

# Shifting Perspectives on Comparative Research: a view from the USA

JOHN N. HAWKINS & VAL D. RUST

**ABSTRACT** *The evolution of scholarship in comparative education in the USA has reached a point where several observations are possible. While there is variation in methodology and theory, three principal perspectives tend to be represented in most contemporary articles published in the top journals in the field. These might be referred to as being area studies based, social science disciplinary based, or development/planning studies based. In this article we briefly trace the evolution of these perspectives, identify some stress points in the field, and look ahead to whether or not the field is facing competition among these perspectives or convergence. We suggest that the field of comparative education, not being bound by one or another of these perspectives, can play a significant role in the reconstruction of learning.*

## Introduction

Theory and methodology are fundamental to the cognitive structure of any field of study (Picou *et al.*, 1981). Their nature and role have generated a great deal of debate, both within the field of comparative education specifically and within the academic community more generally. When perusing the pages of *Comparative Education* and *Comparative Education Review*, as well as other journals in the field, it becomes evident that the authors of those pages represent a considerable variety of intellectual and methodological traditions. While the emphasis on one or the other perspective has changed over time, three principal perspectives tend to be represented in most contemporary articles published in the leading international journals in the field. For purposes of simplicity we might refer to these perspectives as being area studies based, social science disciplinary based, or development/planning studies based (with considerable overlap in some cases). These perspectives are also reflected in the academy in the broad area of international studies, where they have in recent years been in considerable conflict with each other for legitimacy, power and funding (Hawkins *et al.*, 1998).

Area studies approaches to international studies have a long tradition in Western scholarship and in the USA has been best represented by post-World War II legislation for area and language studies programmes and centres (National Defense Education Act Title VI). In a general way, area studies approaches can be defined as a perspective that utilises a holistic analysis of a specific place and culture to build understanding and knowledge. These approaches typically combine disciplinary training with language and area knowledge. Scholars from this tradition typically will have language, area, extensive field experience, and either social science or humanities backgrounds (Bennett, 1951).

Correspondence to: John N. Hawkins, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California Los Angeles, Moore Hall, Box 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095–1521, USA. E-mail: hawkins@gseis.ucla.edu

Scholars identifying with a social science disciplinary base tend to give allegiance to their discipline and to the pursuit of knowledge that is not contextualised. That is, they seek to explain and predict phenomena in terms of context-independent elements, which have been abstracted and dislodged from the everyday world. For disciplinary studies, the national setting or region is not the primary unit of analysis, but it serves as an appropriate setting where problems and issues, and theory and methods can be examined. Scholars in this tradition often do not have extensive language and cultural preparation, and extensive field experience in a particular setting is rare (Hawkins *et al.*, 1998).

Development studies can be seen as a complex mixture of area studies and discipline studies. A subset of development studies is educational planning, which focuses on identifying optimal national investments in education as a means of stimulating and even optimising economic expansion. Development/planning scholars often use a transdisciplinary approach and comparative applications of the social sciences. However, they also utilise a holistic approach, common to area studies, to understand social, economic, and political change. As is the case with the social science disciplines, practitioners of development studies often do not focus on a region or area and most do not have fluent language skills or extensive field experience in a particular setting.

In the two decades following World War II, all three of these perspectives had become represented in American comparative education. By the 1960s the field had clearly identified itself with the social sciences. In the process, the concept of theory underwent a dramatic shift. In the social sciences, theory referred to the lens through which the social scientists viewed the subject of study, rather than the object of research itself. Specialists pointing towards making comparative education a more 'scientific' enterprise complained that comparative education had been linked too closely with 'comparative philosophy of foreign education', and they wished to shift it towards an 'empirical approach of the social sciences' (Noah & Eckstein, 1969).

Prior to the 1970s, area studies perspectives had also thrived in comparative education research, and centres and programmes in universities were well supported. As the Cold War wound down, so did support for these programmes and that combined with new hiring practices for educational research saw the decline of political and financial support for these programmes. The emphasis began to shift towards problem areas, and discipline-focused research began to reassert itself. Consequently, in recent years support for language and cultural studies and scholars with heavy area knowledge have not been at the forefront. Thus, one of the principal contradictions is that just at a time when global relations are being redefined, when new nations are being formed, when ethnic tensions are at an all time high, when deep knowledge of the contexts in which change is occurring would shed great light on the change process, the intellectual ground has shifted away from the viability of the area studies model.

The area studies model had assumed that with linguistic competence came a form of ethnographic transparency that allowed the area specialists to legitimise their work and the representative claims that came with it. Linguistic competence was not enough, however, for area studies. It needed to be conjoined with grounding in the social sciences, and it was this conjunction that completed the area scholar's training and research.

It was also during the 1960s that the development/planning perspective became a visible part of the field. This was particularly through the establishment of a centre for the study of development education at Stanford University. The University of Chicago had already begun efforts towards development activities, through the work of scholars such as C. Arnold Anderson, Philip Foster and Mary Jean Bowman. The planning perspective also grew tremendously as a field as a result of its use in developing nations, and largely with the

support of international and national agencies such as UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Institute for International Education. In the case of the World Bank, planning became a prerequisite for the receipt of assistance (Farrell, 1997).

We would like to explore some stress points in comparative education that arise because of the way these differing perspectives relate to each other and, by doing so, contribute to the international debate stimulated by the two special issues of *Comparative Education* by speculating on future directions for comparative research.

### **Stress Points in the Field**

There has always been some tension between scholars who give great allegiance to a particular social science field in contrast to scholars who tend to utilise a more holistic analysis of problems and issues. Social science scholars argue that their orientation offers the surest means of progress in understanding social organisation. Indeed, their theoretical and methodological approaches entertain a higher status than do those dealing with more transdisciplinary approaches. This tension, however, appears to have become somewhat diminished in the USA in recent years. Survey work at UCLA about the theoretical orientations of comparative educators suggests that the disciplines primarily represented are sociology, political science, history, and economics [1]. Clearly, the social sciences dominate comparative education in our journals. Psychology is barely represented in the field, and even professional education outside the social science disciplines is rare. Today, there are relatively few American scholars in comparative education who ground their work in a single discipline. Rather, they tend to be multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary, in that they rely on two, three and even four disciplines to guide their research orientation.

In terms of theoretical orientation, the field has undergone substantial change. In fact, the change is so significant, we might refer to it as a paradigmatic shift in orientation. Paradigms are prior to and foundational to research rules and theories of a given research community. They are philosophical frames out of which research rules and theories grow (Masterman, 1970). Whereas the theoretical orientation of the field was dominated at one time by a cluster of closely related theoretical orientations, including structural functionalism, modernisation, and human capital theories, this paradigmatic orientation has been challenged by an array of theoretical orientations that might be characterised as cautious if not hostile towards positivism, more humanistic in its concerns, and more aggressive in its demands for radical social change.

While the more traditional theoretical orientations continue to dominate the pages of comparative education journals, newer theoretical orientations are also successfully challenging these. These include critical theory, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and various kinds of feminist theories. Among these orientations, critical theory is far and away the most pervasive in the field today [2]. Despite many shared themes, the work of those identifying with critical theory has never represented a single unified view, and collectively, members of the school continually shifted the terms of their analysis of modern society in response to the massive political and economic changes that have occurred.

The popularity of the newer theoretical orientations suggests that comparative education scholars are more cautious of the possibilities of positivism, even though many remain committed to the importance of theory and retain an allegiance to more science-driven research designs.

Yet another stress point in the field has been the growing array of methodological data collection options available to comparative educators. In the early years of the field, research methodologies of comparative education specialists were remarkably similar and gave the

field 'a measure of methodological unity', through their manner of collecting data and explaining national systems of education (Holmes, 1984). In the 1960s this unity began to crumble, and today scholars engage in large-scale surveys, literature reviews, historical studies, project evaluations, content analyses, interviews, questionnaires, and participation/observations (Rust *et al.*, 1999). And as new approaches to data collection emerge, the field is quick to add such methods to its repertoire. For example, focus groups were unknown only a few years ago, but it has now become a standard research practice in the field. Every research strategy found in the social sciences in general appears to be represented in the field of comparative education, with one exception. There is a striking lack of experimental studies. Those scholars in comparative education apparently recognise the power of naturalistic studies and the difficulty of conducting laboratory-like experiments in these settings.

This methodological diversity represents a major concern to the field. Methodology usually has a central role in the training of those coming into the field, and it also represents part of the glue that defines a field and provides a sense of being part of a professional community. If the research strategies become too fragmented and disparate, the field could begin to gyrate with such force that it may spin out of control, losing any sense of the identity and cohesiveness necessary for a field to grow and thrive. However, research diversity might become strength in that it indicates a break from the stifling orthodoxy, both theoretically and methodologically, that characterised the field in the 1950s and early 1960s. It may also represent a natural expansion of the field. For example, whereas the geographical focus of research in the field was oriented largely towards the developed world, it now deals with all regions of the world and all areas of human development. Such a widening of perspective requires a greater array of research methodologies in order to cope with various conditions and data sources.

Another stress point in the field is between those comparative educators who wish to chart a course of academic credibility and theory and those who wish to have a positive impact on education practice and performance. Even in the time when comparative education was struggling to define itself as a field based on the social sciences, scholars were conscious that their craft had both a more abstract, theoretical mission and one that was practical and policy oriented.

Edmund King (1958), for example, maintained that even though comparative education must become a social science enterprise, it must retain its role as a 'practical and reformative' (p. 349) field. George Bereday (1964), one of the early advocates of comparative education as a social science, forthrightly admitted that a primary purpose of comparative education is its 'practical application'. Harold Noah and Max Eckstein (1969) while advocating a science of comparative education, were nevertheless fully aware that the findings of their science ought to have utilitarian consequences. They exclaimed that the potential of the field lies in four spheres. First, it promises to extend the generality of social and educational propositions beyond the confines of a single society. Second, it has the potential to test propositions that can only be tested in the cross-national context. Third, it has the capacity to further cross-disciplinary activities. Fourth, and most importantly for our discussion, it has the potential to serve 'as an instrument for planners and policy makers' (Noah & Eckstein, 1969, p. 190). In other words, while comparative education has significant theoretical potential, it also has important instrumental potential.

The two most visible spheres in which this instrumental capacity emerged in the field of American comparative education were in regard to two major practical movements: development and planning. Even though these movements grew out of theoretical orientations, they were directly and deliberately interventionist and policy oriented.

In recent years, comparative educationists, regardless of perspective, have been challenged by scholars who question the validity of a paradigm taken from the life and social sciences that placed the field in a position of being dedicated to science and using models that are deterministic in nature. Models such as modernisation, world systems, globalisation, all have a sort of deterministic edge to them that places the scholar in the position of passive observer of events over which he/she has little control. Karl Popper (1962) has labelled this orientation as historicism, because it is based on the notion of carrying over the natural sciences into the social sciences. The field was captivated by this tendency. That is why recent trends have such significance, because they are shifting our attention away from this positivist orientation towards broader considerations of knowledge production. The new theoretical and methodological trends clearly signal a movement away from the general tendencies of our field. They are clearly anti-positivistic in nature, which is refreshing but at the same time challenging. Scholars such as Bent Flyvbjerg argue that the so-called social sciences must drop the fruitless efforts to emulate producing cumulative and predictive theory that is of no interest and consequence to others, and then take up problems that matter to the local, national, and global communities in which we live (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Apologists for the more conventional paradigm in the field claim this new paradigm ought to be rejected, because it places the very foundations of comparative studies in jeopardy. It may even obliterate any notion of comparable categories.

The question must be raised as to the relative strength of such new challenges to the field. In recent surveys of those who have published in comparative education journals, we found that those claiming to rely on anti-positivistic orientations have grown significantly from the 1980s through the 1990s to the extent that they now present a substantial challenge.

In practice, the three perspectives outlined above overlap both intellectually and institutionally, but there remains both competition and convergence. This suggests that a dynamic field such as comparative education can play a significant role in reconstructing learning. Not being bounded by rigid categories such as those we have discussed, the work that is published in our various journals can play an important role in redefining the best of the comparative perspective. We are beginning to see examples of scholarship that link our understanding of history, language, and the social sciences while being situated in comparative frameworks. This is all to the good and augurs well for the future of our field. Thus, the perspectives we have outlined are not mutually exclusive and in fact complement each other. In the spirit of this special issue of *Comparative Education* it is clearly important for scholars in the field to seek ever more challenging ways to work together to shape a new terrain for comparative research in the future.

#### NOTES

- [1] For more information concerning this work, contact Val D. Rust at rust@gseis.ucla.edu
- [2] More than a quarter of all authors publishing in major comparative education journals indicate that their work is related to critical theory.

#### REFERENCES

- BENNETT, W.V. (1951) *Area Studies in American Universities* (New York, Social Science Research Council).
- BEREDAY, G.Z.F. (1964) *Comparative Method in Education* (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston).
- FARRELL, J.P. (1997) A retrospective on educational planning in comparative education, *Comparative Education Review*, 41, pp. 277–313.
- FLYVBJERG, B. (2001) *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- HAWKINS, J.N., HARO, C.M., KAZANJIAN, M.A., MERKX, G.W. & WILEY, D. (1998) *International Education in the New Global Era* (Los Angeles, UCLA).

- HOLMES, B. (1984) Paradigm shifts in comparative education, *Comparative Education Review*, 28, pp. 584–604.
- KING, E. (1958) *Other Schools and Ours: a comparative study for today* (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston).
- MASTERMAN, M. (1970) The nature of a paradigm, in: I.L.A. MUSGRAVE (Ed.) *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, pp. 59–89 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- NOAH, H. & ECKSTEIN, M. (1969) *Toward a Science of Comparative Education* (London, Collier Macmillan).
- PICOU, R., WELLS, H. & STEVEN, J. (1981) *American Sociology: theoretical and methodological structure* (Washington, DC, University Press of America).
- POPPER, K. (1962) *The Open Society and its Enemies, Vol 2* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- RUST, V.D., SOUMARE, A., PESCADOR, O. & SHIBUYA, M. (1999) Research strategies in comparative education, *Comparative Education Review*, 41, pp. 86–109.