COMPARATIVE EDUCATION, AREA STUDIES AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Part 1: the issues

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Abstract

This paper is in part a response to persistent calls over the past four decades for attention from comparative educational researchers to methodology that exploits working alliances between comparativists and social scientists. The paper describes how the disciplines (or fields) of comparative education and area/Middle East studies have evolved from their joint heritage, which has produced questions about their validity, and resulted in a number of conceptual problems relating to aim, method and theory generation. The paper suggests that in addition to combining these relevant traditions, the way forward for comparative education could usefully take much from the traditions of social anthropology, which has already worked out many of the issues facing comparative and area studies today. On the basis of such explicitly articulated connections, it proposes a framework for looking at theory and method in comparative education that would help to make diverse contributions to the field 'meaningful' in theoretical and mutually comprehensible terms – thereby assisting claims to 'discipline' status.

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Introduction

This paper is partly about disciplinary definitions and boundaries. Questions about this issue have been raised in various challenging ways following trends in recent decades towards interdisciplinarity, and fresh perspectives at what constitutes 'knowledge' – teachable knowledge in particular. In this sense, the present paper looks at universal and discrete frameworks of academic language, arguing overall that explicitness in terms of both theory and methodology is rendered even more important as disciplinary boundaries are increasingly bridged in area-based and comparative social sciences.

More specifically, the study is in equal part a response to calls, recurrent since the 1960s, for attention from comparative educational researchers to methodology that exploits working alliances between comparativists and social scientists (Anderson [1961], Brock and Cammish [2000], Barber [1972]). That such calls are still being made four decades on suggests that attempting to answer them is still a valid exercise. Area (specifically here, Middle East) studies have been subjected to similar questions about their validity, again turning largely on whether 'academic discipline' status requires the kinds of questions tackled to be directly related to a defined methodology (Tikly and Crossley [2002], Nonneman [2001] Tessler [1999], Khalidi [1995]). There are also reservations about the aims and assumptions that have resulted from the

particular colonialist-tinged evolution of these two fields of enquiry. However, such reservations do not necessarily amount to an assertion that these fields have no value; the premise adopted here is that the perceived shortcomings of comparative education and area studies are ascribable only to inadequacies within specific approaches taken so far rather than some intrinsic non-validity.

The present paper is the first of two interconnected papers. This first outlines points of convergence – methodologically, theoretically, and in terms of common cultural heritage – between the disciplines (or fields) of comparative education and area/Middle East studies, suggesting that it makes sense to combine the relevant traditions in the search for a valid way forward for comparative education. Moreover, it argues – much after Masemann's coinage of the term 'critical ethnography' more than two decades ago [1976, 1982], and similar work of others (Foley [1977]) that this way forward could usefully take much from the traditions of social anthropology, which as a relatively tightly defined discipline has already worked out many of the issues facing comparative and area studies today. Some aspects of such a relationship between area-based anthropological and educational research have already been explored (Musgrove, 1982), but not to the extent of drawing out the implications for comparative educational research theory and methodology. The points made in the present paper may be valid for a broader range of area and comparative studies; education (specifically higher education) and the Middle East/Arab Gulf are simply where my own area of specialist knowledge lies. The second paper (forthcoming) looks at an example of such combination has been attempted, with reference to the criteria discussed in this first paper.

Shared traditions and shared problems

It is implicitly acknowledged in comparative education discourse today that we are talking not about a distinct discipline, with a defined body of theory and methodology, but an array of

educational questions that suggest a comparative approach to answering them. Indeed, much comparative educational enquiry (if truly 'comparative' in ways that will be defined here) can be seen to have more in common with range of social and area studies than with other branches of specifically 'educational' study – such as teacher training, cognitive development and the like. The pages of 'comparative education' journals and books invariably incorporate elements that would arguably more properly be called 'area' studies.

Similar tensions surround the self-definition of the various area or culture-defined fields of study – including those of the Far East, Latin America, Jewishness, and America among many others – in academic and research institutions. Arguments have been forwarded challenging the discrete status of these subjects.

The validity of these allied disciplines or fields is questioned on three main counts, each of which can be seen to have evolved from their common history as the 'mere' observers' accounts of what happens elsewhere. This has produced the following conceptual problems. First, there is the fact that each is seen as underpinned by the ethics and attitudes of colonialism; increased awareness of valid cultural diversity has made traditional Orientalist and imperialist assumptions of superiority over the 'other' academically untenable. Second, there is the fact that social sciences (e.g. sociology, politics, economics) are generally and increasingly studied within a global framework anyway – so what is distinctive about self-consciously 'comparative' studies? And third (the consequence of these two preceding circumstances) each is periodically subject to criticism on account of a lack of methodological and theoretical rigour.

1) Imperialist heritage

The evolution of Middle East Studies, as a late 20th Century extension of Orientalism (defined as the study of Asia, the Middle East and the Islamic World) carries the baggage of imperialist attitudes. 19th and 20th Century Orientalism was enabled by empire: the British, French and latterly Americans, in India, Egypt, the Levant and Arabia. And while the Western tradition of Orientalism as exemplified by Edward Lane, Ernest Renan, Gustav von Grunebaum, Hamilton

Gibb and Bernard Lewis is not uniformly negative towards the object of its study, it does on the whole assume an objective normality from which its subjects were/are rendered worthy of study on account of the ways in which they digress(ed) from this 'norm'. A major weakness of traditional Orientalism is that 'Muslim society' is treated as a monolith – 'the Muslim mind', 'the Oriental', 'the Islamic ruler', 'the believer' are typical clichés. Furthermore, analysis of the significance of selected social features tended/tends to discount the fact that the cultures under study were/are in relations of extreme inequality and even discord with the cultures from where the orientalists came/come; analysis was consequently inevitably inaccurate and partial (Asad [1973], Said [1978], Haddad [1982, Introduction]).

Comparative education also developed amid an atmosphere of imperialist agendas and attitudes, colouring both its methodology and its theoretical assumptions. This was certainly the case when Europeans began to document their impressions of educational practice overseas in the 18th and 19th Centuries – a time commonly thought to herald the beginnings of educational comparison as an academic field (Jullien [1817]). In fact, documented educational comparison began much earlier and can be seen as intrinsically bound up with the sorts of experiences of travel abroad that produced Middle East Studies. A tradition of educational and epistemological borrowing directed East-West, Muslim-Christian, Orientalist-type exchange from the start, with Medieval Muslim readings of Aristotle (Farabi, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khaldoun) informing Islamic divisions of knowledge for educative purposes, and scholars such as Ibn Hazm explicitly surveying how "various nations differ from one another" in this respect. Subsequently, these Medieval Muslim efforts in turn provided the basis for later European scholarship, not only in terms of epistemology and the preservation of classics, but also in terms of providing models for systems through which that knowledge could be transmitted – the first European universities were allegedly modelled on the great Muslim *madrasas* of Baghdad, Fez, Cairo and Damascus, for instance. This second millenium process of educational borrowing continued apace with, for example, the 17th and 18th Century modernisation of Ottoman Turkish education being inspired by conscious imitation of European systems.

This, then, was essentially what comparative educational study was: looking overseas for ideas – mainly to borrow, but later increasingly for curiosity's sake – until the mid-20th Century efforts of comparative scholars such as Bereday, Holmes, Noah and Eckstein to provide the theoretical and methodological underpinnings that would move the field towards 'discipline' status. While the 20th Century rationalisation of the field facilitated hesitant definitions of comparative education, i.e. research/description where the focus is on differences and similarities between at least two countries (Cook [1998]), it did not resolve a number of ambiguities over its aims, methods, findings and value, of which the following discussion outlines some of the most critical.

2) Self-definition

Tensions surround the self-definition of the various area or culture-defined fields of study in academic and research institutions. Arguments have been forwarded challenging the discrete status of these subjects. It is increasingly felt among higher education and research institutions that area or culture defined fields of study might be better viewed not as distinct 'subjects', but as fields of data to be looked at through the standard 'disciplines' such as history, language, literature, political science and the like.

The field of comparative education as a whole, as has long been pointed out, lacks a coherent disciplinary, academic enquiry-driven, base. Part of this seems likely to be due to the fact that comparative education' like other branches of educational study awkwardly straddles the academia-policy distinction. As Holmes pointed out in 1978, the term means different things to different people: to members of international organisations, to national research bureaus, and to university academic departments. Several people have told me, in the course of preparing this paper, that I was wrong – that 'comparative education' to them, in their particular section of the field, has a clear and distinctive identity and discourse framework. But the fact that each of these people on further questioning has described an entirely different framework of enquiry merely substantiates the point.

3) Lack of theoretical and methodological rigour

As a consequence of its lack of clear identity, comparative educational studies can seem to flounder in aimless comparison and travelogue, which the next section will illustrate.

The reservations about area studies discipline status also relate to questions about aims and methods. Its colonial beginnings have underpinned and possibly stunting the subsequent development of Middle East Studies insofar as it has continued to rely on a range of approaches including subjective opinion, philosophisation and non-methodical direct observation. The pages of Middle East studies journals are filled with reportage, straight description or untheorised ethnography (e.g. *IJMES).*

Only recently has this approach to area studies – simply describing the unfamiliar – begun to be challenged (Shea [1997], Bates [1997], Tessler [1999], Nonneman [2001]). *Modern Middle East studies* is making progress towards moving on from this traditional paradigm, increasingly helped by the fact that many exponents today are themselves Middle Eastern in origin and consequently do not share the unquestioned assumptions of superiority or preoccupation with studying the 'other'. There is a far greater range of conscious specialisation today among Middle East scholars according to specific academic, literary, sociological, liturgical, historical or geographical interest, for instance in Tessler's 1999 volume. Gellner's anthropological work is likewise concentrated primarily on the Middle East/Islamic world but defined primarily by its disciplinary and theoretical approaches. Talal Asad, Edward Said, John Esposito and Sami Zubaida are other high profile exemplars of such theoretically defined approaches. Nonetheless, the very process of splitting into such discipline-specific areas, while lending more respectability to the efforts of individual scholars, further weakens the claim of Middle East studies to be a discrete discipline itself.

A common anthropological base?

I think the features (questions and answers, problems, and histories) shared by comparative education and area studies today in fact help to point out a way of dealing with some of these issues. Social or functional anthropology has, in its own disciplinary trajectory, already thoroughly worked out many of the theoretical and methodology issues facing comp and area studs today. It makes sense therefore to consciously bring together these relevant traditions in order to highlight ways in which they can intersect to mutual benefit.

To start with, there are already many points of convergence between the avenues of major anthropological and area studies enquiry. Not only does social anthropology (concerned with the construction of, and interaction between, identity, belief systems, patterns of behaviour, social frameworks) correspond most closely out of all the strictly 'diciplinary' contenders to the dominant approaches applied to geographically defined study of areas, but area studies have themselves long been considered one of the standard approaches to research that is conceptualised primarily as 'anthropological'. To illustrate, if the point of a given area study is to look at differences and similarities between societies, or if a discrete study is simply premised on the notion of holistic comparison or a broad framework that acknowledges differences, then this is arguably by definition 'anthropological' as opposed, for instance, to 'sociological'. Anthropology is essentially comparative or area-based insofar as it studies other societies and belief systems in order to produce generalisations about the nature of mankind. The 'area' aspect of this integrated study paradigm adds to the approach/discipline and sphere the third variable – the 'where'.

The cultural heritages of area or comparative studies and descriptive anthropology (ethnography) are also linked. Defined according to its predominant sphere of activity during the 20th Century as the study of primitive, largely African, societies (Asad [1973]), descriptive anthropology can be seen as associated with similar notions of colonial superiority, stemming from the fact that colonial activity in Africa from the late 19th Century is what allowed the access of early anthropologists (Vidich & Lyman [1998]). The result of this was a pervasive tradition of

'armchair' ethnography, or travelogue, underpinned by, if anything, simple diffusionist or evolutionist notions of development. One of the implications of this lack of thoroughness was that the political circumstance of colonisation and concomitant pervasive social imbalances were largely ignored in anthropological description of these 'primitive' societies, rendering holistic analysis of the significance of social features impossible (Asad, [1973]) - much after the manner of thinking behind monolithic analyses of 'Islam' and the Middle East today.

Around the turn of the 20th Century, contact with, and theorisation in terms of, evolutionary and social sciences resulted in the application of generic principles of social evolution to anthropology's theoretical framework. Also contributing to its professionalisation was methodological refinement, led by Malinowski and his near contemporaries. The 'comparative method' was developed, with emphasis on peer observation, identification with local cultures and linguistic knowledge. A major principle of empirical, qualitative, ethnographic method today is that observers' subjective involvement in, and influence upon, what they are observing be acknowledged and taken into account in assessing not only bias but, bias accounted for, what is actually happening in the field. A logical extension of this position is that the impact of more pervasive social and political circumstances, including colonial or post-colonial foreign presence, should also be taken into account when describing what a given society is like. Not to do this detracts from the value of a study as a way of describing a truth, or variant truths. Having taken on board these principles and integrating them into disciplinary methodology, ethnographic findings could thenceforth begin to approach validity in terms of universals or predictiveness.

It is true that even these developments do not seem to have counteracted either universally or immediately the widespread assumption that certain (i.e. 'Western', Christian) sets of values and social norms were more 'advanced' and therefore universally superior (e.g. Parsons [1966, 1971]). Most immediately, the bio-cultural eurocentrism of unilinear evolutionism can be seen to have replaced the political ethnocentrism of actual occupation. And it can be argued of course that anthropology still carries the baggage of eurocentric or colonial bias.

Nonetheless, it is the fact that as a whole discipline anthropology's central questions (What is the essential nature of man? How has this evolved over time? How does this vary

among regions?) are articulated at a high theoretical level, and that its methods of enquiry are relatable to this coherent theoretical base, which makes its status as a discipline unquestioned. Successive grand theories (functionalist, evolutionist, relativist, structuralist, structural-functionalist, Marxist, post-structuralist, transactionalist …) have helped to make anthropological sense of field data. While Middle East studies/Orientalism, comparative education and social anthropology may have had similar colonial beginnings, Middle East studies (in common with other areas studies) and comparative education have never developed a clearly articulated scientific method of observation or theoretical framework in the way that social anthropology has.

So much, then, for the conceptual and historic links between anthropology and area/comparative studies in general. As for comparative *education* specifically, justification for seeing parallels with the conceptual basis of social anthropology derives from the consideration that education in its widest sense is arguably, along perhaps with language, the key sphere in which such social and cultural constructs are both generated and manifest. The link implicitly underpins Musgrove's 1982 study, as well as some classic anthropology (e.g. Mead, 1929/20).

The sorts of questions arguably central to comparative educational enquiry are clearly 'anthropological', and of themselves may provide sufficient argument for methodological and theoretical borrowing from that discipline:

1) Why are education systems different?

2) Why are they the same?

3) What underlying social and cultural (or economic and political) realities do these differences and similarities reflect?

4) What general theories can we construct about the nature of education, its effects, and its relation to social realities from these comparative perspectives?

In this light, comparative educational research can be seen as that undertaken in order to define the fundamental conditions of educational development and change, with reference to a range of paradigms. The same people who have insisted to me that the field of comparative education is

not in fact as vague as I have outlined have also objected to the apparent 'narrowness' of such a conception. Such a framework for enquiry, however, can usefully be seen as inclusive rather than exclusive; it is potentially a framework for making 'comparative' sense of diverse contributions that include even the wholeheartedly empirical and anti-theoretical. The definitional part of comparative educational task as thus defined can be facilitated by anthropological and social science theory. Meaningful reference to the range of paradigms can be facilitated by the application of tried and tested anthropological methods.

The following table summarises the key shared features of the three fields under discussion, and underlines the points where social anthropology has stepped out of the traditional problematic comparative paradigm.

Comparative education & area studies	Social anthropology
Doubts over 'discipline' status	Clearly defined
'Borrowing' basis	Combined with 'scientific' enquiry
Straddles policy and academia	Purely academic
Imperialist heritage	Yes
Untheorised travelogue/description	Only at first
Lacks explicit methodology	Coherent methodological base

The challenge for comparative education

So, it seems, there are the following issues – relating to aim, method and theory generation – left for comparative education to wrestle with today.

1) Aim

For instance, does comparative educational study aim predominantly to: a) inform educational policy, b) encourage actual 'borrowing', or c) inform the social science academy?

a) To inform policy:

This answer may seem on the face of it unobjectionable: surely knowledge (in this case simply finding out what happens elsewhere) is better than ignorance in policy-making? Holmes' 'problem-solving approach' to comparative educational study was premised on the idea that there were universal policy problems, and that solving these could be facilitated by overviews – classifying a broad range of data, and establishing normative models or themes that could be used to predict outcomes in particular cases. The same awareness (that educational development was central to global economic and social development) also provided the perception of need for the UNESCO/IBE and other database exercises.

But a number of ethnocentrism-related problems raise themselves here, including:

i. The role of local context in making comparison meaningful/valid

ii. Whether or not there are practical and ideological problems implicit in the practice of educationists from developed countries looking at education in developing countries.

In-depth understanding of local contexts is necessary for accurate representation of data – irrespective of whether or not interpretive data analysis is attempted. This truth was in fact realised as early as the 1930s, when the board of the *Yearbook of Education* debated how far a sociological context was necessary to appreciate the significance of statistics presented (Clarke [1932, 1933]). It is felt that the requisite consequent level of flexibility in approach and mindset might not always be available in policy borrowing circles.

b) To encourage borrowing:

In the context of assumptions about the nature of the world and patterns of evolution, the second option even more pointedly suggests uncomfortable overtones of judgmentalism, regarding who should be borrowing from whom. It is increasingly untenable these days to argue in academic discourse that policy makers should be learning from the best (i.e. 'us', or rich

industrialised 'Western' models); pragmatic borrowing/lending (approached from different directions depending on which side of the 'developing/developed world' divide one is from) implies notions of better and worse systems. Increasingly, challenges are mounted against the imperialist-tinged assumption that the way to promote 'development' among different cultures is through imported models of education (Dubbledam [1994], Findlow [2001]). Indeed, some of the difficulties involved in cross-national borrowing had been highlighted as early as 1900 (Sadler), and can be seen to have lain behind the subsequent mid-century formulation of a 'science' of comparative education, in which attempts were made to integrate context as an important variable (Holmes [1962, Chapter 1]). Notwithstanding these ongoing reservations, imported 'experts' from rich, industrialised countries continue to be consulted on everything educational in developing countries despite a frequent complete lack of understanding of the cultural context, and therefore specific needs, in which they are working. This is particularly the case among the rapidly modernising countries of the Middle East (Findlow [2001]).

c) To inform the social science academy:

It could also be argued that, with the third option, to 'compare' – to study simply what is 'different' has usually, given the history of the disciplines under discussion, meant 'inferior' – that, indeed, any field of study incorporating the word 'comparative' is suspect from the perspective of academic integrity today. The intractable nature of this reservation aside, it seems plausible to argue (as Nagel did in 1961) that, if comparative education is to have the status of 'social science', its prime function has to be to generalise – to theorise.

2) Theory generation

However, shared understanding of even the term 'theory generation' is problematic. For comparative education, like most other social sciences, there are two main types of 'theory'. First, there is comparative education theory – that which, in principle, outlines how method is

connected to the particular questions that comparative educational enquiry engages in. Second, there is 'grand theory' – that shared by other social scientists to make sense of empirical findings.

The history of comparative educational research incorporates both. Holmes' problem-solving approach had an implicit pragmatic agenda that, although empirical and predictive on a small scale (e.g. 1980, 1983), was theoretical above all in terms of commentary upon the discipline/field itself; it did not emphasize the importance of uncovering universal truths and patterns about the nature of education, human development and society after the manner of educational sociologists such as, say, Parsons, Massialas or Bourdieu. Bereday's approach, on the other hand, was more inductively theoretical, concerned with how education is transformed, and its relation to government; in this context, data was collected in order to test hypotheses – more conventionally 'scientific'. This inductivist tradition also underpinned the work of Noah and Eckstein.

However, the latter type of grand theoretical approach appears to have been impossible to maintain across the board – among the vast range of writing, reportage and research to come under the 'comparative education' banner. There are two conceptions of the challenge. Altbach and Kelly [1986] have described it in terms of defining a common theoretical perspective, or overarching social theory, on which all contributors can agree. I think it actually goes beyond that, insofar as many contributors don't even attempt to relate their observations to *any* theoretical perspective. The pages of comparative education journals and books along with UNESCO/IBE Yearbooks underline the difficulty, with analysis more often than not limited to analysis of policy – in empirical terms – unlinked to universal social or anthropological theory. This may be partly or even largely attributable to the fact that large numbers of those engaged in comparative and international educational discourse (the genres overlap) are practitioners themselves, and policy-makers, possibly more than strictly academics. Whatever the reason, the result is that there is no universally shared scientific theoretical or methodological framework, and no common terminology.

For anything approaching generalisation, and therefore interpretation, standard academic paradigms are necessary. Comparative education as a genre, like anthropologically based

Middle East studies, has tended uneasily to straddle a structural-functionalist position (but without the accompanying rationalised methodological foundations of social/functional anthropology) and a more relativist one.

The past half century has seen repeated calls for increased attention to contextual variability in comparative study, largely on the premise that a structural-functionalist approach seeking to establish universal laws, patterns and types of relationship/behaviour can easily overlook important exceptions, and the significance of those exceptions, and the principle that a text is only interpretable in its context. The main thrust of these calls has been with a view to enabling effective policy borrowing (e.g. le Metais [2000]). But both Anderson and Bereday as far back as 1961 highlighted the point that the sort of ethnocentrism that sees only familiar patterns and deviations from these is bound to detract from accurate perception whatever the aim – academic analysis or informing policy. This increasingly prevalent view informs Kai-Ming's [2000, p.84] succinct declaration that, "In other words, comparative education by nature should be pluralistic."

It could of course be argued that extreme pluralism has limited usefulness insofar as it renders learning (anything) from other cultures bgically invalid (Young [1997]). And a more cynical interpretation of such calls for relativism could be that in many 'comparative' studies the empirical knowledge base is limited to only one culture.

However, Young's tentative outline of an approach that acknowledges cultural differences ("language games"), but also "family resemblances or overlaps" (Young [1997]), underlines that the two positions need not be in opposition; a relativist, pluralist, approach does not necessarily rule out the possibility of findings feeding into structural-functionalist paradigms of understanding. This, essentially, is the position adopted in this paper – that it is only by means of in-depth understanding and representation of the particular that a valid appreciation of the whole picture (however structured or apparently unstructured) can be gained. There is nothing wrong, therefore, from a relativist, pluralist perspective, in requiring that comparative educational research look at the grand theoretical frameworks that have helped to shape anthropology into a coherent discipline. This would facilitate the asking of such questions as:

a. Do particular education systems contradict or support unilinear notions of educational-cultural evolution?

b. Does diffusionism or evolutionism offer a more adequate explanation for particular cases of similarity and difference?

3) Method

One of the attendant methodological issues is, of course, whether a primarily disciplinary or area/field approach is more likely to provide the answers. The intractability of this question derives from comparative education's complex three-variable framework: 1) subject/line of enquiry (education, teacher education, literacy etc.); 2) geographical area(s); 3) particular disciplinary approach. An equivalent framework can be made for area studies. To this add the persistent awkward straddling of academic enquiry and policy formation, and it is easy to see why there is such a range of approaches – with discipline-oriented social scientists arguing that only the insights offered by ethnography, economics, sociology and so on offers the requisite methodological and theoretical rigour, taking findings beyond mere description (Nonneman [2001], Tessler [1999], Epperson and Schmuck [1963], Barber [1972], Noah and Eckstein [1969], Masemann [1990], Brock & Cammish [2000]), and others, particularly area specialists (Judge [2000], Kai-Ming [2000], McGovern [2000]) along with Bereday [1961] and Anderson [1959, 1961] countering that scientific and theoretical perspectives are not adequate to fully explain complex area-specific and local contexts. There have been calls since the 1950s for emphasis of *either* tradition – presumably from the realisation that both offer alternatives preferable to mere travelogue or citation of uncontextualised statistics and impressions.

On one hand, the sharing of both methodological expertise and actual data with practitioners in such related fields as social anthropology, ethnography, economics, sociology and the like seems likely to enable findings to more meaningfully and relevantly address the many cultural, political and economic factors involved in any one educational context, and to contribute to answering important social science-related questions (Anderson [1959, 1961], Kandel [1959],

Masemann [1990], Brock and Cammish [2000], Stenhouse [1979], Crossley and Vulliamy [1984], Poppleton and Wubbels [2000]).

On the other hand, it should go without saying that this can only be achieved with in-depth understanding of, and focus on, the particular – to ensure interpretive accuracy and in order to exemplify generalities. It is arguable that only those actually involved in the systems and institutions under study – those who are part of, and understand fully, the respective cultural contexts – can provide such reliability. Reliance upon views from the outside may offer a view at best limited and partial, and in fact often based upon crucial misunderstandings of the significance of contextual variables. Moreover, it is considered (Judge [2000], Kai-Ming [2000], McGovern [2000]) to smack of the sort of imperialist attitudes that laid the methodological foundations of much faux-anthropology and orientalist-type reportage.

Certainly, it would be hard to argue that the sort of amassing of what appear on the face of it to be comparable statistical data constitutes any sort of comparative science, discipline, or even field in itself. It is commonly acknowledged that such an infinite number of factors and agendas are involved in the collection of statistics that there are inevitably questions about their validity and reliability, and context-variable significance, for any given purpose. Implicit in the move towards qualitative research is the realisation that realities are always a lot 'messier, than quantitative or single source-driven studies tend to acknowledge, and that findings thereof always run the risk of being invalidated by uncovering factors that did not fit easily into frameworks for analysis.

Given the huge breadth of social science expertise potentially necessary to do full justice to complex realities, some attempt to articulate methodological parameters seems a good idea. For instance, on the macro-micro issue: unlike area studies and anthropology, the early heyday of comparative education in the first half of the 20th Century was characterised by a macro perspective (whether data collection or social theory). Since then, the general trend has been towards more area-specific studies. To be meaningfully, 'scientifically', comparable, both in-depth experiential and discipline-based knowledge of each system under study are needed *equally*, in the senses of: a) a shared framework for comparison (theory and method) and b)

equal knowledge of all systems under study. The achievement of such a balance is crucially where local and cross-cultural expertise comes in, perhaps as has been suggested with more collaboration between "insiders" and "outsiders" (Crossley [2000, p.77]).

Case-study approaches have been outlined that marry the two, underlining again that there *need* not be anything essentially contradictory about combining these two approaches. Such case studies, conducted according to established social scientific principles, offer a way of realising both discipline and area-based integrity (Crossley and Vulliamy [1984,1997], Masemann [1982]).

Whatever the solution adopted in any given case, the discipline as a whole needs to define ways in which these approaches (macro/micro, one person/a team, field/discipline, description/theorisation) can and/or should interact – not in order to impose an artificial framework, but to enable mutual comprehension. Again, this sentiment is far from new; Bereday in 1967 declared, "It is less and less satisfactory that comparative education should be a grab bag in which any and every approach is as good as any other."

The field today

A quick survey of 'comparative education' journals and books today suggests that calls for this sort of tighter articulation of disciplinary parameters remain by and large unheeded. The associated challenges, and the practical difficulties involved in fulfilling them, can be seen to have led to splits along the following lines: empiricists versus theorists, and experts in narrow areas or fields versus 'generalisers'.

It could be argued that, in common with other social and natural sciences, the division of roles in this way is not only inevitable but actually desirable. If formal articulation of such divisions were built into discipline definitions, this argument would be valid. As it is, however, such divisions permeate the field in a way that is largely unacknowledged and consequently not

put to best use. For instance, while not every 'comparative' study needs to compare directly, it should suggest (however explicitly or implicitly) through reference to a shared methodological and/or theoretical framework how its findings can be related to broader educational, anthropological and sociological theory.

Many ostensibly 'comparative' but actually discrete studies give no nod to the counterpart study – the one that would actually provide the comparative context, and thus meaning, to the research. Far from conforming to the anthropologically-oriented enquiry framework I outlined above, competing and non-integrated conceptions of what 'comparative education' is today appear to be as follows: a) as a forum for relatively un-theorised commentary, b) 'general' theory, c) in-depth studies of highly specific topics, and d) large scale databases.

a) Un-theorised commentary: reportage, travelogue type accounts of what it is like in such and such a country – "… simply studies of elsewhere – simple accounts, for example, in an anglophone journal of what happens in Japan." (Judge [2000, pp. 154-155]) – superficial, un-theorised, and related to no wider academic discourse, any potential value negated by the lack of methodological rigour applied, and therefore any potential for reliable use in comparative exercises (Ertl [2000]). This is as true for Middle East studies as it is for comparative education with, for example, studies on Arab Gulf education published in area journals concentrating on modernisation without reference either to the global context or to modernisation theories.

b) 'General' theory: The other side of this coin is that a large proportion of theoretical research is carried out in 'general' terms, and not clearly related to empirical findings – either original or secondary (Hoffman [1999]). In comparative education, much of this non-empirical work is discussion of method and theoretical underpinnings, i.e. the sort of approach that characterised comparative education's mid-20th Century period of 'scientificization', being only sporadically correlated to empirical field study.

c) In-depth studies of highly specific topics: On the other hand, an apparently separate tradition of largely empirical accounts by experts in narrow areas or fields appears to be developing. Increasingly, comparative education journal pages are filled with in-depth studies of highly specific topics such as: 'differences between primary teacher education in countries a. and

b.', 'the development of higher education in countries a. and b.', or 'I.T. education at secondary level in countries a. and b.'. While these sorts of tightly focused study of sub-systems might be meaningful in terms of exploring questions about the relationship between the particular sub-systems in question, and for professionals engaged in these sub-systems, they carry no value for overarching theories about the nature of educational change, or for the advancement of comparative education as a discipline. At least, any potential value lies undeveloped – perhaps largely due again to the fact that the authors tend to be practitioners in these narrow fields and relatively uncommitted to establishing the wider academic relevance of their findings.

d) Large scale databases: The only really large-scale useable 'comparative' data are supplied in annual data collection exercises by UNESCO, OECD, and other international organisations; the pages of these organisations' respective yearbooks and similar publications constitute the only broad-based forums for discussion of such general themes as were once the meat of academic comparative study. But, as pointed out above, they are clearly aimed at policy circles, neither aiming to further academic theory nor pretending to methodological rigour.

Admittedly, there are exceptions to this four-part generality. A number of theorised micro-studies from the late 1990s combine ethnographic fieldwork with explicit methodologies, and suggest relevance to wider theoretical questions in a way that might point the way forward for modern comparative educational research.

Bradley Cook's 2001 paper on Egyptian higher education is an empirical, context-specific, study of Islamic religious-cultural aspects of higher education that nevertheless articulates its methodology in terms that make it accessible and thereby scientifically comparable to other studies that may take up related issues. However, the paper does not attempt to relate findings to wider comparative educational, anthropological or sociological questions – a failure according to the perspective taken here not of the paper, but of the field itself given that the paper was published in a 'comparative education' journal.

A handful of studies conform more exactly to both methodological and theoretical requirements for comparative meaningfulness. Peter Demerath's 1999 study of educational utility

in Papua New Guinea illustrates how in-depth focus on the particular – case study, ethnographic fieldwork – can be mainly empirical while also suggesting relevance to wider questions, in this case questions about the 'profitability', or 'value', of education, about how the education-employment relationship impacts issues of identity, power, tradition and modernism – all central anthropological concerns. Ruth Hayhoe's [1995] study of the massification of higher education in China strikes a different balance – in this case between not the 'general' but the 'comparative' and the particular. This is achieved by first establishing the comparative context, in terms of both comparative education tradition (citing Bereday, 1973) and current international practice, then focusing on local policy – specifically, answering China's educational-training needs. And there are a few other recent examples of well-theorised studies of specific situations, with coherent and explicit methodologies (e.g. Parraddo [1998]). However, it is still noted in terms of 'problems' bridging the academia-policy tension that such well theorised micro-studies usually remain in the realm of academic research and are "…seldom used to illuminate policy making at the macro-level." (Kai-Ming [2000, p.90])

A framework for development?

So, in the ideal world of comparative and area-focused research, a given study would achieve its research value at least partly for the way in which it brings together the shared framework (or the broader context) and the particular. The conceptual framework outlined below is suggested most specifically for comparative education, but could equally apply to area studies where the aim is also to feed into broad-based social theory. The framework relates to tensions in terms of assumptions, theory, aims and methods, within which comparative research could be considered in ways that helped to promote meaningful intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary discourse. Comparative educational and area studies do *not* need to define themselves according to one or other of these dichotomous alternatives. However, articulating the respective role of each

variable with reference to the overall framework would, I suggest, help to promote the sorts of shared language and assumptions that can lead to meaningful dialogue between researchers.

1. Policy / academia: Does a piece of work address perceived pragmatic needs, issues of 'borrowing'? And if so, does it feed into broader academic issues? Which ones?

2. Theory generation / empirical data collection: Is the main goal of a given piece of work the accessing and compilation of empirical data (the dominant justification for the exercise in the early 'explorer-led' days of the allied fields) or, given the relative ease of access anyway these days, is its main value that it contributes to forming a coherent body of theory?

3. Deductive / inductive approaches: Is research driven by the need to answer specific questions contrasts at a conceptual level (Holmes' hypothetic-deductive 'problem approach')? Or by the inductive principle that we can derive universal theories and particular solutions from first collecting a wide range of data (e.g. Bereday [1964], Kandel, Hans, Noah and Eckstein). Or does it bridge both? And is this self-consciously done?

4. Universal (positivist)/ relative (phenomenological): Does the work have a particular application or relevance, or is its aim to generate universal social science-related theory? If an attempt is made to bridge the gap, is this attempt articulated and each alternative mode of analysis sign-posted? For a given study, the question would be: Do findings illuminate only the particular case or are they generative and predictive? Do they combine these functions? If so, in what proportions?

5. Macro / micro: Are findings grounded in a broad overview of issues, with data drawn from wherever is relevant, or are they drawn from a particular system? In the former case, does the researcher have the required level of area/specialist knowledge of each case cited in order to draw valid conclusions?   In the latter case, do findings extend beyond the merely descriptive, rendering the study meaningful in wider academic terms, and does this concentration on the particular contribute to the field by adding clarity to otherwise amorphous variables? It may be possible to specify median points on this cline, after the manner of anthropological methodology – instead of 'global' comparison, comparison could be 'illustrative', or 'controlled' (e.g. limited to a particular region).

6. Quantitative / qualitative: Is meaningful comparison achieved via the presentation of quantitative data alone? Or do questions about the validity and reliability of such statistics cast doubt over their usefulness for informing policy, and generating theory in this case? Does the work rather analyse these data along with those derived from other sources in order to create meaning? While phenomenological aims suggest microcosmic, qualitative ethnography, positivist and directly theory-generating research would suggest at least the use more quantitative data to contribute to macrocosmic descriptions.

7*. The role of interpretation (and ethnocentrism)*: Is an accurate picture of reality achieved in terms defined by the local culture, or interpreted in terms to which outsiders can more directly relate?

8. Evolutionary / synchronic (current): Most sciences incorporate both perspectives in order to provide a whole picture. Comparative education and area studies as a whole tend not to explore how the one can inform the other. Is a significant historical context at least suggested?

Debate over the relative place of many of these variables in fact form the history of social anthropological theory and method. The Malinowskian tradition, along with some of the examples of comparative study cited above, illustrates how such disparate approaches can be reconciled by alternating the focus from the particular (field study) to the general (broad-based empiricism or anthropological theory) and back to the particular (Malinowski [1944, 1948]).

Conclusion

Aspiring to theoretical and methodological validity in such general terms does not rule out the possibility of maintaining integrity as a coherent 'discipline', or 'field', for area studies and comparative education.

To justify its existence, comparative education – like area studies – needs to combine attention to methodology with theorisation, and background subjective knowledge with objectively verifiable science. Its overriding task is to bridge the above conceptual framework, by developing an approach governed by balance and conscious eclecticism. This would combine (in stated proportions) discrete with holistic, macro with micro, qualitative with quantitative, phenomenological and positivist. It would be grounded in a conscious appreciation of differences as well as seeing what is instructively similar and worth a closer look for the sake of informing both the academy and policy. The significance of cultural, social, economic and political differences in determining structures would be acknowledged, but not at the expense of enabling cross-cultural connections. Analysis of a specific geographical and cultural version of education would take account of these specific variables, both describing structures in the terms according to which they developed *and* 'interpreting' this description to make it accessible to global or 'comparative' discourse, thereby combining culturally relativist with structural-functionalist outlooks.

Any comparative (or area-related) study needs to pay attention to data, context and theory. It should, respectively, either be or at least articulated within a framework that is potentially:

a. Comparative (i.e. not jump straight from the particular to the universal)

b. Grounded in deep ethnographic insight

c. Articulated in broad/universal theoretical terms, that can be predictive and contribute to the science of the comparative

Again, to re-emphasize the point, this framework should be consciously acknowledged, even for studies that are essentially 'anti-theoretical – that is, "… when relations of interconnectedness lie implicitly in … descriptions …". The role and nature of each of these elements needs to be specified in any piece of comparative study (as opposed to simply gathering together whatever one happens to know already and calling it 'Middle East study', or 'comparative education' as appropriate), in order to provide that common language that enables meaningful theorisation. While some researchers may already be attempting this task on an

individual basis, there is need for an up-dated and explicit articulation of disciplinary parameters along the lines suggested.

The companion paper to this present one (Findlow [forthcoming]) describes how a recent study in which I focused on higher education in the United Arab Emirates attempts to conform to the criteria for meaningful area-based, or comparative, educational study as outlined above.

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