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Book Review

Merli Tamtik

York University, merli.tamtik@gmail.com

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Book Review

Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods (2014, 2nd edition). M. Bray, B. Adamson and M. Mason (Eds.) Hong Kong and Dordrecht: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong and Springer, 443 pp., ISBN 978-988-17852-8-2.

Reviewed by Merli Tamtik, SSHRC Postdoctoral Scholar, York University.

Having had the opportunity to teach a graduate level course in Comparative and International Education, this book review is my reflection based on the practical needs of a course instructor. Finding materials for students that are beginning to discover the field of comparative education can be challenging. There are introductory books available that contain information on basic foundations, theories and debates in comparative education (e.g. Mundy et al. 2008, Phillips and Schweisfurth 2008). Yet, when it comes to practicalities (students research papers), there is always the struggle over how to compare and what counts as a valid comparison. Being a multidimensional subject area where context determines the research results, there has been a certain ambiguity in the methodological approaches of comparison even among the most distinguished scholars. The complexity of making comparisons has increased with the shift away from the nation-state being the primary focus of a comparative inquiry.

The current book takes an important step away from the exploratory perspective of comparative education and tackles the key question in the field – how to compare. It provides important methodological advice and analytical perspectives on making comparisons. Yet it is not a manual on specific ways to use particular tools. It invites students to “making strange patterns familiar” and “familiar patterns strange” by encouraging reflections on the variety of issues and challenges one can face in comparative inquiry. The book takes a critical perspective on the topics covered, focusing particularly on the complexity of any methodological tool used for research results. Fortunately, it does provide plenty of practical recommendations and approaches for making comparisons. The fact that this is the second edition of a book first published in 2007 additionally speaks to its merits.

The book is divided into an introduction, three main sections and a conclusion. In the introduction piece Mark Bray, Bob Adamson and Mark Mason set the stage for the reader by briefly describing the main historical developments in the field, focusing on the emerging challenges of the 21st century, which have led to the need for this kind of methodological book. The first main section, titled Directions, comments on the nature of the field. Its three chapters present a brief overview of the main actors, purposes and different theoretical and methodological approaches. These chapters serve as an excellent opening text for students to remind them of the key figures and organizations in the field and recapitulates the main academic conceptualization and methodological differences in the field of comparative education.

The second main section, composed of eleven unique chapters, forms the core of the book. The authors’ purpose is to focus on comparisons beyond traditional (comparing countries) which fills a significant gap in the literature of comparative education. Readers can learn about comparing places (M. Manzon); systems (M. Bray & K. Jiang); times (A.

Sweeting); race, class and gender (L. Jackson); cultures (M. Mason); values (W. O. Lee & M. Manzon); policies (R. Yang); curricula (B. Adamson & P. Morris); pedagogical innovations (N. Law); ways of learning (D. A. Watkins & J. Van Aalst) and educational achievements (F. Leung & K. Park). These chapters directly address the emerging practical questions among students and academics on the issues of making comparisons. Some chapters provide very objective accounts on the topic (e.g. M. Manzon, W. O. Lee and M. Manson) others are more personal and even autobiographic accounts (e.g. D. A. Watkins and J. Van Aalst). While having a global message, there is an increased emphasis on the links and examples from East Asia. As the editors mention, all authors are associated in some way with the Comparative Education Research Center at the University of Hong Kong.

As the topics each author tackles in making comparisons are non-traditional and most valuable for practical application, each chapter deserves a brief overview on its own. Maria Manzon's chapter (Chapter 4) on comparing places takes Bray and Thomas's Cube as an analytic tool to help inform comparisons on changing geopolitical spaces. The author emphasizes the importance of multilevel comparative analysis, as a tool to uncover educationally meaningful relationships from complex realities. The chapter aims to make explicit some of the alternative aspects of geographical locations that are emerging as a result of globalization – regional blocks, virtual places, knowledge diasporas.

In comparing systems, Mark Bray and Kai Jiang (Chapter 5) allude to the need to clearly identify and define an educational system, as often several systems can co-exist within and across national borders. As the authors demonstrate by the example of Mainland China, Hong Kong and Macao the differences can emerge not only between the systems but also within. Suggestions on how such complex comparisons can further illuminate analytical and conceptual work of comparativists are given at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 6 by Anthony Sweeting tackles the question of comparing time. As different people may perceive time and its duration differently depending on their interest and engagement with the topic, methodological problems arise when drawing causal relationships or securing validity of the research results. Researchers must carefully consider what type of time is the focus. Is it astronomical, biological, geological, personal or historical? The author suggests strategies for comparing time such as shifting the focus away from nation-states, using different structural forms (diachronic, synchronic, quasi-synchronic), applying diverse tactics for the periodization of time.

Liz Jackson (Chapter 7) focuses on analyzing race, class and gender - the categories that impact the educational achievement and access the most. Each specific factor is discussed separately, to illuminate the unique challenges associated with those categories. Yet, the author emphasizes the role of social context in shaping how each of those categories intersects. The author reminds the reader to become conscious of those qualitative intersections, especially when drawing policy relevant generalizations based on large-scale datasets which often portrait race, class and gender as large homogeneous groups.

One of the most intriguing chapters, by Mark Mason (Chapter 8), discusses the issues around educational comparisons that are largely influenced by culture (such as PISA tests). In order to include culture as a factor in one's research, it is necessary to

recognize culture in its plurality, multiculturalism, interdependence, hybridity and complexity. The author dedicates a core section of the chapter to a discussion of methodological approaches for analyzing culture. He emphasizes the ethnographic, phenomenological and narrative methods in a wider context of social theory, discussing also the main criticism associated with those approaches.

Wing On Lee and Mark Mason (in Chapter 9) tackle the challenge of making sense of comparing values. The authors have chosen to conduct a literature review on relevant studies that touch upon the analysis of the value systems. The cases under review are divided into four groups: cases similar to size, scale and complexity; longitudinal analysis of textbooks; cases on convergent and divergent values and comparisons in qualitative studies. The authors conclude by listing cross-cutting themes in proposed research questions and methodological approaches (with a tendency towards a qualitative approach), noting how these studies have broadened the field of comparative education by adding new languages, terms, procedures and instruments of interference.

In the environment of increasing policy borrowing and transfer, the comparative research on education policy is becoming important. Rui Yang in Chapter 10 examines the debates around defining policy and points out specific factors one should consider when researching policies. Factors such as context, prioritization of local effects, focus on non-Western educational policies and the impact of cultural values are discussed in detail. The importance of critical approach in policy analysis is stressed.

Chapter 11 on comparing curricula by Bob Adamson and Paul Morris is one of the most practical chapters. It contains a framework and practical examples for approaching comparisons of curricula. For different purpose of curricula comparisons (evaluative study, interpretive study, critical study) a specific model is presented that can serve as an analytic frame for each particular purpose. The examples presented in the chapter help to illuminate potential issues in comparing curricula as well as ways to overcome those.

Comparative studies of pedagogical innovations are the focus of Chapter 12 by Nancy Law. This chapter presents a detailed analysis of three case studies to illustrate methodological approaches for documenting pedagogical innovations. The author suggests that the application of increasingly refined and sophisticated methods for tracking classroom-specific innovations can potentially lead to sustaining and up-scaling pedagogical innovation, fostering better learning.

In Chapter 13 the authors David A. Watkins and Jan Van Aalst present their decades-long work on comparing ways of learning based on students in Chinese and Western societies. Using primarily quantitative approaches, the authors demonstrate how they have approached cross-cultural comparisons and discuss what kind of challenges can arise due with metric equivalence and sampling. They conclude by noting that in-depth research through qualitative methods is required to increase the validity of research results.

Chapter 14 by Frederick K.S. Leung and Kyungmee Park studies the comparison of educational achievements. It provides an overview of the approaches to large-scale quantitative measurements when comparing pupils, schools provinces or regions within a country or countries. At the country level the chapter explains the concerns associated with skills levels, benchmarks and overall scores. The authors indicate that while the

issues associated with measuring educational achievements across countries are clear, in reality there is as yet no ideal tool.

The concluding chapter returns to the broader framework of comparisons. It highlights some of the most influential models of comparative analysis, and discusses complexities and themes that have become apparent throughout the individual chapters. Comparative research is not only about the number of units of analysis or geographic levels. There are issues of an epistemological nature that determine the methodological approach. The chapter concludes with an elaboration on the need for academic rigor in choosing a methodological approach in order to make a comparative education a more recognized field of study.

Overall, this is not a basic exploratory textbook that a course instructor can conveniently use to assign chapters for familiarizing students with the basic concepts of the field. This book is a necessary tool for those students who already have a grasp of foundational, theoretical and methodological debates in the field of comparative education. It is a crucial reading for those academics who are embarking upon data collection and analysis and are looking for guidance among the diverse methodological ways of making relevant comparisons. The book is written in an easy to comprehend manner that encourages students to deepen one's knowledge. The links with the theoretical writings are done in a way that clarifies the basic knowledge of the field, provides important additional details, emphasizes the key points and creates links between old and new information. It is definitely a book that every course instructor needs to have in order to help students excel in their comparative inquiry.

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