

Epistemological and Methodological Issues and Frameworks in Comparative and International Research in Education

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Abstract

These are challenging times for comparative and international education (CIE), times when global socio-political changes and tensions are prioritising the critical interrogation of the intellectual foundations of our field, the nature and rationale for international development, the foregrounding of decolonisation debates, and the implications of climate change and environmental uncertainty for more equitable education futures in what we hope will become a post-Covid world. In this presentation for the CIE Round Table I will draw upon my own long term theoretical and empirical work challenging the international dimension of uncritical education policy transfer... doing so in ways that highlight the changing nature and scope of related epistemological and methodological implications. This will include a critical analysis of globally dominant educational goals and agendas; the nature and impact of comparative educational assessments and related league tables; the increasing influence of big data; implications for international research and development agencies; epistemological issues related to research positioning, international partnerships and insider-outsider collaboration; and the significance of different cultural perspectives, ways of knowing and indigenous knowledges for epistemic justice and ongoing debates and tensions within our multi-disciplinary field.

Keywords: comparative and international education, research, epistemological and methodological issues

Introduction

In this paper I will first outline a number of key challenges that are currently being faced by the field of comparative and international education in the light of the nature of previous periods of critical reflection and reconceptualization. In doing so, repeated phases of challenge and reflection can be seen and it is argued that an awareness of this recurring concern with ‘disciplinary’ reflexivity helps to set the analysis of current trends and developments in their wider historical and intellectual contexts. The paper then focusses upon the changing nature and scope of current epistemological and methodological challenges and implications by drawing upon the experience of my own research and collaborations with colleagues in and from a diversity of contexts worldwide. Long term theoretical and empirical work challenging the uncritical international transfer of educational policies, development strategies and research methodologies and modalities frames the overall analysis. This is then evidenced throughout the body of the text with reference to recent research on a range of specific issues, developments and ongoing tensions. This includes theoretical and methodological work on the nature and impact of international surveys of student achievement and related comparative league tables; the increasing influence of big data in educational research; implications for international development goals, agencies and processes;

and epistemological issues related to research positioning, cross-cultural partnerships and the significance of different cultural perspectives for ways of knowing, indigenous knowledges and epistemic justice.

Re-imagining Comparative and International Education: A Recurring Theme

Today the field of comparative and international education is encountering existential challenges to its very foundations, history and future positioning in the academy as a distinctive research specialism. The intellectual origins of the field, as with many others, are facing critical interrogation, with the concept of international development emerging as especially problematic in the face of a powerful decolonial critique and related educational implications for identity, epistemic justice, sustainability and climate change. While some of these global challenges are new and reflect our rapidly moving, digitally informed and pandemic times, others represent further iterations of concerns that informed earlier phases of critical self-reflection within our multidisciplinary field (see contributions to Bray, Adamson and Mason, 2007). An awareness of this recurring theme is important for all concerned, but especially for those engaged in contemporary debates and those pioneering and re-imagining new directions, priorities and positionings.

The Millennium year of 2000, for example, is a distinctive and important benchmark. This was a time when many fields and disciplines recognised the intensification of globalisation in taking stock of their development while looking to the future with renewed energy and creativity. Comparative and International Education was no different in this respect and even a brief review of the literature at that point reveals numerous 'state of the art' analyses. Academic societies and associations, such as the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE), the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), the Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE) and the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) renewed their aims, commitments and rationales for rapidly globalising times (see the various history chapters in Masemann, Bray and Manzon, 2007), and leading academic journals such as *Comparative Education* prioritised benchmark Millennium Special Issues (Crossley and Jarvis, 2000 and 2001).

My own work contributed to such turn of the century initiatives by arguing for a fundamental reconceptualization of the comparative and international dimensions of the field in ways that more effectively 'bridged' what are seen by some as two different but related cultures and traditions (Crossley, 1999, 2000; Crossley and Watson, 2003; see also Wilson, 1994). At the heart of this are epistemological and methodological arguments that recognise the mutual benefits to be gained from a closer articulation between work on theory, policy and practice within our field; and how such reconceptualization could help to challenge Northern epistemic dominance, positivistic assumptions and the persistence of uncritical education policy transfer, often with the support of leading development agencies, to the global South. Such perspectives were derived from personal interest in theoretical scholarship combined with in-depth engagement with dilemmas encountered in the implementation of innovative educational policy (as successful practice) in contexts that included the UK, Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Along with the above, challenges to the neo-colonial assumptions embedded in much international development assistance were becoming increasingly prominent in many fields, and postcolonial perspectives (see work by Torres, 1998; Brock-Utne, 2007; Hickling-Hudson, Mathews and Woods, 2003; and contributors to Crossley and Tikly, 2004), often building upon earlier work on dependency theory with origins in the South, strengthened the place of critical theory, the 'development turn' (Steiner-

Khamsi, 2006) and related decolonisation dimensions of comparative and international education that command much attention today.

At the same time, others were re-imagining the field and extending the policy borrowing and transfer literature in more directly theoretical ways that advanced what Cowen prioritises as ‘academic’ comparative education (Cowen, 2000; Phillips and Ochs, 2003). Indeed, a decade later in 2010, contributors to this more traditional intellectual positioning within the field were maintaining once again that:

... comparative education researchers engage in new and fresh thinking about what we study (our units of analysis); the interpretive concepts, frameworks and theories that we deploy in our work; the influences and contexts that shape the work we do as comparativists, and the epistemic consequences of these broader changes for our field. (Larson, 2010, p. 1).

For those interested in further details, many of these arguments are developed more fully in earlier publications and in my BAICE Presidential Address delivered at the University of York in 2018 (Crossley and Watson, 2003; Crossley, 2019). For present purposes, it is enough to show that while new depths of critical reflection remain imperative today, many constituencies involved in comparative education have faced repeated challenges, and engaged in diverse forms of renewal and reinvention, over recent decades. Moreover, some of these developments, including ongoing advances in policy transfer theory, underpin, inform or inspire the contemporary epistemological and methodological issues, challenges and future directions that are the focus of the following analysis.

Contemporary Epistemological and Methodological Issues

International Surveys of Student Achievement, the Power of PISA and the Rise of the Big Data Movement

Much of my own early methodological work was concerned with the 1970s challenge to the dominance of quantitative research in the field of education (including positivistic trends in comparative research) and more directly with the legitimisation of qualitative case study research for the field of comparative education (Crossley and Vulliamy, 1984, see also 1997). Much was achieved in diversifying educational and social science research cultures in subsequent years as the work of writers such as, Masemann (1990) Fetterman (1993) and Stake (1995) demonstrate, but by the year 2000, the first year for the PISA studies, a resurgence of the prestige of quantitative surveys and statistical analyses in educational research was well underway. This was rapidly followed by the arrival of new technologies, increased digitisation and the rise of the big data movement (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, 2013). For comparative education this represented a major epistemological and methodological challenge with implications for the re-balancing of paradigms and frameworks for analysis, their relative influence especially in terms of policy issues and analysis, the availability and nature of funding for research and the potential marginalisation of university-based academics positioned as intellectual scholars. Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003), for example, were concerned that such positivistic influences on the field were being used to legitimise policy positioning at the same time as they were threatening criticality. As Auld and Morris (2014) have since argued, for them, this represented ‘... a new paradigm of comparative education’ and its ‘influential intermediary network’ of consultants backed up by large-scale quantitative evidence. Similarly, Sellar and Lingard (2013, 2014) saw the OECD’s PISA initiative as a ‘new global mode of governance in education’ highlighting how the ‘top’ performing countries in PISA league tables, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, were becoming the new ‘reference societies’ that others felt compelled to copy. My own research in Hong Kong with doctoral researcher Katherine Forestier (Forestier and Crossley, 2015) added further evidence in support of this

by documenting how the Secretary of State for Education in England was inspired to ‘plunder’ selected Asian policy and practice (Gove, 2011). To quote his own comments delivered to a Parliamentary Select Committee on Education during 2010: ‘I have been to Singapore and Hong Kong, and what is striking is that many of the lessons that apply there are lessons that we can apply here’ (Gove, 2010). Three years later when introducing a new National Curriculum, he was pleased to import formalistic pedagogic reforms to England and announce that ‘I want my children, who are in primary school now, to have the sort of curriculum that children in other countries have, which are doing better than our own’ (Gove, 2013). Somewhat ironically, our findings also revealed that, at the very same time, Hong Kong policy makers were keen to ‘borrow’ elements of English education that promoted less didactic, learner-centred pedagogy. For present purposes this adds further theoretical complexity to existing conceptual and analytical frameworks in the policy transfer literature (Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow, 2012) by demonstrating how borrowing can be multi-directional and even work ‘both ways’ at the same time.

The increasing influence of international surveys of student achievement, and most notably the power of PISA (Mayer and Benavot, 2013), has certainly generated new epistemological and methodological issues and frameworks for comparativists to engage with and it is argued here that this, spurred on by the prestige of the big data movement, continues to generate some of the most pressing contemporary challenges for the field today. Even more pertinently for present purposes, these challenges go well beyond influences upon the content of official education policy. As argued in the 50th Anniversary Issue of *Comparative Education* (Crossley 2014), they have major epistemological and methodological implications for the uncritical international transfer of research paradigms and modalities from powerful, well-funded Northern systems and agencies to the less well-resourced Global South ... with all that that might mean for ongoing research dependency and epistemic justice.

International Agendas, PISA for Development and Sustainability

Large-scale, international surveys of student achievement can also be seen to be influencing international agendas, goals and targets for education and in this respect the relatively new PISA for Development initiative (Addey, 2017) raises further concerns for comparative researchers that are challenging simplistic education policy transfer and exploring the potential for greater epistemological and environmental justice in the arenas of education and international development. Tikly (2020), for example, argues that existing policies for international and sustainable development too often conceptualise educational quality with reference to its potential to contribute to economic growth in alignment with Western knowledge systems, values and languages. This, as argued above, is consistent with the pressures upon nations to score well in international assessment systems and comparative league tables (including PISA for Development) and reinforces the ongoing transfer and application of Western intellectual frameworks.

Here then are timely imperatives for comparative and international education to be more deeply reflexive in its own right while, at the same time, building upon earlier theoretical and conceptual contributions in advancing new intellectual frameworks, critical histories, and postcolonial analyses that recognise the contemporary ‘decolonial challenge’ and value a diversity of cultures and ‘ways of knowing’. It is to such thinking and ways of realising that in practice that I now turn.

Ways of Knowing, Research Positioning and Epistemic Justice

While Masemann’s 1990 paper on ‘ways of knowing’ in comparative education demonstrates how our field has long grappled with notions of epistemic justice, today this is a key conceptual and methodological issue underpinning the contemporary decolonisation challenge, and one that requires ever deeper levels of critical reflexivity

(Rappleye and Komatsu, 2016; Silova, 2019). Within recent years, for example, much work at the University of Bristol (Barrett et al, 2011) has centred upon methodological issues relating to North – South partnerships, research positioning, Southern Theory and epistemic justice drawing upon the work of scholars such as Bhabba, (1994), Loomba, (2005), Connell, (2007) and Santos, (2012). For example, with the support of BAICE funding, doctoral and early career researchers worked with numerous colleagues to revisit the changing nature of insider/outsider positionings (see chapters in Crossley, Arthur and McNess, 2016) in ways that open new liminal research spaces and non-binary methodological frameworks for others carrying out in-depth fieldwork as independent researchers or in collaboration/co-construction with others.

More recently, a series of three on-line webinars convened by the Centre for Comparative and International Research in Education (CIRE) at the University of Bristol in collaboration with UNESCO on the theme of *Decolonising Education Futures*, have made challenging conceptual and methodological contributions to global consultations designed to inform the *International Commission on the Futures of Education*. This major global initiative, established by UNESCO in 2019 ‘to reimagine how knowledge and learning can shape the future of humanity and the planet’ (UNESCO, 2020), is certainly timely for those calling for more inclusive and culturally diverse development frameworks. Moreover, the Synthesis Report from the webinar series provides a rich combination of innovative, theoretical, methodological and practical ideas that it is hoped will play a part in ongoing deliberations (Cortez Ochoa et.al., 2021). To cite the introduction to this Synthesis report:

... much of the knowledge, values, and skills expected to be learned in formal education systems have been Eurocentric in nature. That is to say that they draw primarily on Western frameworks and histories, excluding other ways of conceiving the natural and social world. Protests, including those led by the Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall, Indigenous and other anti-colonial, anti-racist social movements, have called for education to be decolonised and for diverse knowledge systems to be the basis for realising equitable and sustainable futures (Cortez Ochoa et.al., 2021, p 1).

My own contributions to such debates have long been informed by experience working with inspirational colleagues from and within what UNESCO classify as small island developing states (SIDS) and, more specifically, from engagement with Pacific cultures, traditions and epistemologies. My experience at the University of Papua New Guinea throughout the 1980s was especially formative and that led to ongoing work with The University of the South Pacific (USP) and the development of the specialist Education in Small States Research Group (ESSRG) and international network based within CIRE at the University of Bristol (www.smallstates.net). This was initially established in 1994 and now has members worldwide, including from all three major groupings of small states in the Pacific, the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean.

At the heart of the ESSRG philosophy is a positioning that prioritises ways of learning from the distinctive cultures, epistemologies and experiences of small states. In this respect, it is pertinent here to note how Pacific scholars, in what pioneering Tongan writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa (1993) prefers to call ‘large ocean states’, or Oceania’s ‘sea of islands’, have long challenged the dominance of Western development discourses and epistemologies. While this literature is little known beyond the region it has much to offer the international community and has inspired new generations of Pacific researchers to ground their work in traditions from their own contexts, exhibiting deep respect for Oceanic cultures, values and ‘relational space’. This is important scholarship for comparativists, and especially for those engaging with decoloniality and its implications across the social sciences and humanities. One contemporary application that is available in the international literature is demonstrat-

ed by Koya, Vaka'uta et al.'s analysis of the potential for indigenous epistemologies and intellectual frameworks to contribute to improved understandings of the now widely contested concepts of sustainability and development. See also Linda Tuhiwai Smith's influential and more widely known methodological work (1999). Similarly, Fairbairn-Dunlop and Coxon's (2014) volume on *Talanoa: Building a Pasifika Research Culture*, and Johansson-Fau's et al.'s (2020) book *Relationality and Learning in Oceania. Contextualizing Education for Development*, deserve a wider readership and application. The later not only for its conceptual and epistemological contributions but also for its exploration of alternative models for aid interventions. Indeed, Johansson-Fau, the Director of the University of the South Pacific (USP) Institute of Education in Tonga, also writes directly for comparative educationalists and maintains that, despite much rhetoric about greater inclusivity and cultural diversity in educational research and international development:

The current conversation regarding the centrality of culture and context to the field remains generally for 'outsiders', for researchers, academics and development partners who are external to the context. The question asked here is, if the voice of insiders are included in the conversations about comparative and international educational research, what inferences would this have on research approaches, on methodology and on the knowledge generated? (Johansson-Fau, 2016:32).

Rosiana Lagi's (Lagi,2014) work on indigenous knowledge and local understandings of climate change in the Pacific offers further potential for realistic insights and policy learning for SIDS 'living at the sharp end of environmental uncertainty' within and beyond the Pacific. Importantly, this points to what I believe is significant and timely potential for current studies of the educational implications of climate change to learn from indigenous knowledge and locally grounded perspectives through detailed, home grown qualitative research. These are some of the most vulnerable contexts experiencing the impact of sea level rise in the world with for example, Tuvalu in the Pacific and the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, facing national inundation with a rise of one meter in sea level (Crossley and Sprague, 2014). As Dame Pearlette Louisy, ESSRG founder member and former Governor General of Saint Lucia in the Caribbean, argues when reflecting upon the need for SIDS to challenge dominant development frameworks and do more to make their own voices heard in international fora:

If culture shapes what we mean by development, we need to have a firm understanding of the way of life by which we want to be defined. We need to agree on the social order that we need to construct and share with each other. We need to reach consensus on how we present ourselves to the world. We need to take up the challenge of reclaiming our own voices, of finding out who we are; the challenge of adapting these voices to present day realities; the challenge of nurturing the cultural ethos that will infuse our sustainable development agenda. (Louisy 2018, 18)

Related to this are critical issues concerning the internationalisation of academic publishing and the importance of new directions, frameworks and platforms in providing greater support for researchers, perspectives and publications located in the Global South to contribute to the international discourse, further internationalizing higher education and the related academic literature (Walker and Martinez-Vargas, 2020). Global citation data and digital systems certainly reinforce the position, status and profits of the large international publishing houses, often at the expense of epistemic justice, affordable access and the emergence of more locally produced journals and books. How our field can deal with such imbalances in more contextually sensitive and ethical ways remains a further priority for attention as argued by writers such as Robinson-Pant and Singal (2013) and Grieve and Mitchell (2020).

Conclusions

Comparative and international education currently faces existential challenges to its intellectual foundations, the nature and rationale for international development, the foregrounding of decolonisation debates, and the uncertainties generated by climate change in what we hope will be a post Covid world. This paper focusses upon related theoretical, epistemological and methodological issues and implications, arguing that while some of these challenges are new and generated by our rapidly changing and digitised world, it is important to recognise how others represent further iterations and intensifications of concerns and responses that informed earlier phases of critical self-reflection within our multidisciplinary field. In doing so, the analysis explores ways in which increased self-reflexivity, from a diversity of research communities worldwide, are challenging uncritical paradigmatic and policy transfer and engaging with fundamental tensions. and their political implications, in more genuinely ethical and cross-culturally sensitive ways.

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