GRUPPO II
ANALISI CRITICA
DELL’EDUCAZIONE COMPARATA
INTRODUCTION

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF COMPARATIVE EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

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During the 25 years of our Society’s existence, the world has changed about us — and changed fundamentally in its implications for all education. Therefore it is of critical importance that we assess the implications of those changes for comparative studies of education.

Today’s context for comparative studies: the world environment

If we contrast our present environment with that of the 1960s (and still more, with that of the late 1940s and 1950s) we are at once struck by the implications of a microprocessor-dominated technological revolution for all occupations, for all communications, for all relationships in learning and living. The changes which have already taken place during the past generation are probably mere precursors of the next phase of transformation already discernible in the ‘dawn industries’ whose social and educational implications are now being seriously studied by the Japanese government, for example.

To express that contrast in its simplest terms, we need only observe that in the early post-war years it was believed that our inherited systems of schooling and higher education would on the whole suffice to serve greater enrolments, the ‘knowledge explosion’, the ‘white heat of the technological revolution’, and the requirements of a more encouraging and liberal society. (In reality, such a belief was as anachronistic as supposing that pre-industrial factories could serve the requirements of the Industrial Revolution — which is what the early industrialisers at first imagined — or that pre-aviation and pre-electronic apparatus could suffice for today’s communications. Yet such anachronism did in fact characterise much post-1945 planning of educational reform).

Rather primitive international comparisons of reform plans and progress made politicians and administrators think that more people could be welcomed into democratically organised educational systems; more prominence could be given to new forms of knowledge and new skills; more attention could be paid to the special needs of underprivileged groups (girls,
rural dwellers, and migrants) by means of diversified curricula and adaptation of teaching/learning methods. And so forth. A more justifiable and prosperous future could be planned for by more successful use of education as already established. These views expressed what I have elsewhere (1) called «the second technological/educational idiom» associated with the development of heavy industrialisation. Any differences called for in education would be incremental differences of scale and scope; nobody had suspected that a generic change of character might be called for in education, in occupational prospects for everyone, in communicating and receiving knowledge of every kind.

Although some of education’s responsibilities (like the cultivation and enhancement of civilising qualities, and the transmission of useful knowledge and skills) remain with us as before — in principle — the entire instrumentation of learning and living has been transformed by a technological revolution that is certainly more far-reaching and more overwhelming than the first Industrial Revolution was two centuries ago.

Therefore systems of schooling and higher education today can no longer suppose that they are preparing recognisable groups of people (or aptitudes) for stable groups of careers and ‘exact sciences’ along time-honoured paths marked off by a hierarchy of examinations valid for ‘prediction’. Instead, we know that we must prepare people for lifelong reappraisal and re-learning, by means as yet unrealised and in fields unknown to us. We are engaged in education for uncertainty.

Even within the familiar fields of conventional schooling, we do not need to be reminded now that the confident expectations of the 1960s (when comparative studies of education were particularly vigorous, though logically old-fashioned at that date) remain in large measure unfulfilled.

The political will and economic support necessary to reform educational provision fundamentally and more generously were often lacking; ‘perfectly good plans’ somehow did not succeed when attempts were made to implement them; the social and economic gap between the ‘well educated’ and the less educated has perhaps grown greater. Consequently, in retrospect, a growing number of people already have grave doubts about all educational-planning expertise, and about the part that comparative studies of education played in international policy-making.

In the past few paragraphs we have been considering world changes in the outer context of Comparative Education. Let us now look in greater detail at changes in the inner, working context of Comparative Education, and consequentially in its forms of scholarship. Then we can proceed to study changes in Comparative Education’s special interests within the general area of educational development. Finally we must take stock of its new responsibilities in long-term policy-making for an unknown (perhaps

(1) See E. J. Knox: Other Schools and Ours, 5th edition (1979), pp. 36-44.
so far unknowable) future in cooperation with partners unrecognised by specialists a generation ago.

The inner context and 'ecology' of comparative education today

During the 1960s period of expansive optimism, many teachers' colleges (previously often considered to be of poor quality) greatly increased the number and scope of their generally informative pedagogical courses.

Comparative Education benefited by this: some comparative studies became obligatory for many (amidst heightened international sensitivity), and even where participation in such courses was voluntary that option became most popular. Therefore many appointments were made of specialists in Comparative Education — or at least of college teachers able to offer that 'subject'.

By becoming a pedagogical 'subject' (which was in some ways a good thing), Comparative Education risked becoming mere subject-matter, rather than an insight-giving perspective on educational problems which were beginning to look similar across all the international discussions of policy engaged in by statesmen and high-level social scientists (well outside the pedagogical faculties of universities and colleges). Within the Faculties of Education, however, the 'subject' of Comparative Education was sometimes 'padded out' and made more esoteric by inflation with its own theories and 'methodologies'. But in proportion as the social scientists achieved influence in educational policy-making, and also set in motion important internationally comparative studies of education (like the International Evaluation of Educational Attainment or IEA first published in 1967), the relevance of what was happening in pedagogical comparative studies of an abstract nature was called into question. (That was doubly regrettable, if only because Comparative specialists know more than anyone else about educational systems and their ecology and dynamics across the world, while social science specialists dabbling in comparative studies often ignore these things).

Of course, comparative studies of education are essential for teachers during their initial formation and also subsequently when they review, in service, some of the major problems in depth and in a world perspective. That is not in question. But from the late 1960s onwards and during the 1970s, two new events imperilled the standing of Comparative Education as a serious «scientific» study: one was the inclusion of many more teachers' colleges within an expanded framework of higher education, where they had to justify their academic level against the measure of more established faculties; the other was the financial contraction of the post-1973 period, which caused administrators to 'cut off the frills' — of which Comparative Education was often thought to be one.

After this critical excision (but not simply because of it) it became doubly necessary to demonstrate the 'scientific' quality of comparative
studies of education rather than of a subject called ‘Comparative Education’. Fortunately, some specialists had already begun to develop or intensify the research commitment of their work — not simply in ‘library research’ or internally pedagogical interests but in empirical investigations, likely to discover unknown (or at least unconsidered) data or aspects vital for a proper understanding of the educational process.

Such empirical investigations on the ground inevitably brought some Comparative Educational specialists into close working contact with other social scientists, ad sometimes into collaborative teamwork. More to the point — the publications of findings from such researches brought Comparative Education specialists into policy-oriented discussions with Ministers of Education, with inspectors and administrators concerned to improve the workings of education, and also with principals, practising teachers, and even students still at school (2).

Furthermore, these working contacts have introduced fresh concepts into educational planning nationally and internationally; and they have focussed attention directly and practically both on unsuspected dimensions of educational problems and on possible means of solving them (3). Comparative Education still has a long way to go in this new and promising direction. Comparative research is a major aid to policy-making. The current engagement of Comparative Education specialists in a UNESCO world survey of educational research, and the research project of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies on provision for young adults between the ages of 16 and 25, illustrate the point.

Conceptual changes

In addition to the conceptual change concerning Comparative Education’s role, as just described, and in addition to recognition (for example) of ‘young adult’ education as a vital emphasis in catering for the over-16s, comparative studies of education now also ask important new questions to clarify any investigation of school systems.

Have we been too simple in our comparisons? As we all move forward together into a ‘communications society’, have we been content (as teachers and researchers) to view education from above or outside — instead of at the receiving end, where all education worth the name is taking place? Have we been content with data gathered and classifications imposed in answers to other people’s questions or questions appropriate to other times?

When we look, for example, at money said to be spent ‘on education’ in some countries, we find that the term ‘education’ may include not mere-


(3) Post-Compulsory Education II, op. cit.
ly sport and people's general cultural well-being but also research, including scientific and perhaps militarily useful research. If we examine the term 'research' for a moment, we may find that it refers not so much to empirical investigation or innovative experimentation as to the official gathering of statistics, or similar documentation with little reformatory impact. Indeed, the UNESCO survey showed that some countries permit only 'authorised' research, budgeted for and recognised officially year by year.

In any case, how much research (especially comparative research) succeeds in obtaining the 'inside view' of students and teachers — or of parents and others interested in educational effectiveness? How much note is taken of the experiential dimension — people's opinions formed from their practical experience of education and its successes or needs over a period of time? What do young adults and other newcomers to education — the frontier people — expect or need from education as they face a problematic future of intermittent employment/unemployment and all the other uncertainties? How does 'Western' education as we know it serve either low-income developing countries or the 'high-tech' youth of newly industrialising countries on the rim of the Pacific? These are but a few of the conceptual questions newly facing comparative investigators.

Institutional and operational questions

If space here permitted I would deal with these aspects separately, since each poses new challenges for comparative research. It must suffice to observe that new learning populations, new learning content, new instrumentation for learning, and today's scatter of learning needs and opportunities all introduce new questions about the structural organisation of education and the way in which educational services are made available. Indeed, not merely made available but put within easy and appropriate access of people who may need help in order to benefit fully.

The whole range of learning and re-learning after school has ended, or of post-experience retraining as industries change their emphases and location, and the relationship between formal instruction and 'autonomous' or informal learning through the media or at work and in society, are themes demanding scrupulous comparative investigation as the world's educational problems and prospects take on a new shape because of the technological transformations of our times.

For example, should school systems effectively recognise that 'adult education' has already begun by the age of about 16? Should a kind of 'junior college' provision span the years (and learning levels) between the last years of compulsory schooling and the lower reaches of 'higher education'? Should people be able to obtain high professional degrees (for example, in engineering or even law and medicine) by proceeding to the top academic awards by means of two — or three — tier qualifications? Should 'returners' be able to resume their formal education according to their pre-
sent state of attainment and readiness — and, indeed, according to their ‘personal profile’ of varying competences or present state of readiness and motivation? In our rapidly changing world these are current, practical questions of policy for which comparative studies can provide examples and clues.

*Educational participation in a ‘communications society’*

Important though such questions are for us who know educational conditions and prospects internationally, they remain questions of detail and contrivance. A more fundamental question is whether our studies will help to prepare mankind conceptually and practically for effective participation in a society where all learn and all teach (to some extent) all the time.

Will all those technologically facilitated operations, and all those riches of knowledge and human contact, be brought effectively into play so that all may truly share in ‘civilisation’ — the great discussion of mankind down the ages about the things that matter most?

It is not long since OECD and other agencies used the word «participation» to mean simply enrolment in a class. Now we know it must mean being active in a cybernetic process of communicating information, insights, experiences and proposals for the improvement of the human condition. No educational system so far has been intended to prepare people for such activity or to take advantage of it in the limited circumstances in which it happens. Yet this is the key question for those who would learn the ‘third technological/educational idiom’ (1) of a ‘communications society’, and radical analysis by comparative students of education will suggest most helpful answers.

Comparative studies do not reveal only positive evidence; they also reveal omissions from educational provision or planning, and raise questions for new research — for ourselves and for all other social investigators (who will always need our special knowledge of educational contexts and systems).

Our scholarship can help to establish priorities and suggest feasibilities or investigative approaches in particular circumstances; but we must never again fall into the trap of believing that we are somehow universally relevant practitioners of a ‘science apart’. We are rightly proud of our specialisation; but we are the colleagues and supporters of those seeking policies for educational reform — now, and in a future of vast uncertainty.