘home international’ studies in the UK conducted by David Raffae and colleagues (Raffae, 1999) or Karen Evans’ multi-layered comparisons of youth learning and transitions in matched cities in Germany and the UK (Evans & Heinz, 1994). Much more comparative work could be done in this area. In Belgium for instance, the language group forms the main basis for educational administration, and so a natural unit for comparing the combined effects of different structures and cultures on outcomes. Likewise Switzerland, with its French-speaking and German-speaking regions with different educational structures and cultures, provides an ideal laboratory for comparative work.

There is also room for more studies across supra-national regions. The work of David Ashton and colleagues on European and East Asian skills formation systems (Ashton & Green, 1996; Ashton *et al.*, 1999) opens up the possibility of explicitly cross-regional analyses of skills formation, drawing on the now burgeoning regional studies of political economy (e.g. Albert, 1993; Berger & Dore, 1996; Dore, 2000; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Hutton, 1995; Streeck, 1997; Thurow, 1993). The High Skills Project (Brown *et al.*, 2001) set out to analyse national routes to the high skills economy, but like the earlier studies by Ashton *et al.*, (*op cit*) and Crouch *et al.*, (1999) found as much potential for comparison of regional and sectoral differences. One can now imagine many more ambitious studies that would take the supra-national region as the predominant unit. There is substantial evidence, after all, that education and skills formation systems do tend to cluster along regional lines (Green *et al.*, 1999). If this is the case, comparativists could learn a great deal about how contexts shape educational change by studying how far pan-regional characteristics, net of the policy diffusion effects between the countries within them, do in fact explain cross-regional variations in systems characteristics.

Lastly, the salience of international cross-sectoral comparison also suggests another important point regarding units of comparison. So long as the units being compared have ‘societal’ characteristics—(i.e., in terms of characteristic institutional structures and rules)—there is no reason for limiting comparison to territorially defined units. Diasporic language groups, distributed communities and ‘virtual communities’, are all—in theory at least—amenable to comparative educational research.

This evident potential for comparison at different non-national levels does not mean, however, that Beck is correct to argue that cross-national study is obsolete. School systems, unlike some higher education systems, are still very national institutions. Their structures and processes are shaped primarily by national legislation and the national institutional and cultural contexts in which they operate. To understand the structural (i.e., institutional and cultural) factors that determine their forms and outcomes may often require that we compare across countries—especially where there is too little system variation within countries to allow within-country comparison (Noah & Eckstein, 1969).

Nations are still the preferred units for comparative social science for good reasons. Many of the data are still collected at national level. Many of the operative societal variables are measured as national level aggregates because they proxy for structures and institutions—labour markets, industry structures, political systems, cultural traits—which are still essentially national. Countries do still vary regularly and substantially on a whole range of demographic, economic and cultural indicators. As Ronald Inglehart tersely concludes from his exhaustive study of data for 25 countries in the World Values Survey (1990) ‘The peoples of different societies are characterized by enduring differences in basic attitudes, values and skills: In other words they have different cultures’ (1990, p. 3). These cultures are not monolithic and nor are they immutable. However, in given times and places they act as

important determinants of social and political behaviour which cannot be left out of account.

The country level, therefore, remains important for comparative analysis—but it is only one of a number of levels at which comparison can be effectively used. The question of units of comparison should not in any case be decided *a priori*, but rather according to research criteria. As Neil Smelser has argued, the main criteria for choosing the unit of comparison should be that it is: 1) appropriate to the theoretical problem; 2) causally related to the phenomenon being studied; 3) that there are data available at this level (Smelser, 1976). This allows for comparison at various different levels, including multiple levels. The difficulty is to make sure that where the level of observation differs from the level of explanation that false extrapolations are not made from the evidence at one level to justify explanations at a different level—thus falling into the trap which economists call the ‘ecological fallacy’ (Smelser, 1976).

The main methodological challenge for comparative educationalists is not, in any case, about levels of analysis; it is about the nature of comparative analysis *per se* and whether to do it at all. Peter Jarvis question: ‘Why should we undertake comparative analysis at all in this Global Village?’ (Jarvis, 2000, p. 353) may be not so hard to answer, however [1]. Globalization, as argued above, is not so far removing difference from the world as to make comparison and contrast impossible. So long as there are still contrasting societal units to compare, comparison is still possible. Globalisation may alter the spacial dimensions of what we take to be a meaningful societal unit, but even Beck would not argue that society has ceased to exist, or that world society is irreducible.

The harder question to answer is what is comparative analysis? It can be argued that all social science is essentially comparative. Durkheim famously wrote that ‘comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology, it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for the facts’ (Smelser, 1976, p. 2). But for Durkheim accounting for the facts meant understanding the pattern of relationships between collectivities—or what he terms ‘social facts’—since this is what distinguishes sociology from other disciplines such as psychology. The study, statistical or otherwise, of variations in individual traits and behaviours is therefore, rightly in my view, not generally considered to be comparative study, although it may share certain objectives with it, as Smelser argues (1976). The difference, as Charles Ragin lucidly argues, is meta-theoretical: comparativists believe that societies are ‘real’ phenomena; methodological individualists believe they are simply statistical abstractions (Ragin, 1981).

Collectivities, or societies, are, as Durkheim conceded, made up of individuals and their actions; but they represent more than the sum of those. The patterns of variation between collective or societal properties and behaviours, and the determining relationships between them, cannot be explained by the mere aggregation of individual characteristics and actions. This requires analysis of the effects of structures and characteristics which are integral to the collectivity or society itself, and which have meaning only at that level. Many societal characteristics cannot be considered, for instance, in individual level statistical analysis, either because they only show up as constants and cannot therefore be used to explain variation, or because they are meaningless at that level. Distributional properties, for instance, such as income or skills spread—have no meaning at the level of the individual (Green *et al.*, 2003). Comparative research is thus about analysing the pattern of relationships between characteristics of societal or collective entities, whether they be at national or other levels.

There are, of course, many ways of using comparative methods to understand relationships of cause and effect. John Stuart Mill famously wrote about the Method of Agreement, the Method of Difference, and the Indirect Method, which is a combination of

the two (Mill, 1970). All methods of comparison in social science, whether quantitative or qualitative, are, in a sense, variations on this theme, although it is rarely possible to meet Mill's ideal requirements that all possibly operative variables are considered, because we cannot know in advance what they all are. Comparison works by the manipulation of variables, holding certain variables constant, so as to test the independent effects of other observed variables on outcomes (Smelser, 1976).

Quantitative comparison does this statistically, establishing probabilistic relationships between independent and dependent variables, and has the advantage that it can simultaneously test correlations amongst a large number of variables. However, quantitative analysis faces major limitations in cross-societal comparison. There are often insufficient data for many of the societal cases that might be studied, thus reducing the number of possible cases in the sample to a point where there are more variables than there are cases. This makes statistical analysis unreliable. Statisticians may respond by widening the sample to a very disparate range of countries or units, to achieve sufficient cases, but this introduces new problems about comparing societies that are essentially incomparable except at meaningless levels of abstraction. Statistical comparison across societal units can be very powerful when it pays respect to the complexity of societal phenomena, but it is not always possible.

If comparative analysis is defined as comparing across societal entities, as argued here, then Charles Ragin is probably right to argue that the characteristic method is that of qualitative comparison, or what he calls the 'comparative logical method' (Ragin, 1981). This method does not work with samples or populations but with all relevant instances of the phenomenon in question, or with a set of these cases which the researcher decides are relevant, and which will set the limits of generalization for the explanation. Consequently, there is no temptation to compare large samples of dissimilar cases where the number of variables is so wide as to defy analysis. The logical method has a number of other advantages. Firstly, whereas statistical analyses finds it hard to deal with multiple causation, logical comparative analysis tends to work with configurations of conditions. The logical method requires explanation of all cases under consideration. A number of valid sets of preconditions for the outcome of interest can be identified, whereas statistical analysis will only tend to bring out the most dominant (Ragin, 1981). Secondly, whereas statisticians only examine the relationship between specific variables, logical comparative analysis examines cases holistically and in their 'real' context. Qualitative analysis can therefore pay more attention to the actual mechanisms of causation, whereas statistical analysis alone cannot go beyond determining the probable strength and direction of causation. Logical comparative analysis cannot, of course, claim that its findings can be generalized beyond the cases under review, but in avoiding the universalizing tendencies of statistical approaches, it tends to respect the unities of time and place which are, arguably, essential to any credible historical or sociological analysis.

Logical Comparative analysis can be conducted in a number of different ways and for different purposes. In their very illuminating article on comparative historical sociology, for instance, Skocpol and Somers distinguish between three primary types of comparative 'logics-in-use' (Skocpol & Somers, 1980). The first type, described as 'parallel demonstration of theory' and exemplified by Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974), involves using comparison to illustrate the application of previously derived theories in different historical cases. The process of applying the theory to given cases may enrich and refine the theory, and may demonstrate the explanatory power of the theory, but comparison is not used here either to generate or validate the hypotheses. In the second type of 'contrast-oriented' comparison', exemplified by Reinhard Bendix's *Nation-Building and Citizenship* (1977), what matters most is that the historical integrity of each case is respected.

Comparison is used to demonstrate the variety and particularity of historical conditions, thus throwing into relief the essential characteristics of each unique case. Theorizing tends not to be as explicit as in the 'parallel' type, and comparison is not generally used to generate the explanations, which are usually derived at the level of each case, although within a common comparative frame of reference.

The third type of comparison is described as 'macro-causal analysis' and it is here, and only here, where systematic controlled comparison is used to generate and test hypotheses and explanations of cause and effects relationships. This, as Skocpol and Somers rightly argue, represents the most powerful form of comparative analysis and can involve works of huge complexity and power, such as Moore's magisterial *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* (1966). The difficulty with such works lies in maintaining an analytically-driven discourse, which moves constantly between positive and negative cases, whilst also maintaining sufficient narrative detail about time and place so that the sense of historical period is not lost. Historians and historical sociologists will often disagree about the point at which such theorizing moves beyond the genuinely 'historical'.

The methods of logical comparison which address cause and effect relationships are mostly variations on the 'indirect method' which Mill thought peculiarly suitable for phenomena which have multiple causation (Mill, 1970). Basically, the investigator examines multiple instances where a particular phenomenon occurs, noting whatever conditions they have in common, and compares these with a range of instances where the phenomenon does not occur. If certain condition(s) are common to the first set and are absent in the second set, and if the cases are otherwise similar, you can assume that these conditions represent causes of the phenomenon in question in these cases. The method is always liable to the accusation that there are 'third causes' which it has failed to observe, but this can be the case also, although it is less likely, in quantitative analysis, where a correlation may be due to an unobserved variable which affects both of the correlated variables simultaneously. Neither of the methods can determine for sure what is cause and what is effect, although quantitative methods have more chances of doing this where there is a longitudinal element and qualitative methods where there is some examination of the causal process. Only natural experiments and randomized controlled trials, with controlled samples and time frames, can escape these flaws but even there social scientists may fail to understand what attribute of the intervention is having a given effect.

Macro-causal comparative analysis is, therefore, one—uniquely powerful—form of comparative analysis amongst several others valid forms, all of which aspire broadly to explanation. In relation, then, to comparative education we may broadly agree with Jurgen Schriewer's contention that 'as a social scientific method, comparison does not consist in relating observable facts but in relating relationships or even patterns of relationship to each other' (Schriewer & Holmes, 1988, pp. 33–34). In order to warrant claims to comparative method, comparative education must go beyond classification and parallel description of cases. This may optimally be done through macro analysis of causal relationships, but it may also involve 'contrastive' and 'parallel' methods, where these are at least seeking to confront theoretical propositions with empirical observation.

The problem with contemporary comparative education research is that much – or even most – of it is not actually comparative in any of the above senses. This is well illustrated by Angela Little's recent survey of articles published in *Comparative Education* between 1977 and 1988 which shows that over 50 per cent have been single country studies. Some of these may be what Leach and Preston call 'comparisons in a single nation' but Little concludes that 'only a small percentage [of articles] have adopted an explicitly comparative approach' (Little, 2000, p. 285). Probably the vast majority of published studies in comparative education generally are either non-comparative analyses of single countries or parallel

descriptions of education practises and policies across a group of countries (which would fall into Hopkins and Wallerstein's category of multi-national studies, 1970). Whatever the merits of these types of study, and they may be great, neither necessarily uses comparative methods to analyse or test hypotheses about cause and effect relationships, or even to confront theory and evidence comparatively to produce what Weber called 'understanding'.

We may believe, as I do, that it is not helpful to police disciplinary frontiers or to draw sharp lines around field of study. But any field or discipline needs some core and distinguishing methodological criteria. In comparative education, and indeed any field of comparative research, these must include the use of comparison to further explanation or to test claims about cause and effect relationships. In the absence of natural experiments in social science, the comparative method is the next best thing to scientific 'proof' and comparative education as a field would lose much credibility as a rigorous academic pursuit if it did not use this systematically.

Comparative education needs to compare, and to do this systematically, if it is avoid the accusation that it too often degenerates into a catalogue of traveller's tales, policy advocacy and opportunistic rationalizations of unscientific policy-borrowing. One way that it can do this is to draw more on the mainstream of comparative history and social science research for its concepts, methodology and evidence. But it is striking, when you revisit the central texts of the comparative education canon, how removed comparative education has been from some of the main currents in comparative history and social science. It is hard not too conclude that comparative education has been at times somewhat insular; sometimes too preoccupied with self-referential internal debates, including those perennials about the limits of policy borrowing and the boundaries of comparative and international approaches. Comparativists would do well to take more account of relevant comparative work in cognate fields, as well as to remember the important work in comparative education carried out by 'unbaptised' comparativists who do not go to comparative conferences and who do not see themselves as professional comparative educationalists (Alexander, 2001). Opening up Comparative Education in the twenty-first century should mean embracing all those who use comparative methods and whose work can help in understanding educational problems.

Comparative analysis remains the most powerful tool for (causal) explanation of societal aspects of the educational process. Globalisation does not reduce its usefulness, although in creating educational spaces which belong exclusively to neither nations nor systems, it makes us look to broadening our units of analysis. The major challenges posed for comparative education today, as ever before, are essentially twofold. Firstly, it is to make the field genuinely comparative. Secondly, it is to bring it back from its relative isolation into the mainstream of comparative social science/historical sociology where it rightly belongs. The enormous richness of the current social science debate around globalisation should at least help to make the second challenge attractive.

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Notes

- [1] See also R. Dale (2000) 'Globalisation and education: demonstrating a 'common world educational culture' or locating a 'globally structured educational agenda?', *Educational Theory*, 50, 4, 427–448; Carnoy & Rhoten (2002) 'What does globalisation mean for educational change: a comparative approach', *Comparative Education Review*, 46, 1, 1–8.

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