



**Learning from Comparing: New Directions in Comparative Educational Research. Vol. 2 Policy, Professionals and Development.** Robin Alexander, Marilyn Osborn, and David Phillips, eds. Oxford: Symposium Books, 2000. 266 pp.

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This edited volume is the outcome of a series of seminars funded by the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) during the period 1997-99. Different research and development centers of the universities of Warwick, Bristol, and Oxford organized the seminars, which brought together an international group of prominent "research providers" and "researcher users." The volume consists of formal papers as well as summaries of conference proceedings, and is divided into three major sections, corresponding to what comparative education can contribute to: (1) the formulation of more enlightened education policies and practices, (2) national development, and (3) the effective work of education professionals. The editors provide useful summary introductions and, in two cases, postscripts to the sections. The papers themselves are of two major types: (1) conceptual overviews of the relevance of comparative education to policy and development studies; and (2) descriptions of cross-national research projects.

As the editors comment in their Preface, the processes of globalization have contributed to increasing interaction among education professionals, and to opportunities to observe and transfer policies and practices across national frontiers and sociocultural boundaries. Most of the contributing authors underscore the need to view education systems as outgrowths of particular historical and national/regional milieus, and as expressions of specific value constellations. At the same time, they are not unmindful of certain universal currents that express themselves differently according to local contexts. Because education systems are culturally embedded, the authors systematically disavow uncritical borrowing of policies and practices and, above all, the frequent imposition of "one size fits all" remedies by international technical assistance agencies.

One of the most engaging and illuminating of the chapters (by Lynn Davies) is, unexpectedly, on what chaos and complexity theories can contribute to more culturally-sensitive and administratively effective approaches to innovation in education systems. Other insightful chapters include those by Rosemary Preston and Cheng Kai-Ming. Preston provides a reasoned argument for critically examining the disciplinary and demographic characteristics of "multinational teams working in a



common language on cross-national case study analyses" (p. 122) and more broadly the assumptions and trends in development discourses, research, and practice over the past 50 years. She is particularly interested in research communities that exist outside the mainstream of higher education and official development assistance agencies and inform us of "the range of innovative coping strategies by excluded" groups (p. 130). Kai-Ming, similarly, calls for more attention to the cultural insiders' views of education and for a greater South-South exchange among developing countries in the conduct and dissemination of research on education.

Among those in the industrial world of the "North," comparative study may also lead to new insights into the uniqueness of what may have been previously taken for granted—for example, that a school inspector is just that. The chapter by Clives Hoppes illustrates how the roles and functions of what may be broadly termed system supervisors and evaluators differ greatly in the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and England. Comparison by providing information on how similar problems are approached in different ways can serve, according to Hoppes, as a useful device for "breaking down the repetition of the encrusted rituals that still hamper parts of our school systems" (p. 240). As with the Hoppes's study of supervisors, Pam Poppleton and Theo Wubbels suggest how a collaborative multinational study of education reform may enable teachers to gain new perspectives on their profession by comparing their experiences with those of colleagues in other countries. Colin Brock and Nadine Cammish provide a conceptual framework, based on notions of "cultural capacity" for change, to study gender, education, and development in six countries.

New directions for comparative research are offered by Val Rust and Michael Crossley. Rust underscores the need for comparative education to respond to the forces of globalization, especially the telecommunications revolution and the dramatic increase in international migration. Crossley recommends overcoming the "traditional developed and developing country binary divide" and various disciplinary and organizational barriers to creatively unite research, development efforts, and implementation of policy and practice (p. 76).

Given the level of cross-cultural sophistication of the authors in this volume, it is surprising to find a number of sweeping generalizations that perpetuate various stereotypical and binary divides. Kai-Ming, for example, suggests that "Chinese society necessarily places more emphasis on human-human relations," whereas in the West, "emphasis is on human-nature relations" (p. 85). Such statements are untenable, even for China itself as a multicultural society. Davies uncritically accepts Frederick Riggs's arguments that "developing countries are prismatic in that they contain elements of the traditional fused type of society and the structurally differentiated or 'modern' society" (p. 204), as if all



countries, including highly-industrialized ones, do not combine elements of the traditional and modern in major institutional spheres and in everyday life. Generally, school systems themselves may appropriately be labeled "prismatic."

Also problematic is the argument expressed by several authors (especially Harry Judge) that notions of professions, and teachers as professionals, may be obsolete. Evidence to the contrary is found in the struggles of teachers worldwide to attain professional status and shape their professions in the face of bureaucratic control. Even more challenging than Judge's questions concerning the value of three key concepts--professionals, education, and comparing--is the chapter by Theodor Sander on "The Politics of Comparing Teacher Education Systems and Teacher Education Policy." By far the lengthiest chapter, it also is the most unsatisfactory. It is based on another "binary divide"--between what the author calls "affirmative" and "critical" approaches to teacher education policy--as well as the uses of comparative education. Sander excessively caricatures proponents of affirmative approaches as uncritical supporters of the status quo and Cold War jingoism. Although I also favor critical approaches (which view teacher education systems as mirroring the contradictions of capitalism) his advocacy is overly deterministic and under-substantiated.

As may be expected from a compilation of conference papers and proceedings, the quality of the chapters is uneven. As noted, several chapters generally insightful in nature also display serious shortcomings. Given these limitations, I still found this edited volume to be valuable as a resource book in acquainting me with what many of my colleagues in other lands consider to be the major challenges to and contributions of comparative education.

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