

Interview with Professor Dr. Charl Wolhuter Professor at North-West University South Africa

Entrevista ao Professor Dr. Charl Wolhuter
Professor da Universidade Noroeste da África do Sul

Entrevista al Profesor Dr. Charl Wolhuter
Profesor de la Universidad del Noroeste de Sudáfrica

Charl Wolhuter¹



Charl Wolhuter studied at the University of Johannesburg, the University of Pretoria, the University of South Africa and the University of Stellenbosch. He obtained his doctorate in Comparative Education from the University of Stellenbosch. He is a former junior lecturer in Historical Education and Comparative Education at the University of Pretoria and a former senior lecturer in Historical Education and Comparative Education at the University of Zululand. He is currently Professor of Comparative and International Education at North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa. He is the author of many articles and books on Comparative and International Education and Historical Education.

ABSTRACT: As part of the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education, the Brazilian Journal of Comparative Education interviews Professor Charl Wolhuter, Comparative and International Education Professor at North-West University South Africa.

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 entrevista ao Professor Charl Wolhuter, Professor de Educação Comparada e Internacional da Universidade Noroeste da África do Sul.

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 entrevista al Profesor Charl Wolhuter, Profesor de Educación Internacional y Comparada en la Universidad del Noroeste de Sudáfrica.

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**

¹ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4602-7113>

A ping-pong dialogue about Comparative Education

The Dossier for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education has a dialogue within the South hemisphere, so we can play it as a ping-pong game.

Maiza: The first question is “whether it is possible to identify advances that have taken place in the development of the field and the critique of comparative education.” What is your reflection on that?

Charl: Thank you. I assume you mean advances the past 40 years. I want to commence by congratulating you, demographically the first largest country in the world with the comparative education society being 40 years old. Else in Southern Africa is 32 years old. Unfortunately, I must be honest, the Southern African comparative and history of education society is not as big nor as dynamic as it used to be 20, 25 years ago. Advances in the field the past 40 years, I can think of in the first very important advance was taking advantage of large data sets. The PISA tests, the IEI tests such as the terms and the PULS tests have risen to prominence in the comparative international education agenda.

On the other hand, the field still stick tenaciously to traditions. The nation state remains the major geographical unit of analysis, for example. Whereas one can make a case for in this age of globalization and of supranational organizations for larger geographical units to form the basis of comparative education studies. One can also make a case for extending comparative education to smaller geographical units of analysis, subnational units, individual institutions and individual classrooms and even individual teachers and students forming the basis of analysis. The field still, for example, secondly suffers from the Black Box Syndrome. Focusing in shaping on

contextual forces, shaping education systems to a small extent, looking at the societal outcomes of education, but neglecting what is taking place inside classrooms and in educational institutions. Despite trailblazing major works such as the publications of Robin Alexander, the University of Cambridge, who started to look at pedagogy and what is taking place in classrooms. The field still suffers from a northern hemispheric age of many frameworks and theoretical paradigms and frameworks tested and developed in the global north still dominates the field. As do scholars in the global north.

If you look at publications in top journals, scholars in the global north were still dominating authorship, even when the field of, in cases where the field of research is situated in the global south. So I see in many respects the field still tenaciously sticking to narrow paths that have been trodden out during history. So that would be my answer to the first question.

Maiza: So, if you think of these advances, what is your reflection on whether it is possible to affirm that we have advanced in the construction of the identity of comparative education as a research field?

Charl: If you look at them, for example, two years ago Bloomsbury published an encyclopedia or a book, international handbook of theoretical positions in the field by Tavis D. Jules, Matthew A.M. Thomas and Robin Shields in which they distinguished or identified 27 major theoretical positions in the field (Jules, Shields, & Thomas, 2021). Each one of those theoretical positions have their roots, their origins in fields outside comparative education. Comparative education is still in need of constructing an autochthonous indigenous theoretical framework. The theoretical frameworks we

use come from cognate fields such as sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, philosophy and the like. We still have the assignment to construct our own theoretical framework and our identity. That is one of the crises of identity research.

Maiza: What would you say about the construction of the identity going back to what you said on the first part on identifying the advances in obstacles when you were talking about the North Global?

Charl: I'm on record. I have published and said that an autochthonous theory of comparative for comparative education should take the education system, its interrelationship with contexts, societal contexts and the comparative part of that should be the centerpiece with the constructing of an autochthonous theoretical framework and identity of comparative education.

Comparative education is distinguished by a three in one perspective on education. A study of the education system in its contextual interwovenness or interrelationships and a comparison, thirdly a comparison of various education systems in their interrelationships with their contexts.

Aguilar: Really nice. For Charles, Charles is an educational system. Is a big category for comparative studies?

Charl: I think we should develop a theory of the education system. I'm also on record saying that education systems in the world exist in a hierarchy of levels, at least seven levels. On a world level, there is a worldwide, a global education project on supranational level, of which the European Union is the most salient, on national level, which is still almost exclusively the focus of scholars. On subnational level, on institutional level, on classroom level and on individual level. On each one of those, you can see the outlines, the tenets of an education system. So a

theoretical framework should make microvision for that entire hierarchy of geographical levels at which education systems do exist.

Maiza: Thank you so much. So, with all of these together, how would you reflect on if this construction of identity, when we are talking about comparative education researcher, is it strengthening the theoretical methodological repertoire and disseminating ways of approaching the objects of comparative knowledge in education? What is your perspective?

Charl: On the one hand, we enrich the field by taking perspectives from all these other social sciences. On the other hand, any field of scholarship should also have and develop its own identity, its own theoretical framework, its own body of knowledge, its own methods. So I don't want to say take everything from what we can get from the other social sciences and throw it out of the back door. Take it to and reach ourselves, but we must develop our own theoretical framework based on our objective study, the education system, education systems in the societal interrelationships and the comparison of these.

Maiza: In this case, it would be taking a step forward in terms of the borrowing that we do from other fields?

Charl: Yes, as I said, I'm totally for in reaching the field with from cognitive social sciences, from their theoretical apparatus, their methodological instrumentarium, their insights, their knowledge. On the other hand, we cannot be an eclectic applied field. We need to develop our own theoretical edifice based on our objective knowledge, our objective study.

Aguilar: So, when we are talking about the object and the approaches, we do have a set of our own framing, right? So how could we expand that?

Charl: I think comparative education as a dual character, it is a field of study, an object of study, the education system in its contextual interwovenness. Apart from having its own objective study, it is also a method of study. So I think comparative education has got a dual character. Having an objective study and a method of study, the comparative method.

Aguilar: So, the Spanish school, when we are talking about the school as the field has developed based on this approach to comparative education, where we are going into the history, right? So, I would like just to, before we go to the next question, you said go looking to cognitive sciences, right?

Charl: Cognitive social sciences, sociology, political science, anthropology, economic psychology.

Maiza: And how would you say that could work in this, because we were talking about big topics like education systems. So that's a big chunk of object to use as a starting point for research. How would you strain this thinking on not only big data sets, but also, for example, ethnographic work, where we do so focus so much in one specific, sometimes phenomenal, or in a participant that you were talking about, going from this big chunk into even going to a teacher. So this also goes into methodology when we are talking about quantitative studies and qualitative studies.

Charl: I think one very striking example of that would be critical ethnography. If we go back to Vandra Masemann WCCES presidential address in the early 1990s, she came from anthropology to comparative education. And in her presidential address in the early 1990s of WCCES, she advocated the method of critical ethnography of looking at the individual student or classroom or teacher, interpret their actions, their situation, their motivation into larger structural inequalities or structural futures of

a socio-economic or socio-political dispensation. That is what critical ethnography does. Interpreting individual actions, experiences, and the like, interpret that in larger socio-economic or socio-political frameworks. So I'm thinking of the paradigm of critical ethnography, which Vandra Masemann explains. It would be a good example of that.

Maiza: Thank you so much for that. It is really interesting how we can go into big data sets, but we are pointing out critical ethnography. So refreshing to hear. This is an approach, for example, that I use. And it's really interesting to see that that could fit also, right? And yes, please.

Charl: I think world system analysis, or new colonialism or post-colonialism would be a better theoretical framework to use with big data sets. With interviews and observations, you may use critical ethnography, but if you use large data sets, no obvious framework, I would look at this. World system analysis or post-colonialism or b-colonialism, new colonialism to interpret large data sets, much of what you see there.

Maiza: Yeah. And so going from the hard work of doing research, capturing what we could see from the context from the phenomenon, and going into how can we actually disseminate this into publishing. This is where we go with our next question, is "how do you perceive the increase produced in the reportable publications that exist on comparative education on the 21st century?"

Charl: I'm going to combine questions four and five. I've written an article which is now on the review, and I've unpacked that thesis in a book, where I say firstly, in the early 21st century, a new phase of comparative and international education is dawned. A phase which we can call criticism of northern hegemony, criticism of northern hegemony, which is evident in a number of strands in the

field. These strands are criticism against international aid and international organizations in education, criticism of one model of development, a call for the decolonization of education practice and of comparative education, a call that indigenous knowledge systems must come to their right, a call for the, and a call and a criticism that comparative education scholars in the global south find themselves in a very unequal playing field, which is interalien to link to question four, is evident in the set of publication for we have, which are situated in the north and which have a northern bias. So I see the current phase in comparative education in the early 21st century is a phase of increasing criticism against northern hegemony. And then to go to question five, my vision for the future of a field is a next field in which the global south will come to its right, a phase where the global south will come to its right. And I see in that the BRICS grouping, the BRICS countries and scholars in the BRICS countries is taking the lead as being the vanguard to the affirmation of the global south and the coming of the, the coming of the global south to each right in the field. In terms of the developing theoretical orientations appropriate and taking cognizance of the realities in the global south, in terms of scholars in the global south, taking the global south as their research field and also taking, highlighting the significance of the education experience of the global south for the entire global community, including the countries of the global north. So I see an X phase in comparative and international education as a phase of the affirmation of the global south. And I see the BRICS countries and scholars in the BRICS countries as having an an assignment to take the lead in this to materialize.

Aguiar: So, we, when we are talking about publications, you said before when we are

talking about, most likely we are talking about journals with high impact factor and things like that. What about alternatives, alternative publications like e-books?

Charl: We must make our mark and we must start getting into the editorial boards of journals already established in the global north and then we must also develop our own journals, based on the global south and see that they get a high citation impact and get developed as to be reputable journals. And I think once again in the BRICS countries we have a big, we are ideally suited and well suited and well placed to start developing journals in which the global south can come to its right in the field.

Maiza: Even, for example, we are talking about our journal, for example, we launched it three, four years ago, but actually three years and of course we had the pandemic and all of these of course can impact the fact that we could seek indexation, do you know, going for *Scopus* and *Web of science* or any other index that people sometimes would prefer to see at the journal. But do you know, do you think that reputable publications are more linked to only journals with impact factor, but right now or the process of developing new journals for the south?

Charl: We have a set of journals we can develop, but we can also develop new journals. I must, for example, a journal focusing on the BRICS countries or a journal taking the entire global south as its mission, the developing of the field in the global south as its mission. For example, we would like to see two such journals. Apart from that, we also in such is our journal, you have your journal, there is one in Argentina and I can carry on. We must develop those journals definitely and start using that baseware, but I think it's definitely scope for more journals.

Maiza: And also the alternatives, right, publishing in ebooks.

Charl: Yes, we must.

The book in which I argue for this new phase in comparative education will be an open access publication. It's easier to register a citation impact on open access and it's cheaper to publish a book electronically than by odd copy. How much I also love odd copy. We must not neglect open access and electronic access and electronic publishing.

Maiza: That's very interesting because this is something that we see. We see many of your publications coming from books and edited also. And this is why Aguilar was also provoking because this is something that it feels like we should have these alternative, right, not only seeking high impact factor journals, because we do have great publications that are not on journals, but still great resources for the field. And would you say that this process of seeking high impact factor or has it done something to the field?

Charl: I think lamentably the global south, we have the foot of the mountain. We have hardly started. I think in our such as this journal, we got accreditation and indexation with our local South African higher education index university grants commission body. But we must still take it up to Scopus, to Scholar, to EBSCO and then eventually to Web of Science. I think that pretty much applies to most of the comparative education journals, so in the global south, we still got a very high mountain to go.

Maiza: And would you like to walk us through these mountains? What would be the next steps?

Charl: Yes, you should start with your national body like grants, which we did in South Africa. Then you must, the next one is EBSCO or Eric and Eric, then Scholar and Scopus. Then eventually on top of it is the Web of Science. And once you get indexation and Web of Science, you must try and increase your impact factor, till you

reach or even exceed where the top journals are with comparative education review and compare where they stand in terms of citation impact. That is the task here of us. I shall send you my book once it is out and it will be open access. Also, some of my colleagues are thinking of starting and open a new comparative education journal in South Africa. I shall also keep you abreast. I shall recommend that you maybe start a journal focusing on BRICS or taking the global south as its mission. Yeah, and we could partner with that.

Charl: That would be nice. Very, very nice.

Maiza: And yes, having the new book open access, that will be really helpful, especially because sometimes we are not able to access some publications, high-profile publications. And when I'm talking about high-profile, it's because sometimes those high-profiles, they end up being published as handbooks or edited books in big publishing companies, which are very expensive to acquire. Sometimes we do have access through the library because they do have some packages that they partner with, for example, Sage, Routledge, Springer. Sometimes we are able to access some books. And that will be really nice because that will be a book that we could do actually a review on and pass it forward.

And before we wrap it up, I know that you comprised questions four and five, but you were talking about trying to develop the south, right. What would be the main challenges that we have right now and that we should be researching in the global south? And when we are talking about making sure that, this research becomes really interesting publication, that can be up to the standards of what we're having, what you said about North.

Charl: The main challenge in the global south is access to education, quality of education, equality of education, and then the opportunity at present is also the new normal. The pandemic has induced reaching out to technology and on-stay education. We should research technology and on-stay education in global south-context. Its successes and failure and use our insights to guide the implementation of technology and on-stay education in the global south as a means to improve education, especially globally, but especially in the global south.

Aguilar: So, when we are talking about, you know, we talked about the construction of the field, the identity of the field, and when we are talking about education within higher education, sometimes we struggle actually to keep comparative education as a course, as something that, you know, people attend, that there is this backing forward with should we have comparative education as a discipline or not? Are we pushing back? What is your perspective on this and how could we, once we do have comparative education within a discipline in higher education for undergrad and grad students, what is your perspective? How could we develop this?

Charl: Unfortunately, in Brazil, as in South Africa, in many parts of the world, the past 40 years comparative education has lost much of its stature and prominence at

universities, staff-wise, infrastructure-wise, and as a standalone course in programs. Well, I think if we want to secure the future of the field, we need to fight and bring it back. At undergraduate and at graduate level, we should bring back and stake a claim for comparative education. One of my pipe dreams is to develop an inter-university, a joint university degree master's program of comparative education, focusing on education in the BRICS countries, for example, which would be something interesting to develop.

Maiza: Thank you very much for all your positioning on these topics. We would like to thank you very much for giving us your time and sharing with us. We are going to make a transcript. Would you like to make a final message?

Charl: Thank you for the invitation and good luck ahead with the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education. We shall be in touch again to see how we can develop these themes which I suggested. Thank you very much, goodbye. We should take the lead and exercise our own agency and take control of that development. Otherwise, it will once again be a replication reinforcement of northern hegemony in the field. So we will.

Aguilar/Maiza: Thank you!