Postpositivist Theorizing and Research: Challenges and Opportunities for Comparative Education

PETER NINNES AND SONIA MEHTA

Naming the Multiple: Poststructuralism in Education edited by Michael Peters. Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1998. 269 pp. $22.95 (paper). ISBN 0-89789-549-5.

Foucault's Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education edited by Thomas S. Popkewitz and Marie Brennan. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998. 388 pp. $27.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8077-3676-7.

Educational Research Undone: The Postmodern Embrace by Ian Stronach and Maggie MacLure. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997. 193 pp. $29.95 (paper). ISBN 0-335-19433-8.

The three books reviewed in this essay present, in distinct forms, the intersections of educational philosophy and research with the postpositivist landscape as interpreted by the authors. Why should we, as comparative educators, be interested?

As educators we deal with the very human processes of learning, communicating, creating, and enabling knowledge; we simultaneously deal with the institutions that embody and encode those processes. As comparative educators, we encounter these processes and institutions on a global level. Whatever the reasons for which we study education within our own nations or beyond them, it is the whole world that remains our stage. Understanding the complexity of the view from such a platform, however, is the very key to what we think we can achieve. Situated as we are in several worlds, it seems detrimental for any one or two paradigms to dominate what and how we teach and how we conduct and legitimate research. Educational theory since the 1950s has been largely influenced by modernist, positivist, and functional theoretical approaches, and comparative education as a discipline has reflected this dominance. Postpositivist approaches have been debated across disciplines other than education and, with some exceptions,[1] largely to the exclusion of the participation of comparative education. As Val Rust points out, this has been to the disadvantage of the field as an academically inquiring one.[2] The books reviewed here present a gateway through which to further develop the discussion of other ways of approaching our research and teaching as comparative educators.

---

[1] For a discussion of deconstruction in the social sciences, see Carlos A. Torres, "Democracy, Education and Multiculturalism: Dilemmas of Citizenship in a Global World," *Comparative Education Review* 42, no. 4 (1998): 441–43. For the relevance of postmodern approaches to education and the need to include multiple voices, see Vandra Masemann, "Ways of Knowing: Implications for Comparative Education," *Comparative Education Review* 34, no. 4 (1990): 465–73. More complete discussion of postmodernity in comparative education can be found in Val D. Rust, "Postmodernism and Its Comparative Education Implications," *Comparative Education Review* 35, no. 4 (1991): 610–26; Robert Cowen, "Last Past the Post: Comparative Education, Modernity and Perhaps Postmodernity," *Comparative Education* 32, no. 2 (1996): 151–70; Rolland G. Paulston and Martin Liebman, "An Invitation to Postmodern Social Cartography," *Comparative Education Review* 38, no. 2 (1994): 215–32, among others.

[2] See Rust, "Postmodernism and Its Comparative Education Implications."

The field of comparative education is particularly problematic in terms of its theory base and guiding principles because it is seen as the infant, or the dependent, of the metanarrative (arguably) that is education. Philip Altbach[3] and Erwin Epstein[4] have drawn out the status of the field: comparative education has always been faced with a crisis of identity. At points, depending on the shifting sands of departmental reform and restructuring, the field has been either marginalized outright, as a program, or has had to justify itself in the larger schemes of schools of education. In the early 1970s, the field was seen as eclectic, lacking in focus, and having to borrow from economics, sociology, anthropology, and other mainstream disciplines.[5] This was ultimately seen as its vulnerability and its isolation.[6]

The basic meanings, problematics, and body of literature that comprise comparative education are worthy areas of argument, especially since comparative education's canon has been traditionally fragmented; that is, the core theories and methodology of our field come from other disciplines, particularly the social sciences. In fact, comparative education has no definitive canon as such, save for the collection of what are taken as seminal texts in the field. Debates on the establishment of a canon for comparative education, what it should look like, or whether the field even has a relevant canon are contentious ones. As recently as the 1999 annual conference of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), there have been calls to establish the canon by rooting comparative education in rigorously empirical studies and arguments for defining the canon through the processes of description, development, culture, and generalization.[7] The notion of a canon seems problematic in relation to postpositivist ideas of process, where process must mean dynamism, flux and flow, change, and multiplicity of meaning reflecting the presence of several truths rather than the one. Postpositivist thinking about our canon, or the identity of comparative education, is important because it has the potential to release meaning rather than contain it.

Max Eckstein cautions that "we are bound by the metaphors we create" and that comparative education may well have adopted its metaphors rather than created them.[8] In borrowing the theory or method base of other disciplines, comparative education, as a field, stands in danger of also borrowing their metaphors. Thus, the field may not have given itself the space either for building its own sets of metaphors or meaning sets or for creating new ones by which to reflect, communicate, or symbolize the meanings and values relevant to its differentiated purpose in education. The ongoing problem of the identity of comparative education seems to be at least on two levels: the question of identifying the canon and the question of situating and teaching it within the programs of a university.

[3] Philip G. Altbach, "Trends in Comparative Education," *Comparative Education Review* 35, no. 3 (1991): 491–507.

[4] Erwin Epstein, "Comparative Education in North America: The Search for Other through the Escape from Self?" *Compare* 25 (1995): 5–16.

[5] See Altbach.

[6] John A. Laska, "The Future of Comparative Education: Three Basic Questions," *Comparative Education Review* 17, no. 3 (1973): 295–98.

[7] This issue was debated at the 1999 CIES conference in Toronto, Canada, particularly in the panel entitled "Comparative and International Education: A Stand Alone or an Integrated Program?"

[8] Max A. Eckstein, "The Comparative Mind: Metaphor in Comparative Education," *Comparative Education Review* 27, no. 3 (1983): 311–22.

These questions may perhaps be phrased in a slightly different way: In a world that is now an interrelated, interdependent, pluralistic one, who are we, as comparative educators, and what are we doing in it? Education in a world so postmodern in nature demands that we clean our lens, if not examine the basis of its appropriateness. What, then, is appropriate? Perhaps the most appropriate lens is that which affords us the richest, most eclectic vision imbued with possibilities and meaning, signifying not only the denseness of context and diversity but also questions, problems, and perhaps even solutions that speak from these very contexts.

In his 1991 presidential address to the Comparative and International Education Society, Rust suggested that by engaging with postmodernism we could "free up" the current understanding of comparative education from its somewhat limiting perception into other possible perceptions of it within the field and beyond it. Rust, among others, sees postmodern approaches as freedoms by which to bridge the gaps that ideological compartments have wrought and from which comparative education would greatly benefit, positioned as it is. Vandra Maseman, Rolland Paulston, and others have echoed this idea while asserting the need for a multiplicity of inclusion, for legitimizing, acknowledging, and interacting with the other, for disassembling and relocating (or allowing oneself to be relocated) in relative and relational, rather than rooted, power relationships.[9] In fact, they have echoed an imperative.

Like comparative education, postpositivism has its own demons, and in an ironic twist, they even seem to be similar. Like comparative education programs, postpositivist thinking has been marginalized by the greater purpose of education, be it capitalism, progress, or others in the grand scheme of modernization. One may venture so far as to say that postmodernism and comparative education share a tendency to be woolly, to have no defining core or identifiable center. And yet this very decenteredness, the fact that comparative education, in the face of modernization, could question the rootedness of power centers, could allow for the multiplicity of voices, the parallel pluralism of subjects, the affirmation of micronarratives, in fact, even our historical absorption with modernist paradigms together with a postmodern critique, may serve to significantly alter our course as comparative educators. It may, as a matter of course, render the field more intellectually discerning and contextually relevant.

In the process of reading these books and writing about them, our thinking revolved around two broad questions: How could these readings contribute and inform the ongoing debates in comparative education, and how might they be of intellectual and pragmatic use to the teacher, student, practitioner, or interested voyager of the field? We have weighed the usefulness of these readings against this broad set of needs and have found, by and large, that the three texts inform each other.

Naming the Multiple: Poststructuralism in Education, edited by Michael Peters, presents concise summaries of the contributions to philosophy of 10 key thinkers who

---

[9] See, e.g., Paulston and Liebman (n. 1 above); Rolland G. Paulston, "Comparative Education after Postmodernity" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society, Toronto, Canada, April 1999); Masemann (n. 1 above); and Rolland G. Paulston, "From Paradigm Wars to Disputations Community," *Comparative Education Review* 34, no. 3 (1990): 395–400.

were part of or heavily influenced by French post-structuralism. The book commences with an exploration by Peters of the multiple meanings of post-structuralism, the complex relationships between these meanings, and their antecedents in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Peters also canvasses their commonalities, especially their rejection of René Descartes's notion of the unified rational subject in favor of notions of the subject as dynamic, multilayered, and contingent, and their rejection of G. W. F. Hegel's dialectical negation of difference in favor of a position that affirms difference. There follows one chapter devoted to each of the 10 thinkers—Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray, Jean Baudrillard, and Chantal Mouffe—and an analysis of the application of their ideas to educational contexts. For readers unfamiliar with these thinkers, the chapters provide very useful summaries of each person's contribution to post-structuralism. For readers already familiar with particular thinkers, the book provides a convenient entrée to a wider range of ideas. In general, the chapters are relatively easy to read, and this is a strength of Peters's collection. Postpositivist writing in general is often perceived as difficult to access, but only the impossibly dense chapter on Derrida by Peter Trifonas reinforces this stereotype.

Perhaps the greatest disappointment with this collection is the superficial way in which most chapters deal with the educational applications of post-structuralist thinking. Most of the authors only deal with classroom contexts; few consider broader educational phenomena or issues such as educational systems, school/community relations, educational administration, education in colonial and post-colonial contexts, or curriculum issues. Yet post-structuralism provides a rich source of ideas about and approaches to important educational problems and issues, many of which are central to the concerns of comparative education. The best exposition of these problems and issues is found in Peters's introductory chapter (pp. 12–13). Peters argues that post-structuralism, among other things, provides a critique of liberal and Marxist perspectives; helps develop complex notions of subjectivities; overturns simplistic ideas about agency and autonomy; provides means for the examination of the complex and intertwined links between knowledge, discourse, and power in a range of educational fields, including classroom research and practice, pedagogy, policy development, and educational management and administration; employs the use of the concepts of "becoming" and "process" instead of "being" and "ontology" in comprehending educational phenomena; provides a means for critiquing and analyzing binary modes of thinking and the notion of difference; and reintroduces the concept of "desire" in educational analysis.

In chapter 7, A. T. Nguyen promotes Lyotard's idea of the use of imagination or imaginative knowledge in resolving social problems. In this vein, we here propose or imagine a series of questions about comparative education teaching and research and our related identities arising from some of the post-structuralist perspectives discussed in this volume.

Following Lacan, to what extent does the comparativist enterprise rest on a desire to fill a lack, that is, a desire to know the other? If we acknowledge this motivation as central, then to what extent, following Emmanuel Levinas (upon whose work Irigaray draws extensively), does our desire to know the other represent an unethical reduction of the other to an object of our consciousness? How can we undertake

educational research that acknowledges the difficulty or even impossibility of presuming to be able to know the other and instead adopts a position of ethical respect and responsibility for the other? Following Irigaray, such a position would "welcome the new" (p. 206) and hence view teaching, learning, and research not in universalistic terms or in terms of a particular kind of rationality nor in terms of particular metanarratives such as freedom, democracy, individuality, or oppression, but would welcome and incorporate differences in perspectives and subjectivities whether they are based on gender or some other parameter.

Following Deleuze, we might ask what useful perspectives arise from an analysis of educational contexts that (a) abandon the notion of fixed, identifiable, or dichotomous meanings, identities, characteristics, boundaries, signs, and signifiers, and instead views all of these as dynamic, in a state of flux, and permeable; (b) recognize the intimate linking, rather than distinct separation, of actors and acts, causes and effects; (c) view both the language of the researcher and the researched as neither neutral nor objective; and (d) instead of focusing exclusively on patterns, commonalities, continuities, generalities, and rationalities, emphasize connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, rupture, states of flow, fluidity, incompleteness, inconclusiveness, affect, and desire.

Whereas *Naming the Multiple* leaves the reader yearning for more specific applications to educational contexts, *Foucault's Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education,* edited by Thomas S. Popkewitz and Marie Brennan, has the opposite effect. This collection presents a range of intriguing studies using Foucault's philosophies as one of their fundamental theoretical bases. It is here that scholars of comparative education can really begin to grasp the profound value of these kinds of analyses for the field. The 14 chapters are grouped into five parts. In the first part, the editors explore the possibilities of Foucault's ideas for developing a "social epistemology of school practices" (p. 3), although it is curious why the authors chose to focus narrowly on school practices as opposed to, say, educational practices, a term that would be more apt for this collection. The second part presents six chapters that in their own way explore the means by which ideas about schooling, education, teaching, and childhood have been historically constructed and rationalized in a range of countries, including Finland, Sweden, and the United States. The three chapters in the third part focus on issues of power, discipline, and governmentality, while the fourth part explores the ways in which Foucaultian analyses can be used to examine the opening and closing of pedagogical spaces. The three chapters in the final part explore the political implications and utility of Foucault's ideas in the educational realm and in terms of the research ethics of intellectuals.

In studying the educational system of a country, there are many approaches possible and many levels (individual teachers, students, and administrators; classrooms; schools; regions; systems) at which the analysis could proceed. We could draw from each chapter of Peters's book much of relevance to one or more of the diverse dimensions of comparative education. So, too, in *Foucault's Challenge.* Each of its parts, in fact, can be taken into broader dimensions and deeper levels of analysis for comparative education. For the sake of parsimony, and in order, perhaps, to whet the reader's appetite, we focus here on one chapter in particular. In the third chapter of *Foucault's Challenge,* Hannu Simola, Sakari Heikkenen, and Jussi Silvonen provide a fascinating case study of the Finnish educational system by undertaking a

historical discourse analysis of the truths about teacherhood over a 70-year period, in particular "the techniques of the production of truth, the constitution of the truth-willing subject, and the separation of true and false" (p. 65). This is one of the key approaches that derive from a reading of Foucault: the emphasis is not on finding out "the truth" but on exploring the various truths that exist within educational discourses and the historical, social, cultural, economic, and political conditions in which particular truths arise and decline. Incidentally, the authors appear to have no sense of the irony about their attempt to find out the metatruth about truths. One important attribute of this chapter for the reader who is new to Foucault's ideas is the attempt the authors make to summarize Foucault's diverse works and the kinds of research questions that arise from their various dimensions. Again with no sense of irony, the authors make a claim for presenting these questions as a "totality" (p. 69), but at a later stage they more helpfully describe them as a "catalogue of possibilities" (p. 70).

This chapter reminds us that Foucaultian approaches emphasize understanding the development of particular sets of ideas; their use in defining, controlling, and disciplining populations; and their role in the production of subjectivities. The chapter focuses, therefore, on teacherhood instead of teachers, by examining what it means to be a teacher. This type of subject-decentered approach represents a substantial challenge for comparative education.[10] It suggests that fruitful research might be undertaken through a shift or expansion in emphasis from making comparisons to what we call "comparativity," a critical examination of the conditions for and consequences of the social, historical, and political process of making comparisons. Such research might move from studying differences to exploring the rise and fall and intended and unintended educational consequences of ideas about difference; from studying schools and school systems to examining the social practices of schooling and systematization of educational provision; from conducting consultancies designed to assist development to a critical analysis of developmentality; from describing cultures to critiquing culturalism in education; from an emphasis on description and generalization to a critical examination of the social and historical constitutedness of comparative education research practices such as describing and generalizing; and from debates about the composition of a canon to a critique of the social and political purposes, processes, and consequences of canonization within this field.

Further challenges to research processes arise in Ian Stronach and Maggie MacLure's *Educational Research Undone: The Postmodern Embrace*. A deep reading of this book requires a departure from the confines of academic form *and* content in order to appreciate this rendering of education within the "postmodern embrace." There are no easy answers here nor any promises to deliver them. What is presented is education in its complexity and how research in the postmodern paradigms might look in the actual doing.

The route the book takes is not complex, however. Initial chapters guide the

---

[10] Popkewitz and Brennan provide other examples of a subject-decentered approach and suggest that we can studying blackness instead of Blacks, femininity instead of women, homosexuality instead of homosexuals, and childhood instead of children.

reader through seemingly unconnected paths that arrive at discussions about the postmodern condition. These chapters lay the ground for an almost fluid understanding of postpositivist ways of conducting educational research by imbuing that ground with metaphors drawn from the unlikely sources of fashion editorials, marketing principles, advertisement, and so on. The idea, in part, is to present the postmodern condition in its social context, with the comment that marketing and fashion discourses may have proceeded along these lines of thought slightly ahead of educational discourse. In part, the book shows how a departure from common ground necessarily extends the view of the field and furthers the premise that education researchers need to look in other, unlikely places for the means of understanding and analysis.

The book treats the whole question of the postmodern embrace of education from the standpoint of understanding the nature of that particular dynamic, on the one hand, and, on the other, of putting that understanding to work by focusing on pedagogy and how this often confusing set of ideas and paradigms is manifest in practice. The authors do this by subjecting to postmodern analysis their own research in a variety of educational projects. The research projects themselves are not randomly chosen: they reflect appropriate and continuing educational issues, including vocational curricula; educational policy; shifting contexts of research, evaluation, and teaching; and the careers of teachers. While resisting the tendency to become a "how-to" manual on methodology, the book also addresses issues such as the nature and use of portrayal and identity building in qualitative research, the validity of research instruments, the potential uses of life biographies, and the problematic relations between researcher and researched. For readers steeped in more conventional methodologies, Stronach and MacLure provide insights that are interesting, divergent, and illuminating. Most useful to the reader, however, is the juxtaposition of modern and postmodern methods of analysis in each instance, which allows a determination of the strengths and weaknesses of each.

We mentioned earlier the general perception that the language of postpositivist texts are often difficult to access. The authors of *Educational Research Undone,* while writing in clear and lucid language, turn the language surrounding discussions of postmodernism on itself. Chapter 1 is particularly notable in this respect. The authors systematically deconstruct the language and metaphors connected with the ideological divide between modernism and postmodernism and those attached to the understanding and communication of the terms. In so doing, the authors also open ways to look for different metaphors with which to understand postmodernism.

In subjecting accounts of educational research to several readings, the authors clearly reveal the danger of adhering to a methodological canon that may ultimately deny voice and caution that we may, by such adherence, miss or ignore those voices that are either not familiar or not legitimated. Chapters 7 and 8 in particular deal with the inevitable struggle in which the postmodern researcher must engage with the subject researched.

Remaining heedful of their mission to nail down nothing, the authors of *Educational Research Undone* provide some notes on a postmodern research agenda (p. 150). First, resist the cycle of analysis and prescription based on familiar meta-

narrative utopias that lead us into limiting and therefore false prophecies. To do this, it is necessary to deconstruct the collective past of educational research and, by so doing, to release educational research from the inevitable frustration and failure caused by fixed metanarrative cycles. Second, undertake a cultural revolution in educational research in favor of risk, experiment, and creativity. Third, perhaps of most significance, make our concern rest with the process by which educational questions are conceptualized and brought to light rather than with presumed lists of issues deemed appropriate to the study of education. Stronach and MacLure's suggestions neatly complement the concrete applications described in *Foucault's Challenge.*

In *Educational Research Undone,* teachers' lives and careers are researched in the context of life biographies and portrayals, in the transitions that they made in the course of life, and so on. One would have hoped to see more discussion of the process of teaching, especially since it has ramifications for the future of comparative education, which, even by any other name, would still conceivably be a process of teaching through, and about, power relationships. For example, what kind of postmodern reading might be given to the teaching of international material to international students who themselves act out this education on international material? This is the chapter that remains to be written, possibly by a comparative educator.

The three books reviewed here provide, then, a range of important challenges for comparative education. These include the challenge to examine ethically our own desire to know the other, to welcome the new and diverse, to employ dynamic rather than static concepts in our analyses, and to adopt a decentered approach that both focuses on the processes of the production of educational truths, by ourselves and by others, and treats metanarrative utopias with a healthy skepticism.

A final observation may be in order here regarding the identity question of comparative education in its search for a canon. Applying a postmodern understanding of this issue acknowledges that the terms used to describe comparative education are not static and at any time are at best liminal or in between each other and other states, thereby questioning the idea of a fixed canon. Each of the three books reviewed here presents important ideas and challenges for comparative education. We found a serious reading of them fascinating and provocative, and the substantive use of these ideas would be a daring move, and a useful one, for comparative education.