



Learning from Comparing: New Directions in Comparative Educational Research, vol. 1: Contexts, Classrooms and Outcomes. Robin Alexander, Patricia Broadfoot, and David Phillips, eds. Oxford: Symposium Books, 1999. 302 pp.

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Comparative education's status as a discipline is frequently a contested one. Because it exists at a crossroads between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and amalgamates elements of sociology, philosophy, anthropology, political science, and policy studies of education, the nature and direction of comparative education often seem unspecified. In *Learning from Comparing: New Directions in Comparative Education Research, vol. 1*, this phenomenon is in evidence; and yet the breadth and scope of the discourse contained in the book make clear that far from undermining its potential uses, the multifarious aspects of the field constitute one of comparative education's greatest strengths.

The book is the first in a two-part series and builds on the proceedings of a program of seminars funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. In addition to bringing together both researchers and "users' from government departments, public bodies, international agencies and the press" (p. 9), the impetus behind the seminars was in part to attend to the unprecedented rise in interest in international comparisons of education brought on by "school effectiveness" debates. To address where and how

comparative education should fit into this increasingly global conversation on schools and schooling, the seminars sought to explore the following themes:

- comparative education in the 1990s: theory, method, and context
- comparing classrooms and schools
- comparing pupil achievement
- research, development, and education
- the comparative study of educational policy
- educational professionals compared (pp. 9–10)

Volume 1 addresses the first three of these points and is therefore divided into three parts, each containing five essays contributed by some of the leading researchers in the field. In addition, the sections close with a postscript summarizing in part the dialogue that took place at the seminars.

Part 1, "Comparative Education in the 1990s: Theory, Method and Context," unpacks varying analytic frameworks in comparative education. Essays by David Phillips, Patricia Broadfoot, Jürgen Schriewer, Robert Cowen, and Michele Schweisfurth take the temperature of how, where, and why comparative education is and should be practiced in the context of globalization. These chapters encourage comparative researchers to consider how international and educational relations are impacted by increasing structural and cultural immunologies and permeologies (to borrow Robert Cowen's terms), asking the questions of "what will be filtered in; and what will be filtered out?" (p. 83) as nations and states increasingly look to one another for new directions in educational practice. The role of the comparative education researcher in this new context is further complicated by questions of methodology: How do we strike a balance between quantitative and qualitative methodologies; what epistemological models do we adopt; how do we unify and "raise the profile of the field" (p. 99) to enter into and guide the new discourse of comparison stimulated by school effectiveness debates?

In part 2 of the book, we see these theoretical issues in action. Using the studies of four different researchers (Robin Alexander, Joseph Tobin, David Reynolds, and Maurice Galton) as starting points, these essays bring the debate on the role and function of comparative education research to the level of schools and classrooms, even as they highlight international and intranational implications raised by this work. As in part 1, we see both the promising and the problematic aspects of the comparative endeavor. On the one hand, there is Joseph Tobin's innovative ethnographic work with videos as "projective devices" and "non-verbal interview questions" (p. 115) to stimulate polyvocal and cross-cultural conversations on pedagogy. On the other, questions of design validity and generalizability in studies that attempt to compare five different countries based on only ten schools per country (as in Robin Alexander's "Primary Education in Five Cultures") raise inevitable doubts about the reliability of this type of work.

The last section of the book addresses directly the burgeoning trend in international comparisons of student performance. Perhaps the most transparently problematic work in comparative education research, these large-scale multicountry analyses of student outcomes lead, more often than not, to what Peter Robinson calls "the tyranny of league tables" or "cargo cult comparative education" (p. 74), whereby countries attempt to copy one another's pedagogical strategies in an effort to yield better student outcomes and thereby gains in overall economic growth and performance. As these essays show, context-blind comparing and borrowing overlook the essential components of culture and political economy, thereby creating hollow comparisons and weak or watered-down emulations of pedagogical methods. Comparative education might weigh in and turn this phenomenon around, it is argued, by injecting some of the context-specific insight that might better ground these comparisons and increase their reliability.

As a snapshot of a discourse in transition, *Learning from Comparing* provides an excellent cross section of both theoretical and practical insight into the ways comparative education is, could, and should be carried out. While the editors have worked to make the volume something other than "merely a collated set of seminar proceedings" (p. 10), the book read through in its entirety can feel like just that. However, as an opportunity to "sit in" on such a seminar and observe how such a conversation unfolds, the volume affords students, researchers, and users of comparative education a uniquely rich and diverse set of issues to consider.

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