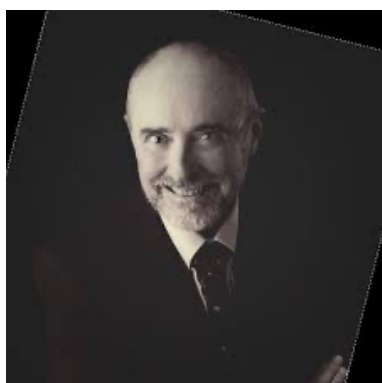


# Comparative Education: epistemological reflections on the research field and its identity

Educação Comparada: reflexões epistemológicas  
sobre o campo de pesquisa e sua identidade

Educación Comparada: reflexiones epistemológicas  
sobre el campo de investigación y su identidad

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**ABSTRACT:** As part of the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education, the *Revista Brasileira de Educação Comparada* welcomes the contribution of Professor Erwin Epstein, who reflects on epistemological questions about the research field of Comparative Education and its identity.

**Keywords:** Comparative Education. Research field and identity. Advances, critique and dissemination.

**RESUMO:** No âmbito da celebração dos 40 anos da Sociedade Brasileira de Educação Comparada, a *Revista Brasileira de Educação Comparada* recebe a contribuição do Professor Erwin Epstein, que reflete sobre questões epistemológicas sobre o campo de pesquisa da Educação Comparada e sua identidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação Comparada. Campo de pesquisa e identidade. Avanços, crítica e disseminação.

**RESUMEN:** En el marco de la celebración del 40 aniversario de la Sociedad Brasileña de Educación Comparada, la *Revista Brasileña de Educación Comparada* recibe una contribución del profesor Erwin Epstein, quien reflexiona sobre cuestiones epistemológicas acerca del campo de la investigación en Educación Comparada y su identidad.

**Palabras clave:** Educación Comparada. Campo de investigación y identidad. Avances, crítica y difusión.

**40 ANOS**

1983-2023



S B E C

**SOCIEDADE  
BRASILEIRA DE  
EDUCAÇÃO  
COMPARADA**

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## Advances in and critique of Comparative Education

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It seems to me that it's important, first of all, to see that most people think of Comparative Education as a relatively new field. It's not a new field. But I think the reason why people think it's a new field is because it didn't develop, it developed slowly in the second half of the 20th century, and especially with the organization of societies within the field.

Now, the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education (SBEC) is celebrating its 40th year of existence and this might seem like a long time. It might seem that too many, but Comparative Education is an old field. It might be believed that Brazil established its society early in the field's history, but, of course, that's not the case. In fact, the Brazilian society is middle-aged when viewed from the perspective of the founding of comparative education societies in general. So, now the classic book on the histories of comparative education societies is a book that is edited by Masemann, Bray, and Manzon (2008). For me, every comparativist should have this book, should read the book. It's a wonderful book to understand and have a grasp of the field.

The book shows that the Brazilian society was founded roughly in the middle of the founding of the 45 societies that are members of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES). In fact, the first society, which is the *US-based* Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), was founded in 1956, which is 17 years before the Brazilian society. And even the founding of the *US-based* society came some two centuries after the origin of the field itself. Now, notice that I've said the *US-based* society. It is not the US society, even though there are people who pretty much run the society who think it's the US comparative education society. It's not. The fact that it's the *US-based* society and not

the US society is an important distinction. Because when the CIES was first formed, it was the only society in the world, the only society in the world in the field of Comparative Education. So, when they looked around, they saw there weren't any other societies, they said: "Well, we're the world society, so to speak. There aren't any others. We are the society". The Constitution was never changed to make it the US society of Comparative Education, for Comparative and International Education. And so, we have to understand that there is no US society, it's the *US-based* society. It's a distinction, I think that's important to acknowledge this distinction.

So, to identify advances in the field and the development of the field, a lot depends on whether we view advances having taken place since the origin of Comparative Education, or whether we see advances since the origin of the Comparative Education societies. Again, an important distinction. So how do we judge advances?

We might insist on viewing developments originating with the first courses in the field offered at universities, or the first academic degrees that were offered in the field, or maybe the first books or journals that were produced. So, the book called *Comparative Education at Universities Worldwide* (Wolhuter, Popov, Manzon, & Leutwyler, 2013) has an introductory chapter written by me. There, I acknowledge that the most important development of the field is what I call professionalization. And what is that?

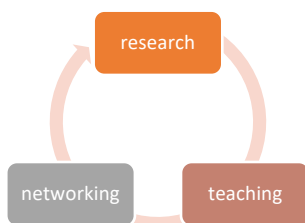
Professionalization consists of the rise of coursework, textbooks, encyclopedias, yearbooks, academic journals, formal academic programs at universities, and maybe, above all, professional organizations. So, it's not an easy question to answer. It all depends on your perspective. It all depends on how you

see how one sees the origin of the field and how one sees the development of the networking in terms of Comparative Education societies.

## Advances in the construction of the identity of Comparative Education as a research field<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, to address this topic, we have to ask on what does the identity of a research field depend? And I would say that, first and foremost, there needs to be a kind of self-consciousness of belonging to a field. So Comparative Education, as is true of all academic fields, consists of three main components. Now what are the three main components? There's **research**, there's **teaching**, and there's **networking** (Figure 1). Now, of these three components, **research**, in my view, is the most fundamental. Why? Because it is the most essential to forming an identity.

**Figure 1**  
*Three components for Comparative Education*

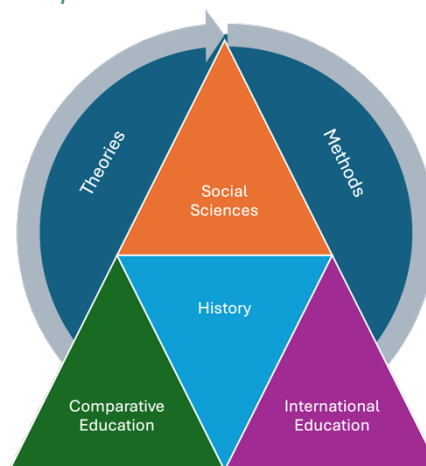


My identity as a comparativist is shaped more by my research than by my teaching and by my participation in academic networks. That's to say that my participation, most importantly, is my participation in these professional networks, the comparative education societies. However, without teaching and without academic networks, the value of research would dissipate, it would be short lived. In other words, all three components – research, teaching, networking – they're all necessary even as the research part is the most fundamental to a scholar's self-

consciousness of being a comparativist. I hope that makes sense.

Now secondly, to grasp a field's identity, it's important to discern the boundaries of field of Comparative Education. Now, these boundaries are diffuse, they're very broad, but they are identifiable. So, all academic fields have boundaries in order to distinguish them from other fields. In the case of Comparative Education, the task of identifying boundaries is very difficult because the field relies on the theories and methods of other fields, especially depends on History and all of the Social Sciences (Figure 2). Even more so, Comparative Education is often joined to International Education, which is a field that is closely associated with Comparative Education, but is nevertheless quite distinct, as I argue the chapter *Why Comparative and International Education, Reflection on the Conflation of Names* (Epstein, 2016).

**Figure 2**  
*Comparative Education and other fields*



<sup>2</sup> From the question: whether it is possible to affirm that we've advanced in the construction of the identity of Comparative Education as a research field.

Now, it's important that the US-*based* society is called the Comparative and International Education Society. That's ambiguous and it's also misleading. Because it doesn't let you know, it doesn't tell whether Comparative Education is distinct from International Education or whether they are one field. In fact, I argue that they are two separate fields, they're related fields, but separate fields (Figure 2). So, technically speaking, the society should be called the Comparative Education and International Education Society, not the Comparative and International Education Society. It would take too long to explain all the differences between Comparative Education and International Education, but I have to say that I'm very pleased that the Brazilian society has called itself the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education, because what that does is to eliminate ambiguity, it eliminates this confusion.

How are we to understand the advancement of Comparative Education as having an identity as a research field? To do this, we have to go beyond defining Comparative Education and its boundaries. We have to also view the field's advancement from the perspective of history. And to do that, we have to start with its very beginnings. So, as I mentioned before, a lot of people view Comparative Education as a young field. In fact, Comparative Education originated even before the advent of sociology and other social sciences. Most people don't realize that.

Who is often viewed as the father of Comparative Education? It's Marc-Antoine Julien of Paris (1775-1848). He is considered by many, maybe most, to be the originator of Comparative Education. But his *magnum opus* appeared in 1817. That's more than a decade before August Comte (1798-1857), the founder of sociology. And his work, Comte's work, is widely considered as

having defined positivism. Now, Comte, although he is viewed as the progenitor of the epistemological stream of positivism, Julien predated positivism before Comte.

Comte's positivism claimed that phenomena are subject to invariable laws composed of physical facts whose relationships are verifiable through firsthand observation. And like this, Julien's positivism proposed a systematic observation of educational phenomena to discern law-like principles on which to base the improvement of education. That's very similar. They're very similar. Comte did not focus on education. Julien focused on education. So, adherents of positivism understandably see Julien as the originator of Comparative Education.

However, I have challenged that claim. I have challenged the claim of Julien as the field's originator because what it does is to overlook the alternative epistemology of relativism or what we call contextualism. Now, let's look at positivism and why we see positivism as being so much the pillar of Comparative Education.

A classic example of positivism, I think, is the work of Noah and Eckstein (1969), called *Toward a Science of Comparative Education*. Positivism is science, so to speak. But if we take into account relativism as an equally valid alternative epistemology in Comparative Education, we see that others, that some scholars who preceded Julien, relativists like Louis-René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais (1701-1785) in 1763, or Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812) in 1780, or Friedrich August Hecht (1865-1915) in 1798, all of them have a greater claim as originators of our field than does Julien. So, in this way, the works of such 20th century relativists as Edmund King (King, 1968) and Vernon Mallinson (Mallinson, 1957), their works contrast sharply with the works of positivists like Noah and Eckstein (1969), or



like my mentor at the University of Chicago, C. Arnold Anderson (Anderson, 1961).

So, in other words, positivism arose in the 19th century and relativism preceded it in the 18th century. So, although the 20th century saw the broad advancement of these epistemologies in Comparative Education, that century, the previous one, witnessed an amalgamation or consolidation of these in the form of what we call historical functionalism. I don't have time to go into all of that, but it's sufficient to say that these epistemologies formed the backbone of the field of Comparative Education. So, in their purist form, they informed rather than drove educational policy, it's important distinction, they informed rather than drove policy. So not infrequently, comparatists of education

did not and do not practice their field as purists. On the positive side, you could look at manpower planning, for example, that idea of manpower planning experienced a lot of popularity, especially in the 1970s. You can look at the work of Harbison and Myers (1964) on the use of Comparative Education in the service of policymaking. That's a good example of this trend. On the relative side, there are scholars like Paul Monroe (1927; 1932), William Brickman (Brickman, 1966), they epitomized the early- and mid- 20th century policy-oriented, humanistic tradition. So that distinction is, I think, a fundamental distinction between positivism, on one side, and relativism or contextualism, on the other side.

## Handling the repertoire of comparative knowledge in education

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Firstly, it's important to acknowledge that the relationship between scholarship and policy, whether that policy is in terms of educational policy, political policy or economic policy, understanding that relationship is fundamental to doing Comparative Education.

Now, my own view of our field is that the principal goal is to apply the theories and methods of history, philosophy, and the social sciences to understand problems of education. The keyword here is **understanding**. Now, notice the distinction I'm making here. I emphasize understanding, not solving. **Understand, not solve**.

Solving problems requires a separate policy-making skill, one that should depend on understanding how and why policy forms and changes. So, pure Comparative Education tries to understand. Policymaking, on the other hand, is best made by policymakers who rely on comparativists of education for understanding the implications of choosing one or another alternative educational policy. That distinction is critical to

understanding the functioning, how Comparative Education functions or at least should function. So, getting to the question of strengthening basic identities in Comparative Education. In my view, there has not been a strengthening of the basic identities of Comparative Education, at least as I've described them, at least in terms of their pure forms. So, even more, I believe these forms, and, when I say forms, purest forms (positivism and relativism), I believe that they have, in fact, been weakened, not strengthened. And why? It's because of a more extreme embrace of policymaking in this century, the present century, compared to the last one. So, rather than epistemology-informing policy, the fight for human rights, decolonialism, social justice, intersectionality, all of these have moved to the forefront of research and overall activity in the field; taking over much of the activity in the field. And this fight has frequently obscured the use of traditional epistemologies to inform rather than to drive policy.

So, we could look at the work of Steven Klees (2020) and Keita Takayama (2011). Their work, I think, typifies this trend of using activism to drive Comparative Education, activism to form policy. So, their progressive view is that the application of traditional epistemologies to inform policy is a cover-up to conceal the evils of capitalism. Now, by contrast to this, epistemological purists could well argue that forcing research projects to mold policy rather than to inform policy serves to cancel objectivity.

Now, this is not to say that purists are not or should not be concerned with such things as human rights and social justice issues. Social activism among scholars and their capacity as responsible citizens is admirable, which all, I think, be involved in social

activism. But if it becomes a key objective of their research, it will threaten their ability to be unbiased in the quest for truth. So, that distinction, and this is another distinction that I think is important. So, as you can see, the construction of identities in Comparative Education as a research field has taken different forms at different times, even creating very deep cleavages in the field.

A great danger, it seems to me, is the prospect of an ascending identity that obscures the epistemological platforms of other identities. So, to cancel positivism or cancel relativism, for example, regardless of their flaws, I think would be a tragedy for our field.

## How do you perceive the acquis produced in the reputable publications that exist on Comparative Education in the 21st century?

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Or what I would say the legacy produced in reputable publications in Comparative Education in the 21st century? In terms of this question, even once reputable publications, it seems to me, can succumb to malevolent intent. As I've written, the most prominent example of malevolent intent in Comparative Education is the Nazi takeover of the International Review of Education in Germany in the early 1930s. Now, the Nazi control of the International Review of Education is really an extremely important episode in the history of the field, because it was by far the most preeminent journal of its time in Comparative Education.

So, this is an extreme example, but it's a very important example of how malevolent intent can enter into the field, then shape the field. So, what we're experiencing more commonly in Comparative Education these days, at the present, is the gradual movement from purest scholarship to social activism scholarship, as I described before.

Now, unfortunately, I see this happening in all kinds of contemporary books, and in the field's most venerable journals, even in the Comparative Education Review, which I edited for 10 years in the 1990s. The other prominent journals, like the British Compare and Comparative Education, they're not as prone to yield to this trend, I think, but they too are showing signs of succumbing to this kind of thrust.

But interestingly enough, the journals that I have done most to preserve purest scholarship come, I believe, from Spain, Latin America, and parts of Asia. And of these, I would rate the Spanish *Revista Española de Educación Comparada*, and the *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* as the outstanding examples of adhering to purest scholarship. And there are a few other Comparative Education journals from outside Europe and North America, and most particularly, I would say the *Revista Brasileira de Educação Comparada*. These

are rising to the top of, in this regard, the top of purest scholarship. And I see the world of comparative scholarship, which it was once dominated by Europe and North America, as shifting in quality, if not quantity, toward Latin America, Africa, Australia, much of Asia, and some parts of the Middle East.

These areas of the world, and I'm most familiar with Latin America, the quality of comparativist work has exploded in recent years. I think the expansion of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies and the growing participation of the World Council's constituent members, I think account for much of the shift. But so, does the expansion and the use of non-anglophone languages. Years ago, many years ago, 1980s, I think, I wrote a review of the book titled *Educación Comparada* by Ángel Diego Marquez (Marquez, 1972), in which I regretted that this masterpiece would receive little worldwide attention. Why?

Because of the limited community of Spanish language scholars in the field. This would not be true today.

The community of, I would say, certainly Spanish speaking, Portuguese speaking, non-Anglo language speaking communities, have expanded significantly in numbers and quality such that the scholarship these areas are producing can't be ignored by English speaking and indeed the rest of the world. So, this rise of the non-European, non-North American societies, the research, the quality of research, the purism of their research is something that is, I think, a remarkable episode and remarkable phenomenon in Comparative Education today. And I think it's going to do, I think we have to look at this in terms of how we're Comparative Education is going in the future.

### **Main challenges and trends in the current context of world geopolitics<sup>3</sup>**

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I've already talked about the growing tendency of comparativists to engage in political activism in place of purist scholarship. Now, I see that as the greatest threat to the field. And I want to quote now something that my mentor at the University of Chicago, C. Arnold Anderson, once said: *this is said that disciplined work [and by that he meant pure scholarship] gives more purpose to life than do the countercultures of political activism that seem to be copies of medieval dance ecstasies*. I mean, that's a beautiful thought. And it's one to which I really subscribe.

But okay, another problem, alarmingly and interestingly enough, is a lack of knowledge among comparativists about Comparative Education itself. What am I saying? I'm

saying that many, maybe most comparativists, I think really don't know what Comparative Education is. I did a study with Bradley Cook and Stephen Heide about 20 years ago, and what we found was that a large majority of our sample of North American-based comparativists had never even had an introductory course in Comparative Education.

There's no reason to believe that has it all changed in the present. So, it shouldn't be a surprise that the basic epistemologies upon which the field rests are commonly ignored, and that so many comparativists, or so-called comparativists, choose political activism over pure scholarship. All fits into what I was saying before.

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<sup>3</sup> What would be, in your perspective, the main challenges and trends in the current context of world geopolitics?

Okay, as a last thought, in my view, what is the most important geopolitical challenge to be addressed in education generally in Comparative Education in particular? It's one that I say is given over to the intensive study throughout much of the world, and that is the relationship between education and socio-economic inequality. That is to say, how do schools relate to the gap between rich and poor. So, it's generally acknowledged that there is a wide disparity between what schools are supposed to do to reduce, if not eliminate, this gap and what schools actually do.

In democratic societies, schools are supposed to be the key to social mobility. They're supposed to afford opportunity for all, but especially opportunity for poorly resourced students to allow them to advance their position in the social hierarchy. But in fact, the opposite is often the case. Often schools that serve the poor are deficient. They have inferior teachers, they have inferior physical conditions, so even when schools in poor areas are properly supported, the areas in which they are located are given over to such poor conditions that they are unable to affect much in the way of change. So, in this way, schools contribute, schools themselves contribute to systemic inequality. So, instead of eliminating or reducing inequality, they actually enhance inequality.

So, what do countries concerned about the ineffectiveness of schools to bring about change? What do they do? Typically, governments pour, what do they do? They pour disparate portions of funds into poor, usually public schools in the hope of enhancing the learning of poor students, poorly resourced students, and to give them a better chance to succeed. But this has not worked. The gap between rich and poor in most countries is getting worse, not better. And schools, even when given better

support, have done little themselves to improve the closing of the gap.

Now, it's not that the governments don't know this, and increasingly governments are, finally at least, paying heed to the inferior results from throwing more money at schools, especially public schools, that serve the lower income students. The most important programs to bring about better results are those that provide tuition vouchers and scholarships to poor students, which enables them to enroll in alternative, usually private schools. Now, it's interesting. When we think of private schools, we often think of them as serving exclusively the rich. But with vouchers, the lower income children can learn at better schools, raising the level of opportunity for them. And so, we find that putting resources in the form of vouchers and educational savings accounts, like putting these directly in the hands of families, rather than pouring them into the schools, this is a growing trend. It's a good trend. This shift from allocating funding directly to families in support of their children's education, rather than to the schools themselves, is becoming increasingly accepted.

In Latin America, the *Oportunidades* [Opportunities program], anti-poverty and human resource development program in Mexico has led to better school enrollment, better educational attainment results for the lower income children. In Colombia, the *Programa de Ampliación de Cobertura de la Educación Secundaria* [Secondary Education Coverage Expansion Program] also has produced favorable results. And the most extensive educational choice effort in Latin America, and the one that's most thoroughly studied, is the one, is the school voucher program in Chile.

So, what do we learn from these programs? First, it appears that enhancing the value of vouchers and other educational choice



programs for disadvantaged children does work to reduce the achievement gap between students of low- and higher-income families. That's number one. And second, segregation between school-serving families of low-income students and schools-serving higher-income students doesn't matter as much as many have thought. In other words, it's neither the separation of children into school-serving higher and lower socio-economic populations, nor the pouring of resources into schools-serving low as opposed to high-income populations, but rather the social and financial capital resources commanded by the child's family

in support of education that counts most in influencing the achievement gap and positioning the child for social mobility.

Well, that's about all I have to say, and I hope it's understandable. I hope you have a sense of where I'm coming from when I talk about great geopolitical issues in Comparative Education, and also in talking about identities in Comparative Education, especially how research fits into those identities. So that's my take on the question that Luis had presented to me.

## A metalogue as final remarks

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**Maiza:** It's overwhelming because it's a deep reflection. Every time you were talking, the papers that are read were popping up. When you talked about the father of Comparative Education, I remember you wrote an article where you questioned the role of Marc-Antoine Julien of Paris. And it was interesting because I was seeing all the work popping up. Can I ask you to just elaborate on your perspective of the boundary spanning? Because you referred very much on the Comparative Education being coming from Social Sciences and going for History. And we do have a lot of boundary spanners in Comparative Education.

**Erwin Epstein:** Well, in terms of the boundaries between Comparative Education and its own pillars, the methods and theories derived from History and Social Sciences, it's a matter of focus. These fields don't focus intensively on education, and especially in a comparative sense, whereas Comparative Education does. So Comparative Education is an interdisciplinary field. It takes these other fields, combines them, develops them into their own theories and methods in order to focus specifically on the problems that relate the international problems that relate

to education. So Comparative Education is unique in the sense that in terms of its focus, not in terms of its methods and theories, but in terms of its focus. And that's where the boundary comes to play.

**Maiza:** I do recall this discussion being really intense, because where are the boundaries? But then, coming from methodology, coming from history, for example, we do have a lot of History of Education working together with Comparative Education. And then it rises that feeling how the boundary spanners are coming and going in between these fields while they are using methodologies there.

**Erwin Epstein:** Exactly, exactly. And the amalgamation of fields is quite common. Look at social psychology. Social psychology is a combination of sociology and psychology. They mesh together in neither purely psychology, nor purely sociology. And Comparative Education essentially does the same thing, except it does it with more disciplines, more fields. So, it takes the best from these other fields in the purest forms, not in terms of the social activism forms or the purest forms, but takes the best from these fields, applies them to what? To

understanding the problems and issues of education as they exist across cultures, across societies. That's what the focus of Comparative Education is, or at least should be.

**Maiza:** It's so interesting because when you were talking about the matter around policy, as are we informing or are we actually being used to develop the policy itself? It's interesting because then we can have another field crossing when we are talking about policy borrowing, right? And in that case, I feel that the Comparative Education has a really important role on the discussion about the policy (borrowing) process.

**Erwin Epstein:** As long as we don't get sidetracked by trying to make policy rather than to understand policy, right? And I remember, let's see, one of the early comparativists, it was Bereday. I remember a lecture, this is in the 1970s, or maybe the 1960s, he did a lecture on the difference between interdisciplinary work and multidisciplinary work. And the multidisciplinary work, Comparative Education is not multidisciplinary because multidisciplinary means, well, you got one discipline here and another here and another here and there and there are boundaries or the boundaries. Interdisciplinary takes those boundaries and kind of meshes them together. And so, the outcome is what, Comparative Education? As long as it focuses on issues of education, well, cross-cultural, cross-society.

**Aguilar:** I'm very happy with the depth of your approach and how your answers are so interlinked, and so powerful. But there is a memory that you must have, which is that when we were with Prof. Jacob (from Washington) in Mexico, there was a reflection structure, he had a very similar structure to this reflection that you had done about 15 years later, right? Very important, very important.

**Erwin Epstein:** Just to say that it is a great pleasure to be with you and also to give honor to the Brazilian society and to be part of the to honor for the 40 years of the foundation of the society. It is magnificent, it is a wonderful thing.

**Aguilar:** Erwin, in addition to thank you very much for your presentation, I wanted to tell you that when you spoke, as you were going through each of the questions, you were putting more challenges each time, and it is as if we had written the story recently through new challenges of your reading, of your reflection.

**Maiza:** It actually felt like a reconstruction of the field.

**Erwin Epstein:** Well, I'd like to say that it's an account of the construction of the field, of the speciality, of the Comparative Education. It is part of the history of the societies, of all the societies in the Comparative Education. But I am very impressed by the work that exists now in Latin America, about the field. So yes, I am very impressed.

**Maiza:** Thank you very much for this reflection. That's how we can contribute to the field. And we appreciate very much your reflection because, you know, we can always refer to Erwin Epstein with this great reflection, this great legacy, and this contribution to the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education and my personal gratitude for contributing to the Brazilian Journal of Comparative Education.

**Erwin Epstein:** El placer es mío. Se lo agradecido mucho por todo y entonces, great pleasure for me. I have to say so, anything I could do to ayudar los miembros, los socios de la Sociedad Brasileira. Estoy disponible para hacer cualquier cosa. Thank you so much. It's been wonderful.

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