THE TERTIUM COMPARATIONIS
IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

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The «tertium comparationis» has received a different consideration in many authors and texts of comparative education.

José Luis García Garrido in «Educación comparada: fundamentos y problemas» (1982) says:

«In every comparative process there is besides the events or the aspects to compare one more element. This element is usually called by the comparatists as ‘tertium comparationis’. This term has created thinking in the two elements (facts, fenomens, etc) which are needed to make possible the comparison. The subjective element will be the third (tertium). It is evident that this last element will be equally necessary — or even more — as the facts to compare are increased. According with the latin terms suggested by the classic authors, we will also call it ‘comparative criteria’ (pag. 121).

Gustavo F.J. Cirigliano in his article «Pasos en el proceso comparativo» included in the book of Angel Diego Márquez «Educación Comparada. Teoría y Metodología» affirms:

«Steps in the comparative moment: It was time to underline the differences and similarities. At this moment it will be convenient to have a valid module, of a ‘tertium comparationis’. To grasp the identity, the common characters — if there are any — hidden between differences, it is a hard but necessary work. Just because it is so hard we usually tend to consider and abstract only the differences. This ‘moment’ is the best opportunity to establish a norm to measure the level of similarities and also the level of variability. We dare to say that actually, in comparative education, the norms of this fourth moment are not accomplished» (pag. 203).

Alexandre Vexliard, in his book «La pédagogie comparée. Méthodes et problèmes» interpreting to Franz Hilker exposes:

«At this moment of the process (juxtaposition) we need the ‘third term’ of the comparison. Robert Ulich insists on this. When we work with statistical elements the third term of the comparison will
be a relationship referred to total population, or a relationship 'per capita'. The third term will have a more qualitative meaning, for example: the instruction level that is reached in a concrete age. Finally, the third term can be found after we compare the elements obtained in different countries.

We close this selection of texts with some ideas of George Z.F. Bereday of his book «Comparative Method in Education». In the comparative studies we have to make first a juxtaposition, a preliminary confrontation between the elements from different countries. We make this task in order to find the 'tertium comparationis', the criteria to give validity to the comparisons, and verify the hypothesis. Finally we make the comparison, the simultaneous analysis of education in different countries.

Through these texts we can observe a common denominator. Following the scheme of Hilker and Bereday, the ‘tertium comparationis’ appears between the juxtaposition and the comparison. On the contrary, the functions, the origin and the meaning of the ‘tertium comparationis’ is different in the different authors.

Garcia Garrido gives it a subjective and aprioristic character, and it is put by the individual. Cirigliano considers the ‘tertium comparationis’ necessary to discover the similarities and the differences, but he doesn’t make a clear difference between if it is an «a priori» or «a posteriori» character, but it seems to participate in both characters. The ‘tertium comparationis’ is for Vexliard more than an ideal model, the criteria or indicators to make the analysis of reality; and for Bereday, we can find it at the end of a confrontation between the different information.

Apart from the convenience or the inconvenience of this term (tertium comparationis), due to the implicit limitation in the comparison between only two elements; there are fundamental problems: It is necessary to have a model to establish the comparison between two or more elements? Isn’t it sufficient to confront the facts to discover the similarities and differences that don’t implicate or conduce to an ideal model? If we consider necessary to accept this model, must we put it in this moment of the comparison, the last one and the most important, at least according to schemes of Hilker and Bereday? Wouldn’t it be better to use it since the first moment even before the recollection of the facts? Wouldn’t be this model the one which would let us select the information in order to make it comparable? Remarking that we need the comparability to start with the descriptive moment, condition and basis of all the subsequent treatments, can we identify the ‘tertium comparationis’ with the hypothesis that leads us in the search of information and that finally the facts verify, refute or rectify? Is it a model with concrete characters, or is it just a set of questions that allow us to collect information or the indicators that facilitate us to quantify and evaluate the answer? And finally, can there be comparative studies that use the ‘tertium comparationis’ as an ideal model and in consequence give it an aprioristic character while it doesn’t exist in other cases.
and its function is substituted by the list of criteria that we use in the
descriptive moment of the recopilation of information?

This set of questions that include a great number of metodologic and
epistemologic problems can't be answered in this short contribution. I
want to remark that this set of questions do not implicate a 'yes' or 'no' as
an answer. The different alternatives are models or possibilities that had
been developed in a wide range of comparative investigations, that in any
case require researches about their opportunity, validity and efficacy.

The international organizations of education such as UNESCO,
OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), and
the Council of Europe, have created models that are the framework to col-
lect information and are very useful.

But we must underline that none of these three models have pretended
to be an ideal model. Their aim is to facilitate the recopilation of facts that
can be comparable without any valorative or prescriptive connotation.

To facilitate the collection of facts the main thing is the criteria or the
aspects that allow us to analyze the educational systems. It is fundamental
to collect a non redundant information with the minimum data that will
allow us to understand the educational systems. The debates in order to
elaborate this criteria have taken a long time. The main question has been
the definition of the criteria.

The main difficulty is lack of concrete definitions. One solution is to
explain the elements of the concept and convert them into questions. For
example, the primary education has different duration in different coun-
tries. But if we ask for the age of starting and finishing, we can establish a
mondial comparison and obtain valid conclusions without using aprioristic
models.

H.J. Noah and M.A. Eckstein in their book «Towards a science of
comparative education» they establish the differences between concept and
indicator. The first one has a more general and theoric character while the
second one remarks the concrete aspects and also allows us to find quan-
titative data. For example the educational level of a concrete population
(concept) can be traduced by a concrete indicator, the average of the years
of scholarship of this population. At present we are not going to discuss the
differences between concepts, criteria and indicators.

We will use the three terms with a similar meaning.

The international organizations of education in order to collect
statistics have elaborated concrete indicators. They do also use graphies
and symbols that allow us to represent the educational systems easily and
completely. There have been many discussions about the symbols and for-
mules to represent educational levels, years of each type of studies, condi-
tions to access and to finish studies, exams, diploms and so on.

In the book collection «World survey of education» edited by
UNESCO there is a brilliant exemplification of these procedures to repre-
sent the educational systems all over the world. In the «Year book of
education», also edited by UNESCO, there are statistics about the education, science and culture made with definite criteria that permit us to compare the statistics between different nations.

The main question is not the 'tertium comparationis' but the elaboration of the lists of criteria concepts or indicators (the different authors use these three terms with a similar meaning). We need to give concrete definitions to obtain a comparable information, quantitative (number of students or teachers) or qualitative (objectives, concepts, methodology and evaluation). This is the principal point: its validity, fiability and economy to traduce the analized reality related to the problem that moves us to investigate and to our hypothesis. According with Lê Thành Khôi in his book «L'éducation comparée», the comparative education is a carrefour of disciplines and methodologies of historical, anthropological and cultural sciences. We use content analysis, observation, forms, interviews, rating scales. This rich methodology presupposes the lists of indicators whose elaboration, justification and standardization has been realized in education and international organizations. A paradigmatic example of this could be the ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education).

It would be desirable to elaborate in the different areas, sectorial instruments or lists of indicators, made by the numerous scientific societies and national and international organizations. It would be a very helpful task with an enourmous methodological effectivity.