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Comparative education research: approaches and methods

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misconceptions about their education systems as a powerful ideological tool with which to undermine the good sense of standardized education systems.

While we have raised a few critical points about the book, this should not discourage readers from learning the useful insights that Park's secondary analyses of PISA and TIMSS data offer. *Re-evaluating education in Japan and Korea* is timely given that the recent top rankings of East Asian nations in OECD's PISA have ignited the "learning from the East" boom in Anglo-American nations as well as the negative responses to this boom that are based on the kind of stereotypes that the author so successfully demystifies (see Takayama, 2013; Waldow, Takayama, & Sung, *in press*). The book certainly has provided a solid empirical ground for much-needed myth-busting work from a macro, systemic point of view. Those who are inspired by Park's work now have to carefully differentiate what counts as good and bad elements of standardized education systems in East Asia so as to make the current lesson-learning from the East Asian PISA success much more empirically grounded and productive to equity-conscious policy development elsewhere.

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Comparative education research: approaches and methods (2nd ed.), by Mark Bray, Bob Adamson and Mark Mason, Hong Kong and Dordrecht, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong and Springer, 2014, 443 pp., US\$38.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-988-17852-8-2

Books on comparative education that serve as general guides usually aspire to introduce students to the field and be adopted as textbooks for classroom instruction. Only a few of

these are edited volumes organized around a clear unifying model as an analytic tool to define the field. The book under review is such a volume, and it stands out from the others by virtue of the unique analytic device it employs: a three dimensional cube introduced in 1995 by [Bray and Thomas](#) that is the tome's guiding force.

In my view, the volume under review is the best edited set of readings available in comparative education. All of the chapters are sound, illuminating and aligned extremely well with the cube as the unifying apparatus. It is also notable that the book arises out of one of the world's leading centres of comparative education: the Comparative Education Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong. Nevertheless, I will show that the volume is not without serious imperfections.

The most notable edited books that in the past have articulated a unifying apparatus to elucidate comparative education, if not actually to define it – are that of Eckstein and Noah (1969), who employed the scientific method as their unifying theme, and that of Paulston (1996), who engaged the device of social cartography to map educational change. The cube as a unifying device is far more comprehensive than the devices used by these others. It avoids (though not entirely successfully, as I will show below) the empirical exclusivity of Noah and Eckstein's "science" of comparative education and the cartographic pigeon-holing of Paulston's "map" (see Epstein & Carroll, 2005).

The cube and its "dimensions" are the driving force for the volume under review. Each of the readings can be found along one or another of the cube's three dimensions: geographical/location, nonlocation demographic, and aspects of education and society, though all of them contain cells crossing more than one dimension. Inexplicably, the book is not organized in a way that follows the cube's three dimensions, but rather, is ordered according to sections labelled "Directions" – covering the nature of comparative education – "Units of comparison" and "Conclusions". One is left wondering why the editors did not subdivide the "Units of comparison" section, containing 11 of the 16 chapters, into three subsections illustrative of the cube's dimensions, which are, after all, the guiding elements for the volume. The chapters by Manzon ("Comparing places"), Bray and Jiang ("Comparing systems"), and Sweeting ("Comparing times") could have easily come under the geographical/location dimension; those by Jackson ("Comparing race, class and gender"), Mason ("Comparing cultures"), and Lee and Manzon ("Comparing values") under nonlocation demographic; and those by Yang ("Comparing policies"), Adamson and Morris ("Comparing curricula"), Law ("Comparing pedagogical innovations"), Watkins and Van Aalst ("Comparing ways of learning"), and Leung and Park ("Comparing educational achievements") under aspects of education and society.

A much more critical imperfection is that the book reflects a clear epistemological imbalance even as the analytical device it employs is an advance in theoretical sophistication. In particular, the book confuses theory with method and engages method as if it drives theory. For example, Fairbrother, in his otherwise illuminating chapter entitled "Quantitative and qualitative approaches to comparative education", claims that quantitative methods are tied invariably to nomothetic generalizing analysis, while qualitative methods are tied invariably to ideographic contextual inquiry. To be sure, quantitative methods are usually nomothetically driven, and qualitative methods are usually ideographically oriented – but not necessarily so. For instance, case-study research normally employs qualitative methods but is always nomothetically driven. The very notion of a "case" shows this to be so. A case is not an entity that exists in and of itself; rather, a case is a case in a set of a larger order of things, and the qualitative study of a case aims to illustrate how a nomothetically derived generalization applies to any of its constituent units – that is, the cases – each of which is an integral part of its larger set. For

example, an ethnography of schooling for girls in a given country may be a case study to illuminate how gender conflicts generally might arise in a region's or even the world's schools. By the same token, studying the same topic but using a quantitative method could be used to arrive at an ungeneralizable understanding of education in a geographically, demographically, or culturally confined setting. A hypothesis regarding, say, the relationship between the number of windows in a classroom and absenteeism could be tested using statistical analysis but applied in a setting so culturally confined that it would disallow any reasonable degree of generalizability to other settings.

Much of the editors' introductory and concluding chapters are devoted to emphasizing the diversity of methods in comparative education, underscored by the multidimensionality of Bray and Thomas' cube. Yet, in their concluding chapter, they stress differentiation among the book's chapters more in terms of the variation in the number of units (of whatever kind these may be: countries or classrooms or curricula or such) than in terms of methods, whether quantitative or qualitative. In an astonishing display of positivist bias, the editors say (p. 425): "The model [i.e., the cube] does encourage researchers to consider multilevel analyses, but even that is not always essential. Rather, good comparative education researchers will necessarily consider factors along each of the axes *before they isolate the variables pertinent to their hypotheses*"[my emphasis]. Then, in the sentence immediately following, the editors contradict themselves by saying: "In order to do this, researchers need to relate methods to the appropriateness of the epistemological approach selected, i.e., to ask whether the epistemological framework and its methodological correlate are likely to generate the desired type of investigation".

Is it really true that "good comparative-education researchers" must perforce isolate variables and engage in hypothesis testing? What if the epistemological framework is relativist and eschews hypothesis testing in favour of ethnographic methods to arrive at *verstehen*, deep insight into an educational issue? In the latter case, the methodological correlate disallows the isolation of variables and testing of hypotheses. In view of the editors' contentions, notwithstanding their avowed openness to a multiplicity of theories and methods, methodological correlates that avoid hypothesis testing are off limits to "good comparative education researchers". Contrary to the editors' inferences, as I have argued elsewhere (Epstein, 2008), comparative education can legitimately pursue non-hypothesis testing methods. As a final question, given the editors' belief that the minimum number of countries as units for comparison is two, can comparative education contain within its purview single-country studies? If not, perhaps as many as a majority of the articles appearing in major journals of the field should be disqualified. On this question too, I have argued elsewhere (Epstein, 1992), contrary to the editors' contention, that some single-country studies could qualify as being "comparative".

In brief, multidimensionality alone is not sufficient to embrace the full extent of boundaries in comparative education. Perhaps what we lack is a grand theory that truly allows a multiplicity of methods, both quantitative and qualitative, nomothetic and ideographic, in which the epistemological boundaries are wide without being boundless.

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Comparative education: the construction of a field, by Maria Manzón, Hong Kong and Dordrecht, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong and Springer, 2011, 295 pp., US\$32.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-988-17852-6-8

Maria Manzón is not a new name in comparative education. She is well-known among the global comparative-education community in her capacity as Assistant Secretary-General of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) (2005), co-editor of two books: *Common interests, uncommon goals: histories of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies and its members* (Masemann, Bray, & Manzón, 2007) and *Comparative education at universities world wide* (Wolhuter, Popov, Manzón, & Leutwyler, 2008), and editor of *CIEclopedia* (2009–Present). I met her in 2007 when she attended the 5th Annual International Conference of the Bulgarian Comparative Education Society (BCES) in Sofia, Bulgaria, and presented a paper entitled “Comparative education as a field?” published in the BCES Conference Book, Vol. 5, 2007.

All works and activities of Maria Manzón in the past years have definitely marked her as a young star (as Erwin Epstein calls her). The present book *Comparative education: the construction of a field* (2011) is a logical result of her research experience, generated scholarship and professional development.

The book is a thorough, systematic comparative analytical-synthetic study of comparative education by one person. This makes the difference between this book and many other compilation books in the field. The book consists of six chapters which tell the reader step by step what comparative education is.

In the Introductory chapter “Deconstructing comparative education”, Manzón briefly and clearly explains the main questions she intends to answer: “Why is comparative education institutionalized as a distinct field when its intellectual distinctiveness seems to be blurred?” and “What is comparative education?” (p. 2), and presents the theoretical framework, the methodological issue and the structure of the book. She addresses a couple of aims of her work that are ambitious and difficult but possible to achieve. In Chapter 2, reviewing the literature on the nature of academic disciplines and fields, Manzón prepares the foundations for her analyses and syntheses in the next chapters.

Chapter 3 “The empirical substance and mass that constitute the field of comparative education” is the longest one. Manzón presents and analyses the worldwide chronology of comparative education at universities, specialist publications, and professional societies