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# Comparative Education for the 21st Century: retrospect and prospect

PATRICIA BROADFOOT

*ABSTRACT* During the 19th and 20th centuries modern Western education systems have become so globally embedded that alternative forms of educational provision—and goals—have become almost inconceivable. The article argues the likely need for a substantial reconceptualisation in the content, organisation and evaluation of contemporary education systems in response to the profound changes currently impacting on society. Comparative education, it is argued, has a unique capacity 'to make the familiar strange' but so far, despite the advent of exciting new methodologies and the rapidly increasing prominence of comparative studies as a tool for policy-making, comparative education has largely worked within the conventional 'delivery model' conception of education. By so doing, it has arguably helped to reinforce the status quo. Thus the second half of the article offers a prospective vision for the mode, purpose and context of comparative education studies which is in tune with the emerging new educational aspirations of the 21st century and the acknowledged shortcomings of conventional forms of educational provision. Such a 'neo-comparative education', it is argued, would focus on learning and its relationship with culture; would become perhaps better conceptualised as a 'comparative learnology' as the means of understanding how individuals can be encouraged to engage successfully with the many new forms of learning opportunity that are likely to characterise the third millennium.

'School is dead', wrote Reimer (1971). The provocative title of his book was designed to challenge his international readership to examine their most fundamental assumptions about how education should be provided. This book was one of many other equally passionate critiques of the shortcomings of contemporary models of schooling which were produced in the aftermath of the social revolutions of the 1960s. The 'de-schooling' movement, as it became known after the title of Ivan Illich's book of that name (Illich, 1971), called for learning to be liberated from the constraints of formal educational institutions. It argued that schools had evolved to a point where they curbed both children's innate love of learning and their capacity to manage and direct their own educational experiences effectively in the light of their developing individual needs and interests. They cited examples, such as the Barbiana School in Italy, in which the conventional curriculum had been abandoned and teachers no longer taught formal lessons, yet pupils learned with a depth and commitment hitherto unparalleled in this rural village.

At the end of the sophisticated 1990s, the 'de-schooling' movement, if it is considered at all, is likely to be regarded as a rather quaint artefact among the educational antiques. Its message concerning the limitations of conventional educational provision has been consigned to the rubbish heap of woolly-minded liberalism that has no place in the standards-driven educational world of the third millennium. But, as several other contributors to this special issue make clear, it is no longer enough simply to search for new ways to fine tune the quality of our existing modes of educational provision. Like it or not, the educational world today

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faces what may ultimately prove to be a revolution in what is to be taught, to whom and how, since, as Edmund King suggests in his article, 'all its established systems were developed for a world that no longer exists' (p. 267). Thus the message of the 'de-schoolers' has arguably never been more timely.

As is now widely recognised, we live in rapidly-changing times—what Claxton (1998) has described as the 'Age of Uncertainty' in which few would dare to predict the state and shape of the world in even 20 years time. But if nothing else is certain at a time when the speed of change is unprecedented, there does seem to be widespread agreement that the increasing fragmentation of our post-modern world, with its challenge to the very existence of universal truths, will increasingly be characterised by diversity and subjectivity. That the millennium heralds the most profound changes in our social institutions and our practical living arrangements is indisputable. Our educational institutions are already under intense pressure to adapt to the changing needs of the labour market. In the next few decades they are likely to change much more as it becomes increasingly imperative for them to break out of modernist-based views of an externally imposed 'objective' curriculum, didactic pedagogies and universalistic assessment procedures (Torrance, 1999). Without doubt there will be pressures to change the processes of education and the ways in which it is provided and organised. But equally, there will be pressures that result in an even more fundamental debate about the goals of education, a pressure to bring back a sense of vision to educational policy-making, and to re-examine what learning is for. In the face of an uncertain future, one of the few certainties seems to be a consensus that the promotion of more and better learning will be central to it.

The increasing international prominence of a policy discourse of learning in relation to conventional educational institutions such as schools and universities reflects the now widespread recognition of the implications of the 'knowledge society'; of both the potential, and the necessity for the whole population to be able and willing to take advantage of the new means for accessing knowledge that information and communications technology is making available. It also reflects the growing recognition that 'learning' is not synonymous with teaching; that it is an individual accomplishment in the achievement of which teaching is only one element. Arguably even more significant is the growing concern with lifelong learning powerfully described in a recent European Commission report: 'The Treasure Within'.

None of the talents, which are hidden like buried treasure in every person, must be left untapped. These are, to name but a few, memory, reasoning power, imagination, physical ability, aesthetic sense, the aptitude to communicate with others, and the natural charisma of the group leader. All of this goes to prove the need for greater self-knowledge' (Fryer, 1998, p. 13).

The vision of lifelong learning which finds expression in these documents is a profoundly liberating one. Not only does it build on what we know about how people learn best, but it also provides the educational vision that has been so profoundly lacking in the utilitarian concerns of recent decades. It can be seen as the first steps towards the re-establishment of a discourse about learning and education that predates contemporary mass education systems and their universalistic notions of courses of study, examinations and grades; a vision in which it is once again the individual that is the focus of attention and their diverse talents, needs and inclinations. However, as (Hake, 1999) points out, it is a vision that remains largely separate from the world of conventional educational provision in schools, colleges and universities. These show little sign of any fundamental change.

As Rogers (1993) suggests:

Walk into most any classroom in most any school in America today and you'll walk into a time warp where the basic tools of learning have not changed in decades.  
(p. 7)

So, as the second millennium comes to an end, we find ourselves poised between the educational legacy of modernity and a radically new global order in which social, economic, political and technological changes are combining to produce new educational challenges and opportunities. Such changes also represent challenges and opportunities for comparative education as a field of study. My contribution to this endeavour will be, as the title of this article suggests, both retrospective and prospective. It will explore first, the traditional focus of comparative education research and publication as a reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of Western educational traditions and why these came about. Secondly, I shall argue, there are even more powerful potential insights to be derived from comparative studies in the future but only if, within the field as a whole, a sustained and concerted effort to reconceptualise key aspects of its mode, purpose and context is initiated.

## **Retrospect**

### *Provision and Product: delivery systems of education*

In today's increasingly globalised, fluid and fragmented world, the pressure for education to provide the international currency which will form the basis for trade in the knowledge society becomes daily more explicit. As a result, those aspects of educational activity that do not lend themselves to explicit and quantifiable measurement, are increasingly difficult to sustain. Both individuals and institutions, and even whole systems of educational provision, are necessarily becoming increasingly focused on achieving those measures which are the key to survival in the international educational competition.

These contemporary pressures, to conceive of education essentially in terms of a delivery system of pre-defined products which have been subject to rigorous processes of quality assurance, represent the logical culmination of processes that were associated with modernist-inspired systems of schooling in the 19th century. The Enlightenment which provided the foundation for the sustained search for rationalist, scientific solutions to the challenges of the natural world, also underpinned the progressive rationalisation of educational provision into specific institutions in which a hierarchical bureaucratic organisation of classes and curricula, teachers and tests defined an explicit framework of levels of achievement. During the 19th century, the fragmented and varied provision for inculcating the young into the skills, understandings and values of their particular cultural group, which had prevailed in traditional societies, gradually succumbed to the spread of one particular set of normative assumptions about how such provision should be made. These were the assumptions built into Western models of formal schooling which gradually became characterised by its emphasis on academic, book-based learning; on the grouping of children into age cohorts within particular, specialist institutions; on the identification of agreed curricula, often nationally-determined, with a framework of external assessment activities defining levels of performance. If the organisation of the system of provision had its defining characteristics, so too did its inputs, with a central government body, a ministry, generating policy and regulating resources at the apex of a substantial bureaucracy of officials charged with administering and inspecting the quality of provision and beneath them, a cadre of professionals specially-designated and often trained to deliver the agreed content in relation to defined goals.

Now one of the most deeply-rooted and familiar international images, the school in its contemporary guise is nevertheless a cultural artifact. As Schriewer (2000) has pointed out, this particular ideology of education emerged during early-modern Europe and spread all over the world as a result of the intense competition between states at that time. It was part

of a more general diffusion of the cultural model of the nation-state. The impact of colonialism world-wide served further to reinforce the pervasiveness of this particular model of educational provision to a point where today, there is no country, rich or poor, which does not aspire to a broadly similar vision of a successful education system characterised by high levels of student achievement. Moreover, the activities of contemporary international agencies such as the World Bank are serving further to reinforce both this commonality of goals and equally, common assumptions about how these may best be achieved. Thus, the same kind of teacher-development programmes, management-training and school-buildings initiatives currently characterise educational aid projects in many different parts of the world. Most recent of all, arguably, has been the advent of the language of performance indicators—the identification of explicit dimensions to represent the ‘quality’, ‘efficiency’ or ‘success’ of education systems and of individual institutions within them. The growing internationalisation of this activity in recent years, marked initially by the publication of a series of generic indicators (OECD, 1992), represents perhaps the most powerful and insidious development to date in the process of the world-domination of one particular educational model.

National systems of education and the institutions and elements which constitute them have been the traditional context for comparative education studies. As I have documented elsewhere (Broadfoot, 1999), and as Little also makes clear in her contribution to this issue, scholarly work in the field of comparative education has predominantly been framed by the adoption of the nation state as the basis of comparison with national education systems, in whole or in part, figuring prominently as the focus for study. This has been reflected in the contents of this journal. Although there have been strands of work which have attempted to apply the comparative perspective more generically, for example in post-colonialism or world systems theory, such approaches have not constituted the heart of the field which has been characterised by more specific, typically empirical rather than theoretical, comparisons of particular issues between or across national settings. Intra-national studies have been rare.

If the mode of comparative education studies, looked at retrospectively, has been international comparisons or single country case studies, this can in part at least be explained by their implicit purpose. The long history of comparative educational studies has been characterised by a deep methodological divide. It is a divide that echoes the enduring tension in social science epistemology between the search for understanding, on the one hand, and the qualitative methods employed to pursue it, on the other, for generalisations and even laws in the tradition of the natural science paradigm. There is a superficial appeal in the latter approach that offers the promise, through comparative study, of systematic explanations for the relative success of different forms of educational intervention and organisation.

There is no doubt that the significant renaissance of interest in comparative studies in recent years owes much to this kind of approach as evidenced, for example, by the impact of international comparisons of educational achievement.

As Edmund King sets out in his contribution to this special issue, the influence of such studies has grown steadily since the early International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) surveys in the 1960s. Reviewing the historical development of such surveys, Margaret Brown (1999) argues that ‘they have had a greater post-war influence on education world-wide than any other single factor’ (p. 1). In a climate of increasingly intense global economic competition and a growing belief in the key role of education as the source of marginal advantage, governments have become increasingly obsessed with the international rankings of measured educational outcomes. Deaf to both the substantial evidence concerning the technical limitations and shortcomings of such studies (for example, Goldstein, 1996; Brown, 1999; Broadfoot *et al.*, 2000) and the tenuous evidence of any link between educational performance and economic success (Robinson,

1999), educational policy is increasingly driven by national attempts to copy the perceived advantage associated with the educational strategies and techniques of other countries.

Brown (1999), goes on to argue that 'documenting practice in high-scoring countries to give ideas for change is very important' (p. 19). However, she suggests, it would be at least as important:

to work out why similar practices have not been successful in some weaker countries ... It is clearly essential to carefully trial and evaluate any suggested translation of practice from one country to another. (p. 19)

... teachers and the general public need to be educated about the problems of translating such data into implications for our own system and need to be highly suspicious of those who use international data selectively to give unequivocal messages about how to improve teaching. (p. 20)

Implied in Brown's exhortation is the overwhelming need to take culture into account. As such her expressed concern evokes the other powerful tradition within comparative education which can be traced back to some of its earliest exponents. Several of the articles in this special issue make reference to the pioneering work of Sir Michael Sadler in this respect and his enduring contribution in laying the foundations of an approach to conceptualising the field of comparative education in terms of an understanding of the cultural context. More recently, Lawrence Stenhouse (1979) has reiterated the importance of taking culture as a starting point for any comparative study:

If one takes comparative education to denote the activity of studying outside one's own cultural boundaries, then there is a perspective provided by it which cannot be provided by any other principle of study ... to contribute to patterns of descriptive selection and interpretation which question those within the culture in which the observation is made ... the aspiration towards positivist and predictive social science models has led to an undervaluing of observation and description, an overvaluing of the written source, of the statistical, of the accounts education systems offer of themselves. (p. 8)

Joseph Lauwerys was conceding too much to positivist social science when he wrote of comparative education that its 'hope is that it may become possible to provide a body of general principles which would help to guide policy-makers and reformers by predicting, with some assurance, possible outcomes of the measures they propose' (p. 5). I feel that here he is straining after a predictive power that is not comfortable or productive within the structure of comparative study, and that general principles are, within comparative education as within history, not the characteristic products of the study, but rather a means towards the illumination of the particular. The figure or centre of attention is the individual: the general is the background which serves to throw the individual into clear relief ... It deals in insight rather than law as a basis for understanding ... (Stenhouse, 1979, p. 5)

In calling for a 'descriptive' rather than an 'explanatory' comparative education, Stenhouse (1962) cites Kneller's call for 'the study of the interaction taking place between education and its host society, not simply on a national, but on an international level, for the purpose of understanding strengths and weaknesses and seeking solutions to educational problems locally and universally' (p. ).

Writing more than 20 years ago, Stenhouse was articulating his belief about the purpose of comparative education, a belief shared by many comparativists at that time. It is a belief centred on the importance of studying educational practices and perspectives within their

cultural context made up of physical, social, economic, political and temporal specificities. Stenhouse's argument has recently been powerfully restated by Watson:

... instead of anguishing over the value and justification for comparative education we need to re-find its roots in historical and cultural analysis, and we need to stress its ability to critique policy, drawing from the experience of different societies, and its ability to explain and identify themes and trends across the globe. Above all the work undertaken should have purposeful reformist and practical goals and should be used to inform and advise governments. (Watson, 1998, p. 28)

Thus, alongside the rapid and powerful rise of major international quantitative studies in recent years has been a steady growth in more qualitative approaches. Writing in this journal in 1984, Crossley & Vulliamy (1984) use Stenhouse's legacy to make a strong call for the use of case-study research methods in comparative education. Their subsequent book (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997), provides a range of international examples of the way in which detailed qualitative case-studies can provide important comparative insights. Similarly in-depth comparisons of French and English education that my colleagues and I have been conducting over many years (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1993; Broadfoot *et al.*, 2000) have used detailed qualitative data, typically complemented by more quantitative data, to reveal important insights about the source, the scale and the educational significance of national cultural variations. The overall goal of these studies was to document the differences between the education systems of two countries whose common geographical location within Europe and historical interconnectedness would suggest many similarities.

Our studies of teachers, pupils and of the operation of the system as a whole have confounded these expectations. They have revealed deeply-rooted differences in national educational priorities, in epistemologies, in institutional traditions and in professional values. They provide overwhelming evidence of the importance of culture in shaping the organisation and processes of education within any one education system. Our most recent work in both primary and secondary schools has revealed just how deeply embedded these culturally-derived expectations are in the students themselves, and how they influence the students' responses to particular interventions on the part of the teacher. Perhaps even more significantly, these studies have revealed how such cultural influences are manifest in the nature of learning itself, in the different strengths and weaknesses, attitudes and skills that pupils in the two countries demonstrate. Recent work by Elliott *et al.* (1999) which compares and seeks to explain the very different educational experiences of pupils in the UK, Russia and the USA in terms of the unique 'pedagogic nexus' of each country, also makes this point very powerfully.

These more qualitative comparative studies, which recognise the significance of culture as a crucial influence in the creation of particular settings for learning, have in recent years begun to add significantly to our collective capacity to engage fruitfully with the process both of diagnosing the cause of some identified weaknesses in particular education systems and of searching for remedies. If the growing influence of quantitatively-oriented international studies of achievement has played its part in heightening our collective awareness of what is achievable, qualitative studies are contributing in a unique way to the collective understanding of the interrelatedness of the various factors concerned and hence, of the dangers of the kind of crude 'policy-borrowing' that Phillips refers to in his contribution to this issue.

But if pressure has been building up within the field of comparative education to recognise the significance of the cultural flesh on the skeleton of laws and policies, systems and resources, which formally define educational provision, this trend has yet to challenge the established parameters of the field. It has yet to challenge the discourse that defines



educational issues in terms of a delivery model of education in which countless thousands of children and young people throughout the world are more or less successfully processed through centrally-determined curriculum packages, and taught to compete with each other in the business of regurgitating their knowledge in specific ways. As such, these two traditions of comparative education and the tensions they evoke, must be regarded as essentially debates within the existing paradigm. What is needed now, arguably, is a 'third way' which uses more post-modernist conceptual tools to define the mode, purpose and context of what I have referred to elsewhere as 'neo-comparative' education; a new comparative 'learnology' which focuses on individuals and their access to learning, rather than systems and problems of provision; an approach to comparative education which is in tune with the more general efforts to reconceptualise social science to reflect the realities of life in the 21st century.

### **Prospect**

In the preceding sections of this article, I have referred at some length to the way in which the essentially arbitrary institutional and conceptual apparatus of modern Western education systems has embedded itself on a global basis to the point where alternative approaches and forms of provision have become almost unthinkable. I have suggested that there will be a significant price to pay if, as we approach the 21st century, we are not able to recognise this situation and the need for substantial changes in the content, organisation and evaluation of education in response to profound changes in the nature of contemporary society.

In the second part of the first section of this article I briefly delineated the unique potential of comparative education for making the familiar strange in the same way as anthropologists did in a previous era. I suggested that the significantly increased profile of comparative studies as a whole in recent years that the advent of globalisation and particularly, global competition has fuelled, has helped to focus policy-makers' attention, as well as that of scholars, on what can be learned from the educational activities of other countries and other societies.

Finally, I highlighted some of the newest and, in my view, most exciting theoretical and methodological developments in comparative education which build on that strand of comparative education which has always taken context as its starting point. These studies explore in more explicitly socio-cultural terms the interaction of various cultural factors to produce the unique composite that is a particular educational setting whether this is at classroom, institution or national system level.

Important as these developments are, however, I have suggested that they remain nevertheless retrospective. In particular, they accept the nature of educational delivery—the apparatus of teaching and learning—as a given. They are conceived within a conventional framework of schools and teachers, curricula, text-books and examinations. As such they are at best conservative, at worst dangerous, in perpetuating concepts and assumptions that should have no place in the educational discourse of the 21st century. Although this is a failing that is far from unique to comparative studies of education, the sin is nevertheless correspondingly greater since it is the comparative perspective that, as I argued above, has an almost unique capacity 'to make the familiar strange'.

Thus in this second, 'prospective' part of this article, my intention is to set out a new vision for the mode, purpose and context of comparative education studies which reflects the changing educational challenge of an increasingly post-modern era. This project requires, firstly, a critique of the limitations of modernist-conceived arrangements for education both in their own terms, that is their capacity to fulfil existing educational aspirations and, more fundamentally, in terms of the emerging new educational aspirations of the 21st century.

Secondly, it requires an effort to reconceptualise the defining elements of an alternative educational paradigm and the implications of this for the future role of comparative studies.

Modern Western education has been successful. Of this there can be little doubt. It has provided for huge strides towards the attainment of world-wide literacy. For many, it has provided the route towards a modern sector job and economic security. It has contributed to the overall quality of life of both individuals and communities and it has militated against the worst excesses of nepotism and corruption, in the allocation of life-chances. Successful as these developments have been as a delivery system for education, they also have significant limitations, limitations that are becoming increasingly important as the changing world makes new demands on individuals and societies.

Firstly, there remains the apparently intractable problem of providing 'education for all' For example, as Ordonez (1996) argues, in the 49 least developed countries of the world, for example, 50% of children are not in school; 50% of those who are do not finish the first four years of schooling; 60–80% of these have no place to sit or write and 90% learn in a strange language.

There are very many countries where the provision of formal education cannot keep pace with the rising birth rate and others where, even if this were possible, the economy could not usefully absorb the products. The intractable problems associated with trying to provide Western-style formal schooling as a right for every child in the world are the daily concern of many governments and international agencies.

These delivery problems are sufficient in themselves to justify Lindsay & Parrott's (1998) call to 'rethink the delivery of education in today's societies' (p. 346); to question whether there are other ways of providing the world's burgeoning population with the basic education that has collectively been agreed to be their right (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 1990). But the chapter of concerns does not stop with absolute issues of delivery. It also includes the intractable problems of relativities in terms of access and the part that contemporary schooling continues to play in perpetuating, rather than reducing, social inequality (Halsey *et al.*, 1997). Last, but not least, are issues surrounding the quality of learning itself. Are students leaving the education system with the kinds of knowledge, skills, learning dispositions and attitudes that they and society need? If not, we need to consider the extent to which there are inherent limitations in the nature of contemporary educational provision.

An early critic of the outcomes of conventional models of schooling was Sir Richard Livingstone. In 1941, he wrote:

The test of a successful education is not the amount of knowledge that a pupil takes away from a school but his appetite to know and his capacity to learn. If the school sends out children with the *desire* for knowledge and some idea of how to acquire and use it, it will have done its work. Too many leave school with the appetite killed and the mind loaded with undigested lumps of information. The good schoolmaster (sic) is known by the number of valuable subjects that he *declines* to teach. (cited in Abbott, 1999; my emphasis)

Sadly, it is much more common for students to emerge from the education system with this appetite at best jaded. Commenting on the typical contemporary school curriculum, (Stenhouse, 1967, p. 1) refers to the domination of academic subjects that exist external to the individual. Few pupils or even university students, he suggests, have the capacity to master them sufficiently for them to become their own and hence the source of creative thought. Moreover, the world-wide domination of examinations and the key importance in career terms of the qualifications to which they lead, means there is enormous pressure for pupils to pass them even if they do not master the subject in any worthwhile sense. He suggests that

the curriculum tends to be reduced from a living system of interacting ideas to a catalogue of facts to be acquired and knowledge to be gained.

These observations have been validated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 171). In his international study of the psychology of 'optimal experience' he describes a situation in which individuals are willing to pursue an activity for its own sake with little concern for what they will get out of it even when it is difficult or dangerous. When engaged in this way, individuals lose their self-consciousness, even forgetting to feel hungry or vulnerable to other sorts of distractions, so intense is the gratification derived from the experience of 'flow'. However, boredom and anxiety are both profoundly inimical to the creation of such a state. Yet, significantly, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found these two states to be the predominant experience of high school students internationally. Moreover, in those cultures with the highest levels of external distractions and stimuli, individuals were the most likely to experience boredom and frustration, rather than 'flow' in their daily lives. In short, education seemed not to be providing the intrinsic satisfaction of 'flow' experiences during the course of learning nor leading to an adult life where such experiences were common.

Elsewhere, (Broadfoot, 1998) I have argued that there is a profound contradiction between the type of learners that the logic of lifelong learning implies and the *de facto* priorities of our existing educational institutions. That where there is an emphasis on 'performativity', to use Lyotard's (1984) term, this is incompatible with more 'emancipatory' ideals. Students who are dominated by concerns about grades and marks; teachers who are preoccupied with measuring up to externally-derived criteria of quality; institutions whose very existence may depend on the configuration of their performance indicators, and systems whose quality is measured by quantifiable results, are the educational manifestations of 'The Assessment Society'. The preoccupation with 'trading for grades' that characterises so much of what now passes for education, is arguably a defining manifestation of 'late modernity', of a time when the social creations of modernity are out of step with society's changing needs. Thus the rationalist impulse that led to the creation of more 'meritocratic' assessment mechanisms for accountability and selection in the 19th century are arguably now being stretched in their scope to a point where their negative effects outweigh the original benefits.

There is now a very considerable body of international research evidence that testifies to the failure of contemporary schooling to engage the hearts, as well as the minds, of students because of the failure to recognise the key role that perceived relevance and emotion play in learning. Typically, it seems, students become extrinsically motivated by the promise of grades or passes in key examinations and learn not to seek for intrinsic motivation. The result is that when the particular goal is removed, the activity is discontinued as quickly as possible, a situation that is profoundly inhibitory to the inculcation of the attitudes needed to support lifelong learning (Broadfoot, 1996).

It is necessary to question how this situation has arisen historically if the blind alleys of the past are to be exchanged for forms of educational provision that are in tune with the needs of the twenty-first century. Abbott (1999) suggests that it is because we believed in a number of key assumptions which included the notions that potential such as 'intelligence' or creativity was largely innate, that as children became older they needed more formal instruction; that learning was dependent on direct instruction and extrinsic rewards and was logical, objective and linear; that real learning could only be accomplished in formal settings and was measurable and was dependent on class time and the technology of paper, pencil and textbooks.

More particularly, I suggest, a major cause of the current situation is the very success of the modernist education project in its own terms. During the last century the hunger for educational qualifications as the passport to desired occupations infected the whole world. In

today's global society, the value of education has come to be reckoned by students, families, and policy-makers alike in largely instrumental terms, as the source of the coveted passport to occupational success. Students in Asia and the developing world are still prepared to invest enormous amounts of time and effort in their pursuit of success in key examinations. Their parents are prepared to invest a considerable portion of the family income, that often they cannot spare, in after-school tutorial classes in order to squeeze the last ounce of educational capital into their children (Westbury, 1992; Bray, 1999; Schumer, 1999, p. 59).

But, as the connection between educational qualifications, jobs and future affluence is eroded by changes in the economy in countries like Hong Kong and Japan and, for rather different reasons, in Russia or Nigeria, the shallow foundations of an educational system which is driven by extrinsic motivation are becoming increasingly apparent. As countries around the world compete in their desperate search for ways of raising educational standards that will enable them to compete more effectively in the global economy, they are increasingly coming face to face with the harsh reality that:

No curricular overhaul, no instructional innovation, no change in school organization, no toughening of standards, no rethinking of teacher training or compensation will succeed if students do not come to school interested in, and committed to, learning. (Steinberg, 1996, p. 194)

The steadily increasing concern to encourage learning 'beyond the box' of formal institutional provision has not, alas, been accompanied by an awareness that educational priorities inside the box also need addressing. There remains a fundamental tension between the implications of the research on learning and the defining features of contemporary educational institutions (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Moreover, the contemporary international concern with raising standards threatens to reinforce the concern with quantifying *how much* learning has taken place. As a consequence, questions about the nature of that learning, its quality and relevance and perhaps above all, the impact of the whole institutional experience of education on the individual student, are not being asked at a time when they have never been more pressing. Despite the increasingly powerful messages from neuroscience about how the brain works, and the centrality of the whole person—feelings and dispositions as well as intellect—to the business of learning, these messages have yet to impact significantly on either educational policy-making or practice.

Thus, whether the concern is to prepare individuals for the challenges and opportunities of lifelong learning or to support the development of communities in an increasingly anomic and fragmented world (Castells, 1998; Giddens, 1999), there is clear evidence that contemporary forms of educational provision are falling far short of these goals.

This rather lengthy discussion of the nature of contemporary formal educational provision may not at first sight seem directly relevant to the theme of this article which is specifically concerned with the past and the future of comparative education as a field of study. However, it provides the necessary underpinning for the analysis that follows concerning the need for a radical, neo-comparative education which can play a key role in challenging taken for granted notions of Western educational provision; that delineates the rationale for comparative studies in the future in terms of learning, rather than of education and hence in the reconceptualisation of the educational project as a whole for the 21st century.

Comparative education has always been explicitly or implicitly reformative. The reason for undertaking comparative education studies has not typically been simply that of scholarly interest, although there is a place for this. Rather, as with most other branches of educational research, the goal has been to find 'what works' and to use such insights to inform educational policy-making and educational practice. It is a scholarship that, by and large, has

been 'intentionally reformatory' as Nicholas Hans has famously put it. Whilst few would want to quarrel with this broad aspiration as a prospective goal, in practice its pursuit rests on a judgement on what constitutes reform or improvement. In order to map out a journey, it is necessary to have a clear view of the destination. The choice of an appropriate mode, purpose and context for future comparative studies thus requires a fundamental re-examination of the goals of education itself.

Earlier, I suggested that the pervasiveness of contemporary models of educational provision were the more or less deliberate result of the social, political and economic movements of the late 19th and 20th centuries. So pervasive have they become however, that we now largely lack any obvious external points of reference to prompt reflection and critique. Despite continuing cultural variations both within and between societies, pan-global cultural artefacts increasingly impose themselves to limit the scope of such variations. To the extent that cultures and systems evaluate themselves in relation to the same global criteria, they are implicitly embracing the same discourse about means and ends. It is, as Csikszentmihaly (1990) suggests:

Cultures prescribe norms, evolve goals, build beliefs that help us tackle the challenges of existence. In so doing they must rule out many alternative goals and beliefs, and thereby limit possibilities; but this channelling of attention to a limited set of goals and means is what allows effortless action within self-created boundaries. (p. 81)

Globally, we now find ourselves collectively constrained by a particular educational discourse that defines:

... a tacit set of rules that regulate linguistic practices such as what can and cannot be said, who can speak with the blessing of authority and who must listen, and whose educational perspectives are scientific and valid and whose are unlearned and unimportant- in short, it defines what is thinkable. (Kincheloe *et al.*, 1996, p. 30)

In operating within the established discourse of means and ends in education, comparative education research has arguably failed to do what it is peculiarly well placed to do, namely to challenge the desirability of more and more classrooms, more and more teachers, more and more performance indicators. It has so far largely failed to use its increasingly explicit interest in culture to work towards a greater balance in seeking to understand the relationship between structure and agency, self and context; to recognise the way in which power is incorporated within existing educational discourses such that alternatives become almost literally unthinkable.

This may be because the way in which culture itself is defined fails to give sufficient attention to subjectivities. It is necessary to reject a view of culture as the defined and objectified morals, beliefs, values, skills and knowledge of a whole society. Throughout most of the era of mass educational provision, education has been conceived largely in terms of the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. Recently, however, such universalistic notions of culture and of the role of education have begun to be challenged by socio-cultural approaches to the study of education which emphasise the essential relativism of the educational project. Building on the work of Vygotsky, Bruner and others, such perspectives emphasise the key role of social interaction in learning and of the individual's need, therefore, to acquire the 'cultural tools', especially language, to be able to engage effectively in such collaboration, whether they are babies at home, children in school or adults in the work-place.

... culture consists of a complex of shared understandings which serve as a medium through which individual human minds interact in communication with one

another. It enables us to recognise as familiar the way other people think and feel and thus to share their feelings. It also enables us to predict and thus to anticipate the actions of others so that we can co-operate with them. ... This learning and sharing takes place as we cooperate and communicate in groups, and it depends heavily on language, with which culture is intimately related ... (p. 16) [for] education is but the drama of culture set upon a small stage (Stenhouse, 1967 p. 37).

Already, the concept of the 'pedagogic' nexus has underlined the need to see learning as the product of a complex mixture of cultural factors of which the educational system and the ebb and flow of policy within it, is but a relatively small part. It has revealed the crucial part played by cultural factors in encouraging or inhibiting motivation and hence, learning. It has highlighted the many different kinds of learning that can be produced ranging from the ability to reproduce the 'catechism' of conventional wisdom at one extreme to the willingness to work with and support others in the pursuit of solutions to problems in which there are many acceptable answers at the other. By the same token, some cultural settings have produced educational environments in which the key role of 'affect' is recognised, in adult education for example as Peter Jarvis' contribution to this issue makes clear.

Thus, we are not dealing here simply with national culture, Japanese or American or British; with what Isaac Kandel, one of the great pioneers of comparative studies called the 'cultural personality of nations' (cited by Stenhouse, 1962). We must also take into account the well-documented effects of other sub-culturally-derived, individual identities such as class, gender, age and ethnicity as well as those that derive from particular schools and even classrooms and teaching groups.

Schriewer (2000) has argued that education should be conceived as part of a socio-cultural project of intentionality; that societies and groups clarify in the mirror of the other their own intentions for future development. He argues that this process of self-referencing and externalisation in relation to the way in which a given society perceives its own values and context, underpins the socio-cultural process of generating educational ideologies. Comparative education can provide the means of externalisation to facilitate such culturally-framed debates, the system-internal interpretative acts. However, the powerful contemporary overlay of international cultural definitions which are expressed in the use of generalised concepts and indicators now inhibit the articulation of such implicit variety and hence, the possibility of some challenge to the status quo.

To overcome this tendency we need, I suggest, a much more explicit recognition of education as a cultural, rather than a scientific, project. This in turn implies that the creation of a radical, neo-comparative education will require a much more explicit social-science perspective. Such an essentially critical engagement would challenge the legitimacy of established discourses in terms of their effects; it would provide for a new reading of the global and new conceptualisations such as Cowen's 'transitologies', about which he writes in this issue. It would recognise the need for a new reading of 'the other' in terms of different culturally-derived world views. Above all, it would underpin a reconceptualisation of what pedagogy is and how it might be improved in the light of what we know about learning and its relationship to culture.

It has been the core argument of this article that there is a need for a significant change of emphasis within comparative studies so that in future, the emphasis is much more on studying the process of learning itself rather than, as at present, on the organisation and provision of education. I have argued that comparative studies framed in this way have a unique potential to highlight the cultural-relativities of learning and hence, to make an

important contribution to the urgently-needed reconceptualisation of the educational project as a whole if it is to meet the changing needs of the 21st century.

Writing in 1977 in the previous special issue of this journal devoted to 'the state of the art', I suggested that comparative education is not a discipline but a context (Broadfoot, 1977); that it needs to be conceptualised as part of a more generally conceived interpretative social science perspective. In this journal we have explicitly pursued such a policy in recent years. On the cover of the journal we describe how 'over 36 years *Comparative Education's* editorial policy and presentation have evolved to match world developments and the changing concerns of those active in education or involved in its finance, management and wider implications ...'

Recent special issues on educational policy, for example, and adult and lifelong learning have incorporated the kind of critical, theoretically informed social-science perspective which I have argued for in this article. We have begun to challenge the established orthodoxy of mode, purpose and context. In seeking articles that have a novel methodological approach, including, for example, more pictorial forms of representation or narratives, we hope to initiate a debate about appropriate forms of scholarship. In practising a concern with 'ecological sensitivity' we hope to problematise 'context' well beyond the point of description, important as this is, so as to recognise research as itself a social and cultural process. Last but not least, our purpose is emancipatory; to encourage the rigorous application of scholarship to challenge the established boundaries of the field in order to provoke new questions and concerns as well as, eventually, new insights. In all these aspirations, we will take the pervasive influence of culture as a starting point. We start from the recognition that the particular contribution of comparative education is to highlight the lessons to be learned from a systematic and scholarly engagement with the specificities of cultural norms and values, language and tools. These can and should form the creative tensions that provide the means to challenge the dominance of prevailing discourses about what is desirable and how it may best be achieved.

Thus part of a radical, neo-comparative education will be to sustain the existing project of documenting salient cultural features in a given context; of comparing cultures in order to generate insights about variables whilst recognising the integrity of the cultural whole. It will thus involve a deliberately interdisciplinary, or rather meta-disciplinary, approach in which a range of social-science specialisms—sociology, politics, economics, geography, cultural studies, anthropology, history—combine to illuminate the complex and interrelated realities of our changing world. As the boundaries between education itself and other activities in life themselves breakdown, and the worlds of work and home, leisure and study become inextricably related, the erosion of modernist conceptions of education as a defined and organised form of activity need to be matched by similar evolutions in our tools of study. Increasingly we shall need to move towards a 'comparative learnology' with the focus on the individual's engagement with myriad different forms of learning opportunity.

This further implies a willingness to problematise the discourse of comparative education. Even the most familiar terms, e.g. 'comparative', 'international', 'system' 'policy', embody a range of taken for granted assumptions about the appropriate focus and subject matter of such studies. If formal education provision is to become a relatively small part of the range of learning opportunities, there can be no primacy of a particular methodological approach. It is right that comparative education should continue to profit from an appropriate blending of the rich variety of available methodologies which can range from complex statistical analyses based on huge quantitative data-bases at one extreme, through to intensive ethnographic studies on the other. The need, rather, is to free ourselves from the collective conceptual blinkers which the existing apparatus of educational assumptions represents. At

the heart of such a project for comparativists, I suggest, must be the recognition of the central role of culture in facilitating and shaping the process of learning and thus, of the need to study the part played by the perceptions and feelings of the individual learner.

Perhaps most fundamental of all is the need to become more explicitly aware that there is an implicit value position in any conceptualisation of a problem and in the choice of method to study it, as well as in the conclusions reached. Comparative educationists thus need themselves to be willing to engage in fundamental debates about values; about the nature 'of the good life' and about the role of education and learning in relation to this in a world where, increasingly, nothing can be taken for granted. If science is a useful tool it can also be a significant handicap to vision. Looked at retrospectively, we have allowed the flaws in our modernist concepts of education to go unremarked for too long whilst working within the prevailing 'normal science' paradigm. The prospect of a new millennium provides a welcome challenge to educationists to throw off these conceptual constraints in the search for a new vision appropriate to the challenges of a second industrial revolution. It is the unique privilege of comparativists to straddle cultures and countries, perspectives and topics, theories and disciplines. Thus we have a particular responsibility to carry the debate beyond the discussion of means alone. And towards ends.

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