

Comparative Education and its neighbours: labels and identities

Educação Comparada e seus vizinhos: etiquetas e identidades

Educación Comparada y sus vecinos: etiquetas e identidades

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Mark Bray holds the UNESCO Chair in Comparative Education at the University of Hong Kong. Over the decades, he has also held significant leadership positions in professional bodies for Comparative Education, including presiding: the Comparative Education Society of Hong Kong (CESHK) (1998-2000); the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) (2004-2007); and the Comparative & International Education Society (CIES), as President-Elect in 2015/16, President in 2016/17 and Past-President in 2017/18. Since 2012, he is part of the Board of Directors at the Comparative Education Society of Asia (CESA). He has also been a long-term member of the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE). His contribution to the field of Comparative Education is extensive and globally recognized².

ABSTRACT: As part of the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education, the Brazilian Journal of Comparative Education presents a contribution from Mark Bray, University of Hong Kong.

Keywords: Comparative Education. International Education. Research fields and identities.

RESUMO: No âmbito da celebração dos 40 anos da Sociedade Brasileira de Educação Comparada, a Revista Brasileira de Educação Comparada apresenta uma contribuição de Mark Bray, Universidade de Hong Kong.

Palavras-chave: Educação Comparada Internacional. Campo de pesquisa e Identidade.

RESUMEN: En el marco de la celebración del 40 aniversario de la Sociedad Brasileña de Educación Comparada, la Revista Brasileña de Educación Comparada presenta una contribución de Mark Bray, Universidad de Hong Kong.

Palabras clave: Educación Comparada Internacional. Campo de Investigación y identidad.

40 ANOS

1983-2023



S B E C
SOCIEDADE
BRASILEIRA DE
EDUCAÇÃO
COMPARADA

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² Among Mark Bray's literary contributions to the field is a comparative book about private supplementary tutoring for which the SBEC played a leadership role in the Portuguese translation (Bray, 2014). It was followed by a book about approaches and methods in comparative education research in which again the SBEC planted a seed (see Gomes, 2015, p. 20) for the Portuguese translation, entitled *Pesquisa em Educação Comparada: Abordagens e Métodos* (Bray et al., 2015). A profile of Mark Bray's career has been published by the WCCES journal *Global Comparative Education* (Jacob, 2018).

Identifying advances in the development of the field and the critique of Comparative Education³

When considering the question *Is it possible to identify advances that have taken place in the development of the field and the critique of Comparative Education?*, I first thought about critiques about the field that have been published in a number of world regions. I went back to the book co-edited by Arnove et al. (1992a) that reviewed trends, particularly in North America, over the previous decades. Many remarks are pertinent in that book – and indeed in its predecessors (e.g. Altbach et al., 1982; Altbach & Kelly, 1986). For example, the Introduction (Arnove et al., 1992b) described the field of comparative education (p. 1) as “loosely bounded” and with “wide diversity in ... approaches”. The authors added that:

A large number of case studies, historical studies and ethnographies along side of statistical scholarship form the research base of comparative education. Some studies are truly comparative, consisting of research conducted in or on several different nations. A majority, however, are case studies of education in a single country. (Arnove et al., 1992b, p. 1)

These remarks strike me as still very valid today; and although they were made primarily in North American context, they were – and remain – largely applicable to the field in other world regions (see e.g. Wolhuter & Wiseman, 2019). Specifically in Latin America, analyses by Acosta and Ruiz (2018), Gorostiaga and Espinoza (2019) and Aguilar and Assis (2019) naturally show variations, but also broad commonalities.

Also in the 1992 book, Kelly’s opening chapter described comparative education as a field constantly in search of a distinct identity. However, the chapter added, that search “seems to be a source of strength rather than a weakness” (Kelly, 1992, p. 13) because it brings questioning and awareness of ambiguities. Again, that remark seems still to have contemporary relevance. The field remains loosely bounded, but it is vibrant as an outward-looking community with strong international interests.

Reflecting on the relationship between Comparative Education and International Education

Among the 45 current WCCES members, seven have International Education in their names alongside Comparative Education. In 1956, the oldest and largest member was established in the USA as the Comparative Education Society (CES), and, in 1968, became the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES). This change was not uniformly welcomed (Sherman Swing, 2016). Advocates asserted that professionals in administration, guidance and curriculum were more likely to want affiliation

with an international organisation than with an exclusively academic body. Opponents, such as Erwin Epstein, felt that the word international connected “a less analytic type of activity (...) concerned more with practice and implementing [in contrast to the study of] policy” (quoted by Sherman Swing, 2016, p. 21). Nevertheless, by majority vote, the name was changed, permitting and legitimating presentations, e. g., on single countries with little explicit comparison.

³ Each section of this contribution is linked to a question from the interview guide sent to Mark Bray in the context of the 40th Anniversary of the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education.

This feature has extended beyond the CIES to counterpart bodies, whether or not they include International in their names. On the one hand the loose conceptualisation permitted by inclusion of International alongside Comparative is arguably problematic from an academic and disciplinary perspective, but on the other hand the breadth of presentations permitted by this vocabulary enables the societies to be welcoming as arenas for exploration of multiple themes and approaches.

At the same time, it is again worth recalling the statement by Arnove et al. (1992b, p.1) quoted above, this time with some specific emphasis. “Some studies,” they said, “are truly comparative, consisting of research conducted in or on several different nations”. The word “nation” fits into the word “international”, and may here be taken as a synonym for “country”. Indeed, nations or countries are the dominant unit for comparison within the field. However, I have for some years argued for multi-level units of comparison on a spectrum that includes individuals, classrooms, schools, districts, states/provinces, countries, and then world regions/continents (Bray & Thomas, 1995). Indeed, this was the core of the *Pesquisa em Educação Comparada* book (Bray et al., 2015), and the cube in which multi-level units were presented has been widely used within the field.

Also worth noting are terminological shifts in China, for example. The origins of what today is called the Chinese Comparative Education Society (CCES) lay in the Foreign Education Research Sub-Commission of the Chinese Society of Education (CSE) established in 1979 (Gu & Gui, 2007). In 1983, the sub-commission of the CSE was renamed Comparative rather than Foreign, though the sub-commission’s journal, *Foreign Education*, continued publication under that name. The journal was replaced in 1991 by a publication by Beijing Normal University entitled *Foreign Education Conditions*. In the following year, the journal was renamed *Comparative Education Review*, in alignment with the name of the society that sponsored it, but in the first instance the circulation dropped significantly reflecting, as noted by Gu and Gui (2007, p. 234), “the lower interest in the academic field of comparative education compared with the more factual domain of foreign education”. Circulation did subsequently rise again, but much content remains in effect about foreign education without explicit comparisons. This history and evolution of names, but less rigorous evolution in content, reflects epistemological issues that were also evident in Germany, for example (Manzon & Bray, 2007).

Exploring the construction of the identity of Comparative Education⁴

Again, looking back over the decades, one major force for change in all spheres of scholarship has been globalisation. Universities can no longer focus just on their immediate neighbourhoods. This means that every field and discipline is now required to

have an international outlook, and that cross-national comparisons are a norm within every branch of educational studies and beyond. In some respects, this permits synergy with scholars who specifically identify themselves with the field of

⁴ Based on the question: *Is the construction of the identity of Comparative Education researchers strengthening the theoretical-methodological repertoire and disseminating ways of approaching the objects of comparative knowledge in education?*

Comparative Education (with capital letters); but, in other respects, perhaps it dilutes the role of the field.

Elaborating, a key contribution from the field of Comparative Education concerns identification of units for comparison and methodological consideration of the strengths and limitations arising from the choice of units. Critics might justifiably argue that even within the conferences of the professional bodies devoted to the field, inadequate attention is given to methodological issues. As such, a strong case can be made for ongoing and renewed attention to these matters.

Core journals in Comparative Education⁵

The total number of journals in the field of education (and indeed in all fields) has expanded exponentially during the last decade, particularly with the ease of internet access that removes the costs of printing and mailing of paper copies. Many journals have International in their names, in order to enlarge their geographic scope and thereby attract large numbers of authors and readers. Alongside, relatively few journals have Comparative Education in their names because it seems to make more demands on authors who should pay attention to comparative methodology and who would prefer to focus on patterns in single countries.

In this connection, looking back at history, it is again worth noting ambiguities in the journal of the US-based CES that later became the CIES. Shortly after the CES was established in 1956, it launched its journal named Comparative Education Review. The journal retained this name even when in 1968 the word International was added to the society, making it CIES (Berends & Trakas, 2016). Yet as noted by Nordtveit

(2016), the international aspect of the journal was visible from the beginning. Thus, ambiguities were evident even when the host societies was called the CES; and the ambiguities increased when the society became the CIES but the journal remained the Comparative [and not International] Education Review.

Two journals in the United Kingdom to some extent manage similar ambiguities. Comparative Education was founded in 1964 and operates as a free-standing journal rather than the official publication of a professional society. Alongside is the journal of what was originally called the British Section of the Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE) and then in turn British Comparative Education Society (BCES), the British Comparative and International Education Society (BCIES), and the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE) (Sutherland et al., 2007). Today the BAICE journal is called Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education; but it was previously called Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education during both the BCIES era and the first decade of the BAICE era (Bray, 2010). The journal's history dates back to 1968, i.e. just four years after Comparative Education.

Also alongside these journals is the International Review of Education, which dates its history from 1931. This journal does not have Comparative in its title, yet has been described by its Editor (McIntosh, 2002, p. 1) as "the longest-running international journal of comparative education". This statement again underlines ambiguities. Since 1955 the journal has been published under the auspices of what was then called the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE), which in 2006 became the

⁵ Based on the question: *In relation to your remarks above, can you comment further on the titles of core journals in the fields of Comparative (and International) Education?*

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). In 2013, the UIL decided to add a subtitle to the journal, making it International Review of Education: Journal of Lifelong Learning (Roche, 2013).

Implications for the Brazilian Journal of Comparative Education (RBEC – Revista Brasileira de Educação Comparada)⁶

Well, your journal is establishing itself as a significant voice and has a growing reputation on which you and colleagues are to be congratulated. Your journal only has Comparative Education in its title, but has also contained articles that would be described as International Education or Foreign Education.

That is obviously acceptable, for the same reasons as would be given by the editors of the other journals that I have mentioned. At the same time, I would recommend the team constantly to think about boundaries within the field and to encourage authors to pay attention to methodology. This could include explicit comparisons within countries as well as between them.

In any case, I congratulate the SBEC on its 40th anniversary and applaud your contributions to the global as well as to the Brazilian community of scholars. I wish you continuing success, and look forward to ongoing contact and discussions.

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