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ISSUE PAPER

The Contributions and the Limitations of Cross-National Comparisons in Examining Professional Development and Educational Quality



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INTRODUCTION

Although not an unproblematic concept (cf. Kohn 1987; Sztompka 1988), comparison can be defined as involving a search to identify and explain similarities and differences between or among phenomena. Comparison is a central element of disciplined inquiry or scientific investigation.¹ For example, Farrell (1986) includes comparative along with systematic and empirical as necessary and sufficient attributes of the scientific method, which he describes as "not a rigid set of prescriptions [but] .. a highly flexible and adaptable way to order our perceptions of the external world" (p. 203). And as Noah (1986) observes, "[a]lthough comparative education characteristically tends to emphasize differences, the basic similarities of formal education across countries are also of interest."

In the EQUIP1 cross-national syntheses (see Barrow et al. 2006; Barrow et al. 2007; Barrow and Leu 2006) we have followed the dominant approach within comparative education and comparative social sciences, focusing on inter-societal comparisons (Ginsburg 1997; Wakeman 1988). As Kohn (1987: 725) observes: "[i]n many discussions, ... the term 'comparative research' is treated as synonymous with cross-national research, as if the only possible comparisons were inter-national comparisons."² However, we also give some attention to comparisons at other "geographical/locational ... levels: world regions/continents, ... states/provinces, districts, schools, classrooms, and, finally, individuals" (Bray and Thomas 1995, p. 473).³

In this Issue Paper we briefly discuss the contributions that cross-national and other comparative analyses can make to policy and practice in education internationally. We also identify limitations that need to be kept in mind in conducting, interpreting, and making use of the results of studies such as the cross-national syntheses on educational quality undertaken as part of the EQUIP1 leader award.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Comparative analysis in education can enhance our understanding (Eckstein 1986) in assessing alternative policy or practice options (Holmes 1986; King 1979). For example, in discussing the "uses" and "abuses" of comparative education, Noah (1986, pp. 159-61) comments:

¹ Note, however, following Popkewitz (1981), I am employing the term, science, as not being limited to work done within the positivist (or empirico-analytic) paradigm, but would also include interpretive (or symbolic) and critical as scientific traditions (see Ginsburg et al. 1996).

² This dominant approach is based at least implicitly on the notion that societies are relatively independent or isolated social formations. But as Wallerstein (1974/1980) as well as some comparative educationists (Altbach 1982; Arnove 1982; Ginsburg 1991; Meyer and Hannan 1979) have argued, it is increasingly more appropriate to consider nation-states as integrated to varying degrees in a world capitalist economic system and/or world cultural system. Thus, increasing "globalization" makes the assumption of the study of independent societal cases problematic (Sztompka 1988).

³ Bray and Thomas (1995) also draw attention to "nonlocational demographic groupings, including ethnicity, religion, age, and gender" and I would add social class and immigrant or refugee status.

[T]he use of comparative study which I believe to be its most exciting, though perhaps also its most difficult ... is its potential for establishing [and qualifying] the generalizability of what we think we know about education. ... A comparative approach enlarges the framework within which we can view the results obtained from a single country: by providing counter instances, it challenges us to refine our theories and test their validity against the reality of different societies; and, by providing parallel results, it can yield important confirmation of results obtained elsewhere.”

And such understandings are not only relevant to social scientists and educational researchers but also to policy makers and practitioners (whether local, national, or international). As Noah (1986) suggests, cross-national “study of education ... can identify the potentials and the limits of international borrowing and adaptation” (p. 159), though one needs to avoid the “wholesale appropriation and propagation of foreign practices ... [rather than the] careful analysis of the conditions under which certain foreign practices deliver desirable results, followed by consideration of ways to adapt those practices to conditions found” in the focal context (pp. 161-62).

As part of the EQUIP1 leader award work, we carried out case studies of educational reform initiatives in Ethiopia, India, Namibia, and Nigeria. However, while each case study was informative to policy makers and practitioners in the respective country and beyond, we developed a series of cross-national syntheses, focusing on conceptions of educational quality; the content and processes of professional development programs; and the degree and form of implementation of active-learning, student-centered pedagogies. Based on this post-hoc comparative study, for example, we concluded that teachers in all four contexts tend to articulate their conceptions of educational quality with terms normally associated with active-learning, student-centered instructional approaches. This allowed us to focus on the attention of how a global idea was being diffused or how concepts and practices were being borrowed or imposed on a range of developing countries.

Moreover, we found that only in Ethiopia, India, and Namibia (but not Nigeria) was there a clear correspondence between teachers’ conceptions of educational quality and the ideas expressed in national policy discourses. This led us to look for other explanations (besides national policy frameworks) of why such pedagogies were being highlighted at least in how teachers conceived educational quality.

The cross-national synthesis also yielded a finding that in all four contexts teachers’ conceptions of educational quality (highlighting active-learning, student-centered pedagogies) tended to be reflected in both the formal and hidden curricular messages they encountered during in-service teacher education programs. At the same time, however, we found variations within countries in teachers’ perceptions of what they learned during such in-service programs and, especially, in the degree to which they perceived their classroom behaviors as being influenced by such in-service experiences. These similarities and differences (intra- and inter-nationally) led us to push the cross-national synthesis further to examine how teachers’ behaviors may have changed during the course of the projects and what factors constrained or enabled their implementation of the active-learning, student-centered pedagogies.

LIMITATIONS OF COMPARATIVE STUDIES

As in any form of inquiry, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners need to consider the limitations of the research. As Eckstein (1986) argues, comparative analyses shroud the "truth" as well as shed new light on previously ignored or misinterpreted phenomena. And here we are not just referring to limitations for drawing theoretical inferences but also to drawing policy and practice implications. Indeed, we have to reflect on a central dilemma of comparative inquiry – that similar or different "findings" may stem from: 1) "real" similarities or differences in the phenomena being investigated, 2) similarities or differences in the way people being studied view their social reality, 3) similarities or differences in the theoretical assumptions or methodological approaches used by those studying the phenomena, and/or 4) similarities or differences in the cultures or policy/practice frameworks of people "consuming" and seeking to use the findings (Ginsburg and Gorostiaga 2003; Kohn 1987; Sztompka 1988).

The second alternative explanation may have special relevance to the cross-national syntheses. Thus, rather than only relying on teachers self-perceptions of their classroom practices, we are seeking evidence from "third-party" sources. It is not that we should trust researchers' observations more than self reports of behavior, but that having both allows us to engage in triangulation (see Denzin 1971) toward refining our understandings. As Farrel (1986: 209) comments more generally, similarity or dissimilarity "is not something which inheres in the data. It is characteristic of the relationship between the observer and the data, and depends upon the conceptual structures within the mind of the observer."

King (1979: 15) encourages us to take seriously the third and fourth alternative explanations of observed similarities and differences, when he states that as comparative education scholars "we are more scientific if we recognize two inescapably subjective aspects: our own [i.e., scholars'] subjective involvement in the debates about education; and the equally subjective involvement of those [policy makers, educators, citizens] who are trying to arrive at solutions in other countries." In cross-national and other comparative studies this creates a particular challenge, since "[o]ne of the most difficult problems of the comparative method is ethnocentrism ... [i.e.,] looking at the world primarily from the point of view of the observer's own culture and values (Noah 1986, p. 163).

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations to cross-national studies, most of which inhere in non-comparative investigations as well, it seems that the potential contributions of such work make it worth pursuing. Otherwise, we rely on single country or single project case studies and find ourselves over-generalizing the findings and not contemplating contextual and other factors that may be particularly relevant in the next setting in which we seek to adopt or adapt the lessons learned.

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