Why Researchers Compared Education Internationally 1994 - 2009 and What This Tells Us about Why We Do This Today

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Abstract
This paper is a systematic literature review into the recent history of international comparative education research. I review the reasons given for comparing education internationally in the fifteen years leading up to 2009, discuss the different types of research conducted and identify patterns in terms of research conducted in different locations. This historical review gives an understanding of the academic and political values of this time and of how they impacted upon researchers motives and methods. It also provides a basis for reflection and understanding into changes in the comparative research discourse in the past five years. I developed a systematic approach to building this paper, using a structured intersecting model with multiple starting points, each of these beginning with a strategically chosen node: a significant journal or institution. I then read and classified the comparative research undertaken, also investigating patterns in the most frequently cited references. Although I am framing this as historical research into the recent past, its intention is also to inform current dialogue by enabling reflection on the changing emphasise found in comparative research and enabling exploration of the broader social, cultural and political context of such changes. The conclusion to the study raises issues for debate regarding the opportunities and challenges of recognising a sense of international collegiality amongst teaching professionals and academics when the nature of comparative research by and into different nations has significant and consistent differences. This is fitting within the conference theme of 'international development and international dialogue'.

Introduction

In this paper I review the reasons people had for comparing education internationally in the years 1994 to 2009. There are two reasons why I chose to do this. Firstly a personal reason, in 2010 I had published a paper in a local journal that I wished to return to and this paper very much grows out of that one. Secondly, by using hindsight I hoped it would be possible to generate among attendees at the conference a reflective discussion on the reasons why we compare internationally today. Therefore although there are two parts to the title in fact, this paper only addresses the first part *'why researchers compared education internationally 1994 – 2009'.* The second part *'and what this tells us about why we do this today.'* is the title for the discussion that this paper was intended to provoke.

I developed a systematic approach to building this paper in order to identify the motives people have for researching in this field. Firstly, I took as my starting point the journal Comparative Education Review. I read each article published therein, in the years 2006-2009, with an emphasis on finding the motive given for conducting the piece of research. This was supported by another route into the literature in this area, which was to read each master's thesis, comparing education internationally, written at Cambridge University in the years 2006 to 2009. This way I hoped to gain insight into the motives behind internationally comparative peer reviewed research and also research written by students at an early stage in their academic career. I also trailed the references used to build a picture of research conducted over the fifteen year period 1994 to 2009

The deductive framework used to review this literature

From an initial reading into this area I created a deductive framework with which to analyse the motives of international comparative researchers when reading further. This framework is based on Arnove (2002, 2003) with a fourth motive added which is based on Bray's (2007) modification of Arnove's framework. According to these authors there are four potential motives for comparing education internationally:

- Firstly, a reflective motive to understand other systems and practices as a way of reflecting on our own systems. Researching others simply for the 'value of knowing both them and ourselves' (Arnove, 2003, p.482).
- Secondly, a developmental motive, looking for new strategies and practices, researching others 'to borrow' from them (Arnove, 2002 p.483).
- Thirdly, a motive of enabling global understanding or 'contributing to international understanding and peace' (Arnove, 2003, p.10).
- Fourth and finally, a competitive motive to learn from others so as to compete against them within a global economy. Bray (2007) specifically attributes this motive to large-scale government funded statistical research.

This framework provided the outline for the initial structure of this article. However as I read further another issue emerged. This was a pattern of certain countries where a large amount of research had been conducted often by British and American researchers, specifically the Far East and especially Japan. Exploring this led to the writing of an additional section.

The reflective motive

Many writers in the period 1994 – 2009 emphasised the validity of reflection as a motive for international comparative research, partly on the basis of the dangers implicit within any other kind. Mason, (2007) wrote that the biggest differences in practice are potentially between teachers in the same school rather than between stereotypically representative teachers in different nations. He pointed out that trying to learn from others can lead to simplistic stereotyping, Manzon (2007, p.95) supported this by writing that it is easy and risky to assume a teacher is representative of a school, a school representative of a country or a country representative of a region. He was supported by Leung and Postlethwaite (2007) who argue that comparing between nations is comparing the incomparable because the differences are both so many and so subtle. This caution was to some extent challenged by Givvins, Herbert, Jacobs, Hollings and Gallimore (2005) who argue that teaching is distinctly different in different nations for cultural reasons. They argue that a cultural 'teaching script' (p.313) is learnt as a child and replicated as a teacher. However, even they accepted that there are other factors at play in any lesson. They also found that only in Japan was their strong enough evidence for them to conclude that there is a 'national teaching pattern' (p.314). Li (2006) and Van Reis Saari (2008) in their research also looked for cultural differences in classroom practice, in these cases in approaches to maths teaching. In all the cases referred to in this section the primary goal was discussion and reflection. Givvins et al. (2005) for example, were unsure whether cultural scripts could be successfully exported. In summary, enabling reflection, in the years 2006 to 2009, was seen by many working in the field of international comparative education as being a valid motive for conducting research. It probably still is today.

The developmental motive

Most researchers found that at least some lesson could be learnt from the comparison they conducted even if they expressed it in cautious terms. For some, pressure to discover concrete strategies by looking abroad came from others connected to their research. For example typically the institution researched into wanted more concrete results. This was an issue that appeared for Szelengi and Rhodes (2007) in a study into how overseas students are shaped by their experiences in the USA. There was also often a difference between the desired outcome of conversations between participants from different nations in different economic circumstances and with different academic traditions. Potts (2007), for example, writes about how for him the primary goal for his research was a process of reflection, However, he found that his Chinese colleagues wanted to learn and transfer concrete practices.

Several writers such as Baker, Kohler and Stock (2007) openly acknowledged that they found that they discovered within themselves, without outside pressure, a tension between the goal of reflection alone and a temptation to discover practice that could be transferred between nations. Others such as Law (2007) did not find this to be a problem. She felt that although reflection is a valid reason for research it is equally valid to accept that concrete lessons can be learnt from researching internationally even and perhaps especially when the research is small in scale. She writes that there is a 'dangerous paradox' (p.370) with international comparison. This is that it is at its most interesting when it involves trying to learn from the detail of pedagogy but this is also when the risk of drawing erroneous conclusions or falling into stereotypes is at its highest. However, to her this does not mean that this motive should be rejected just that conclusions should be approached with caution. Bray (2007) identified a similar problem but felt that in avoiding attempting to learn from the detail of classroom practice there is a danger of simply 'producing descriptive work of a very low calibre' (p.359), which he describes as unfortunately more prevalent in international comparative research than in any other field in education.

Mosselson (2007) is an interesting example of a researcher studying with the clearly expressed motive of discovering concrete strategies. She had particularly strong motives as she was analysing why her own Bosnian ethnic community, especially young women, seemed to be under-achieving academically. This was a situation she wanted to assist in remedying. This motive to compare to improve a community one is part of, or involved in, was also reflected in the work of many others researching in this field (Chinas, 2008; Cosic, 2008). Interestingly a significant number of these researchers used small-scale qualitative methods (Brown and Conrad, 2007; Hinderlitter et al., 2007; Hannum et al., 2007; Stanisic 2007; Blasco, 2009). In summary it seems that at this time there were considerable pressures both personal and professional that led researchers to want to be able to find practical strategies from their research even when it was small scale and qualitative.

The motive of enabling global understanding

Bray in 2007 argued that the motive of enabling global understanding dominated amongst the least formal kinds of international comparative research, that which might not be conventionally defined as research at all. However, as research of this type is harder to access, in this sub-section I will be analysing the role this motive played in academic research. In 2003 Arnove opened a series of collected articles with the statement that the aim of the book was 'global peace and justice' (p.10). Post (2009, p.1) similarly wrote that the reason for the existence of the journal Comparative Education Review at all is that such research is 'essential for a peaceful world'. This motive was not only mentioned by both Arnove (2003) and Post (2009) but also by many others. Examples include: Myers (2007) who explored how a shared concept of citizenship could be developed world wide and Suarez (2007) who focused on developing political understanding in South America and the Caribbean;

The motive of enabling global understanding was then and still is mentioned in the literature of large organisations, which fund international comparative research in education. The first sentence of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's constitution is 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed' (UNESCO, 2009). The world's three largest non-governmental organisations: UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development all support universities in conducting research in international comparative education under the banner of idealistic constitutions (Bray, 2007). University based international comparative research is not necessarily lacking in idealism even though it arguably has a higher level of academic rigour than other international comparative connections.

A significant number of writers in the field of international comparative education stated that one motive for conducting their research was to provide a response to the process of globalisation (Green 1997; Chabbott & Elliot, 2003; Baker & LeTendre, 2005; Levy, 2006; Spring, 2007). People who acknowledged that their writing was a direct response to globalisation can be divided into two schools of thinking. Firstly, those who adhered to a set of assumptions about the nature of globalisation as reflected in not only academic literature but also much non-academic literature on this topic published today. These assumptions, which could be described as mainstream thinking on globalisation, included the following:

- it is new
- it is accelerating
- it involves greater interaction between individuals across nations (socially, politically, economically)
- it will affect the role of the nation state and national governments
- it is driven by changes in technology connected to computing and the internet.

To these writers (Arnove, 2003; Bray 2007; Kennedy, Hahn & Lee, 2008; Carney, 2009) globalisation is a process, the nature of which is largely accepted and research is needed to generate an educational response to it. This is interesting as although this article is dealing with recent history. This was also an era that predated the popular use of most social media sites that people and academics use in 2016.

Secondly, there was another school of writers who challenged some of this mainstream view of globalisation. These writers used education to act as a lens with which to understand the process of globalisation and for questioning some aspect of the mainstream view. To some extent these writers should not be described as international comparative educational researchers at all. They were rather sociologists, historians or political scientists who found education a useful vehicle and others sat on a blurred boundary between two or more fields. However, articles of this nature were frequently published in comparative educational journals between 1994 and 2009. Below are some examples:

- Green (1997), Popkewitz (2000) and Sidhu (2007) use an historical approach to education to try to understand globalisation.
- Apple (2000), Burbules and Torres (2000), Lingard (2000), and McCarthy and Dimitrades (2000), all writing at the start of the Bush era, argue that globalisation within world education systems would lead to an increased emphasis on decentralisation. They use the study of education to understand larger economic and political changes as does Hanson (2008).
- Meyer (2006) analyses Japanese approaches to human rights via the lens of textbooks.
- Keating (2007) explores how citizenship education reflects concepts of democracy and citizenship in different European states.
- Toreiphi (2007) uses educational statistics to argue that among the most globalised people are the world's poorer communities including the Nagas.
- Ichilov (2008) analyses Arab-Israeli relations via educational policy.
- Tsvetkova (2008) does the same but in the context of Cold War relations.

In summary the motive of increasing global understanding was certainly prevalent in the decision to conduct international comparative educational research. The temptation to use education as a lens for understanding complex global processes was also understandably strong. By definition comparative and international studies into education have a large and fascinating space for the expansion of ideas. However, one could argue that for comparative international research to be relevant to teachers today it should ideally be conducted at teacher, student and classroom level and should focus on practice.

The competitive motive

In 2003 Cabbott and Elliott stated that although most international comparative research is small-scale and qualitative most funding in this area is directed towards large scale quantitative surveys. Two of the most well-known of these regularly conducted large scale studies, at the time and in 2016, are the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) with a sample of 250,000 students in 32 countries and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which compares 500,000 students in 50 countries. The intention behind national involvement in these reports as stated by Bray (2007) is educational improvement so as to compete within a global economy. They are not done for interest's sake alone. The intention is that policy makers are able to discover which countries are successful at what and then, it is presumed, researchers will look further to find out why. These studies are not intended to be an end in themselves. It is important therefore to distinguish between criticism of the existence of these studies and criticism of how they are portrayed and used by governments.

Many writers were critical of the use made of such studies. Chabbott and Elliott (2003) described them as leading to a lot of 'national breast beating' (p.15) but very little deep understanding of different educational systems. They go on to write that 'results issued with much fanfare may dominate public debate long after smaller studies with much smaller budgets call them into question.' (p.17). They also stated that the biggest failing of governments in terms of funding comparative research had been to be prepared to fund large scale data collection but not to fund further research into establishing the meaning and relevance of this data. Baker and LeTendre (2005) saw the discrepancy in funding large scale data collection but not subsequent in-depth research informed by this data as being due to politicians with 'solutions already in mind waiting to find a problem that justifies this policy.' (p.154). Theirs' is a long term historical approach. They identify three moments of educational reform in American post war politics each provoked by a sense of national crisis, the most recent of these following the first publication of TIMSS in 1995. They argue that following this, policies were brought in that the US government claimed were developed by learning from other nations but that actually came from a domestic political agenda.

In summary however, there was not widespread criticism of the motives behind the practice of compiling large scale statistical reports that compare internationally. They were and still are, as Fairbrother (2007) pointed out fascinating, as a picture into the field of education worldwide and a potentially valuable starting point for further research. However they were in the eyes of some academics, at that time, often simplified by politicians and the media beyond all usefulness.

Western approaches to East Asian nations 1994 to 2009

From this review of literature it became clear that a disproportionately large number of articles published in Comparative Education Review 1994 to 2009 were about the Far East and specifically, Japan (Gerbert, 1993; Lincicome, 1993; Sorenson, 1994; Robinson, 1994; Leng, 1996; Takahaza, 1998; Ban & Cummings, 1999; LeTendre, 1999; Givvins et al. 2005; Meyer, 2006). This was especially the case from 1994-1999. Bray (2007) contextualised this by describing how comparative international educational research as a field of study has two historical points of origin Japan and the West. Samoff (2003) took this even further arguing that schooling as it is commonly practised across the entire world is a model which was exported via empire from Europe and Japan.

However, several writers (Baker & LeTendre,1995; Green, 1997; Chabbott & Elliott, 2003; Tamer, 2005; Watkins, 2007), even at this time, were critical of many articles written about the Far East and especially Japan. These writers described some of these studies as simplistic and stereotypical. This perception that Western researchers may sometimes idealise the Japanese system is also reflected by some Japanese researchers of the time such as Takayama (2007, p.423), who wrote that 'in striking contrast to the international acclaim during the 1980s and 90s for Japanese schools, the Japanese continued to perceive their countries schooling as steeped in crisis.' An extraordinary sentence by Mason (2007, p.179) illustrates the complexity of the relationship Western researchers had with Japan, 'It is the cultural production of the 'western' centre (including of course Japanese cultural capital) that dominates that of the periphery.' The description of a Far Eastern culture as Western and the use of the word periphery seem to show something about the complexity of Western approaches to both the Far East and to other nations.

Conclusion

In conclusion it seems that in the years 1994 – 2009 a reflective motive was certainly present in much research in this field. However, it seems that many and perhaps a majority of researchers used international comparison to try to discover transferable practices or policies. Looking for concrete strategies particularly dominated when the researcher was part of or was involved in one of the communities researched into. There was also another powerful motive of using educational research to increase global understanding and also to understand the process of globalisation. However, while much of this research is fascinating to read some of it may have had little relevance for the day to day practice of teachers. In the last two decades the use of large scale statistical research comparing nations internationally has become established and this paper focuses on the beginning of that process. However, while usually seen as valid in origin and intention these programmes were widely criticised by academics (Baker & LeTendre, 1995; Bray 2007) who felt that they were too often misused in terms of their public presentation by politicians and the media. As with research related to globalisation these large scale statistical research programmes could also seem distant from the day to day practice of teachers. In geographical terms there was a considerable amount of dialogue on education between the West and the Far East, especially Japan, and a clear motive of learning from each other.

This is interesting but it is also significant as it raises questions regarding the nature of the dialogue the West had with other nations. Also at times this may have been expressed in rather simplistic ways.

The purpose of this paper was to present an overview of research during a narrow period of recent history. However, its deeper purpose was to generate discussion on how much has changed and how similar we, are as researchers today, in 2016. This discussion was opened up at the ACEID, IAFOR Conference, Kobe, 2016. However, I hope that it is long running and engaging. Please feel free to contribute further to this. My email is below.

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