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Comparative education: the construction of a field

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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

through four periods: 1900–1945, 1945–1970, 1970–2000, and 2000s. This chapter also focuses on the surveys of the field's contours and some international organizations which are usually mentioned when the practice of comparative education is discussed. The final section of this chapter, devoted to the institutional construction of the field, outlines three typologies: Typology 1: USA and post-war internationalism; Typology 2: Socialist bloc and post-war nationalisms; Typology 3: Spain and reformist policies. After having examined the institutional histories in Chapter 3, Manzon explores the intellectual histories of the field in Chapter 4. While the first four sections of this chapter contain reviews of the literature on some epistemological, theoretical, and thematic aspects of comparative education, in the fourth section Manzon highlights her own alternative intellectual histories of comparative education.

Chapter 5 “Mapping the intellectual discourse on comparative education” is the “pearl” of the book. This is not a raw pearl accidentally found and spontaneously appeared in a monograph. This is a very carefully processed and polished pearl. Manzon elegantly gives answers to three questions: Is comparative education a discipline, a field or a method? How can comparative education be distinguished from related fields? How is comparative education defined by other authors? The culmination of her analysis finds expression in her definition of academic comparative education as

an interdisciplinary subfield of education studies that systematically examines the similarities and differences between educational systems in two or more national or cultural contexts, and their interactions with intra- and extra-educational environments. Its specific object is educational systems examined from a cross-cultural ... perspective through the systematic use of the comparative method ... (p. 215)

I would be wrong if I started to argue with Manzon whether her definition is entirely correct according to my view. Concepts like field, subfield, education studies, context, object, subject, among others, have different meanings in the terminology systems used by scholars in different parts of the world in different host societies. Our similar but different comparative educations exist in parallel. Manzon's definition results from examining and summarizing the definitions formulated by comparativists from the 1930s to the 2000s. The greatest contribution of Manzon is that she outlines the historical, geographical and contextual map of comparative education. This is a lesson many of today's comparativists might want to learn from.

Chapter 6 plays the role of conclusion. Manzon stresses on a paradoxical relationship between the institutional and intellectual construction of comparative educations. And finally, the appendices at the end of the book should not be omitted. There are 10 appendices and each is a table. These tables contain chronologies of the institutionalization of comparative education worldwide by continents, statistical data on comparative education as a university discipline worldwide, data on WCCES member societies, content analysis of comparative-education journals. Collectively, they are a useful data source.

This book is a valuable work not only because of all classifications, analyses and generalizations. Manzon's research strategy is an excellent example that could be used in further studies in the field.

This book is serious, reasonably ambitious and precisely written. It is undoubtedly a must-read for comparative educators, students in teacher training programmes, policy makers, scholars in other comparative fields, and for all people interested in the nature, the diversity and the large possibilities of comparative education as an interdisciplinary field.

Robert Cowen concludes his foreword to the book (p. xvi) with: “I am grateful that this book has been written”. Without any reservations I would add: All comparativists should be grateful that this book has been written.

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