Comparatively Knowing: Making a Case for the Vertical Case Study

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Abstract
This article enters into contemporary debates regarding methodology and training in comparative and international education by addressing epistemological questions about *what* can be known of the world and *how* it can be known through comparative research. We contend that debates over qualitative versus quantitative methods or area studies versus cross-national studies miss the mark as they address only superficial differences in the field when much deeper divisions exist over the nature of comparative knowledge. Based on our view of comparative knowledge, we propose the vertical case study as a means of comparing knowledge claims among actors with different social locations in an attempt to situate local action and interpretation within a broader cultural, historical, and political investigation. We also put forth a program of study that would enable students of comparative and international education to conduct research promoting full and thorough knowledge of multiple levels of comparison within a single vertically-bounded case.

Comparative and international education: Fifty years of debate

The 50th anniversary of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) provides an ideal opportunity for students and scholars of comparative and international education to reflect on the debates that have shaped the field and continue to define its contours. These debates come to life in the recently-completed oral history of the field, *Comparatively Speaking*, a documentary in which past presidents of CIES discuss the origins of the Society, the tensions among its members, and their visions of the future for comparative and international education. Some of the most memorable footage comes in response to questions about the principal divisions in the field for many decades: the distinction between comparative education and international education; the theory/practice divide; and the meaning of "comparative methods." From our vantage point at Teachers College, the latter issue constitutes the most contentious contemporary debate. Cast as deliberations over qualitative versus quantitative methods or as case studies versus cross-national studies, we believe these debates over methods miss the mark as they address only superficial differences in the field when much deeper divisions exist over the nature of comparative knowledge.

In this article, we seek to move several issues of current debate from the more common terrain of methodology and methodological training to the less familiar landscape of epistemology. We contend that students and scholars of comparative and international education need to pay greater attention to epistemological issues related to *what* can be known about the world and *how* it can be known through comparative research before attending to the rules and procedures—the methods—used to gain such knowledge. As Masemann argued in her 1990 presidential address, "… our conceptions of ways of

knowing have limited and restricted the very definition of comparative education that we have taught to students and used in our own research and, indeed, have promulgated to practitioners" (p. 465). Based on our deliberation with students and colleagues on these matters, as well as our own research experiences, we propose the vertical case study as a means of comparing knowledge claims among actors with different social locations in a vertically-bounded analysis (see below). Drawing inspiration, yet departing, from Bray and Thomas's work on multilevel analyses (1995), we argue that attention to context and the local level is not optional but obligatory in order to generate trustworthy knowledge. This commitment to context is reflected in the discussions of the vertical case study and of the program of study for graduate students we propose below. In sum, we believe the vertical case study offers the best possibility of broadening the historically dominant epistemological bases of both comparative and international education.

An epistemological case for the vertical case study

Case study methods are not new to comparative and international education. In their insightful review on the topic, Crossley and Vulliamy (1984) identify three case-study traditions in the broader field of education—the anthropological, the sociological, and the evaluative—which share a common conviction regarding the centrality of contextual understanding and detailed micro-level research. Their embrace of case study research in comparative education is not merely methodological; rather, Crossley and Vulliamy make an epistemological 'case for the case' by arguing that what can be known about one context cannot be assumed to be true in another context. This issue, which they refer to as "ecological validity" (p. 198), highlights the importance of examining how cultural, economic, historical, and political forces within a given context play out in schooling (see also Vulliamy, 1990). As Broadfoot argues, "education can only be fully understood in terms of the context in which it is taking place…. The unique contribution of comparative studies is that of providing for a more systematic and theorized understanding of the relationship *between* context and process, structure and action" (Broadfoot, 1999, pp. 225-226).

The vertical case study differs from the traditional ethnographic case study described by Crossley and Vulliamy in its concomitant commitment to micro-level understanding and to macro-level analysis. It strives to situate local action and interpretation within a broader cultural, historical, and political investigation (for examples of such research see Bartlett, 2006, and Vavrus, 2005). The vertical case should be grounded in a principal site—e.g., a school, a community, an institution, or a government ministry—and should fully attend to the ways in which historical trends, social structures, and national and international forces shape local processes at this site. In other words, local understandings and social interactions should not be considered demographically or geographically bounded. Instead, in a vertical case study, understanding of the micro-level is viewed as part and parcel of larger structures, forces, and policies about which the researcher must also develop a full and thorough knowledge.

Within the field of comparative and international education, the approach that comes closest to the one we are proposing is the multilevel analysis put forth by Bray and Thomas (1995). They contend that all comparative education research occurs along three dimensions: the geographic/locational, tied to levels (world region, country,

state/province, district, school, classroom, and individual); the demographic not tied to a place (ethnic or religious groupings, for example); and the societal, by which schooling is linked to broader political or economic structures and forces (p. 473). Therefore, instead of comparison across nation-states, Bray and Thomas argue for comparison across different dimensions and, specifically, geographic or locational levels to avoid "incomplete and unbalanced perspectives on educational studies" (p. 472).

We, too, make this recommendation from a methodological perspective but substantiate it on epistemological grounds. What makes single-level analysis "incomplete and unbalanced" is often, though not always, the absence of contextualized knowledge that takes into account how larger forces, structures, and histories inform local social interactions and understanding. As we discuss below, economic or political processes are frequently treated as autonomous, as though they have the power to determine human behavior; such research leads to ill-informed policy prescriptions. Contemporary examples in the field of comparative and international education include the presumptions that education universally functions as a "vaccine" against AIDS, constitutes human capital formation resulting in economic mobility and societal growth, or leads to improved maternal and child health. Despite these general tendencies, studies at the micro-level have demonstrated that such educational outcomes depend largely on the context, the type of education provided, and the local reception of educational efforts.

An example from the comparative study of literacy bears out this point regarding the limitations of single-level analysis. Much work in comparative and international education claims that the acquisition of basic literacy by adults has certain 'effects;' for example, various studies claim that maternal literacy reduces child mortality, improves maternal health, contributes to poverty reduction, and increases women's likelihood to participate politically with very limited attention to either context or content of literacy instruction (see UNESCO, 2006, chapter 5 and Watkins, 2001, chapter 1 for useful summaries). Yet there is significant debate over what literacy actually means, and this is reflected, at least implicitly, by the fact that countries measure literacy in highly variable ways (UNESCO, 2006, chapter 6). In such circumstances, efforts to study literacy solely from a quantitative perspective, which is often necessary to conduct cross-national studies, means that scholars are using incomparable data. Indeed, rich case studies of literacy have demonstrated that the meaning and politics of literacy vary radically in different contexts and that the potential opportunities afforded by literacy are profoundly constrained by locally-relevant social, political, and economic structures and power relations (for examples, see Ahearn, 2001; Bartlett, forthcoming; Dyer & Choksi 1998; Kulick & Stroud, 1993; Luke, 1996; Street, 1984).

Current debates over research methods and the most appropriate research training for students in comparative and international education, be they students of literacy or not, do not adequately address the epistemological importance of contextualized knowledge. Too often, case study research is cast as 'not comparative'; too often, we are convinced to conduct quick, insufficiently grounded evaluations, participatory or not, upon which policies are then based. From our perspective, multilevel analysis is necessary to balance perspectives in comparative research, but it is only sufficient when it includes a thorough understanding of the particularity of the micro-level.

The benefits of vertical case studies

Vertical case study research promises a number of advantages for current and future scholars and policy analysts. First and foremost, we believe it helps to counter the tendency to view local knowledge as an add-on to the knowledge that 'really counts' by making comparison among micro- and macro-levels the centerpiece of the research endeavor. We concur with Crossley and Vulliamy that case studies in education have "exposed the gap between rhetoric and practice" in the policy arena (1984, p. 198). Rhetoric, they note, is what is generated by studies that do not focus on local practice but instead "uncritically describe what *ought* to be happening" as articulated in official policy (ibid, emphasis in original). Vertical case study research has the potential to place local knowledge on a more equal footing with official, authoritative knowledge by analyzing what 'ought to be' based on policy pronouncements and cross-national comparisons as well as what 'is happening' as recounted by local actors.

A second and related benefit to this approach is that it requires scholars to think critically about the politics of knowledge production in comparative and international education and their role in perpetuating research that privileges certain ways of knowing over others. For instance, short-term consultancies are a great temptation because of the funding and prestige that often accompanies them. Yet Crossley and Vulliamy caution those in the field against participating in the production of ever more "descriptive, anecdotal studies which lack both rigor in terms of data collection and a theoretical framework within which to make sense of the data—the more so in cases of 'quick and dirty evaluation'" (1984, p. 203). The absence of full and thorough knowledge of the local context is one of the dangers of short-term projects, which rarely allow one to get her hands dirty digging through layers of meaning at the micro-level because such excavation takes time.

The research preparation we propose is designed to help researchers make two critical decisions: first, to decide whether their knowledge of a region is sufficient for the task set out by the funding agency; and second, to determine whether the research parameters for the project will permit the development of sufficient understandings of the particular to make the consultancy meaningful. In addressing these two issues, researchers are confronted with the uncomfortable possibility that they may be reproducing dominant power/knowledge relations by accepting the status of 'development expert' when one does not, in fact, possess expertise on the region and by producing reports lacking in theory and in substance because the conditions of the consultancy do not allow such depth of engagement at the local level (Parpart, 1995). As Samoff (1999) warns, research commissioned by international development agencies or other interested parties often promotes an understanding of education and development that comes to be viewed as a global consensus. Moreover, he argues, educational reforms based on this 'global' view are not likely to succeed if the micro-level is ignored in their formulation: "…effective reform requires agendas and initiatives with strong local roots and the broad participation of those with a stake in the outcomes, including not only officials, but also students, parents, teachers, and communities. Unless the beneficiaries of the reform become its bearers, it is likely to be still-born" (p. 84). Vertical case study research, we believe, is a particularly effective way to promote engagement

with the knowledge borne by each group of stakeholders in a policy reform initiative or in a research project.

The final advantage of the vertical case study is that it recognizes the decentering of the nation-state from its privileged position as the fundamental entity in comparative research to one of several important units of analysis. Marginson and Mollis (2001) make this point cogently in their article on the challenge that globalization presents to comparative education. They write, "Governance remains national in form, and nation-states continue to be central players in a globalizing world, but partly as local agents of global forces, [as] the nation-state now operates within global economic constraints" (p. 601). Thus, the importance of multilevel research that situates the nation-state within a world marked by global agencies and agendas is more apparent today than ever before. Yet the national-global relationship is only one part of a vertical case because the local-national and the local-global connections are of equal importance. The goal of this type of case study is to develop a thorough understanding of the particular at each level and to analyze how these understandings produce similar and different interpretations of the policy, problem, or phenomenon under study. Building further on Marginson and Mollis's work, we view the vertical case study as a middle ground of sorts between what they refer to as the universalist strand of comparative research that emphasizes similarity across cases and the ultrarelativist strand that takes difference to an extreme:

> Against the universalist position, we argue that method in comparative education should be oriented toward the interpretation of differences and the recognition of the 'other'…. Against the ultrarelativist position, we argue that comparative education needs to interpret individual difference not simply as terminal but in the context of a wider set of variations, recognizing that there are commonalities structured by the relations between 'others' and between 'other' and 'self.' (2001, p. 588)

The vertical case study lends itself to the simultaneous comparisons of similarities and differences, across multiple levels, which are necessary to avoid both ultrarelativism and universalism.

What do students need to know? Developing depth and breadth in CIE

We begin with the assumption that it is possible for researchers to understand how actors at multiple levels interpret their world and the role of education in it and that graduate training in comparative and international education ought to reflect this potential. If this is the case, then discussions about the education of future scholars shift from debates over qualitative *or* quantitative methods, or area studies *versus* discipline-based programs to deliberations over how to enable students to conduct research that promotes full and thorough knowledge of multiple comparisons in a single case. The recent moderated discussion on area studies and the disciplines in *Comparative Education Review* (Merkx et al., 2006) provides insights into lingering divisions in the field today regarding the value of local understanding that are often cast as matters of methods and training alone. Motivans, who works at UNESCO's Institute of Statistics, describes the statistical community in which he works as follows: "We work in an institutional culture that values 'facts' and objectivity over opinions and views and reductionist interpretation over ones that portray the complexity of issues. Facing these deeper

epistemological roots represents a challenge to recognizing and valuing context" (2006, p. 147). King, an economist at the World Bank, argues that area studies enables educational economists to avoid some of these problems because it helps them to value "the cultural context in which education decisions are made" (2006, p. 132). Yet is an appreciation of the "cultural context" the same as an understanding of local knowledge? We concur with Motivan's assessment that the deeper epistemological issue is whether one can avoid reductionism in quantitative or qualitative cross-national comparative research and instead learn to embrace the complexity of local understanding in one's scholarship. While this may be a particular challenge to those tasked with developing statistical models to explain educational behavior, it is no less problematic for those responsible for evaluating policy or conducting research using qualitative appraisal methods that do not allow one to develop a deep knowledge of the context in which one is working.

Similar agreement among the contributors to the moderated discussion is evident in their disavowal of an either-or stance between area studies and discipline-based studies, but there are still unmistakable tensions over the extent to which the development of local understanding is embraced. Hayhoe, professor and past president of CIES, fully supports area studies for the possibility it affords to those whose perspectives have been marginalized in the field: "I see area studies as a vital means of learning from nondominant cultures and civilizations. This learning may fundamentally change contemporary theories of education and development over time" (2006, pp. 142-143). While concurring with Hayhoe about the importance of area studies, fellow professor Brustein criticizes it for not contributing to the knowledge in the field that 'really counts': knowledge that can be generalized from one context to the next. He contends, "Area studies fail frequently to take advantage of opportunities to generalize from their rich contextual findings to the broader world" (2006, p. 136). In this discussion one finds not so much a debate over area studies and the disciplines as a division over thorough knowledge of the particular at the expense of general knowledge about the comparative. Yet comparative research does not have to mean only "the analysis of educational systems and problems in two or more national environments" (Jary & Jary, cited in Rust, 2002, p. 54). It can, we believe, refer to comparison among levels whereby local, national, and international understandings of an educational matter are analyzed vertically (from one level to the next) rather than horizontally (across national boundaries). A vertical analysis does not preclude cross-national comparison, as one could compare an analysis in one context with one conducted in another. However, the primary purpose of a vertical case study is to promote comparison among levels rather than across states.

To prepare graduate students to conduct vertical case study research, one must begin by inculcating an appreciation of these multiple levels and by developing the skills to study thoroughly each of them. Such training necessitates area studies to acquire the language skills, historical understanding, and cultural awareness needed for sustained fieldwork in one community; it requires discipline-based coursework to ground research in a theoretical and methodological tradition; and it requires interdisciplinary knowledge to grasp how different theoretical traditions conceptualize and study the local, the national, and the international. As Broadfoot writes, "Comparative education needs to be … at the forefront of recognizing the increasing complexity of interacting international and intercultural variables and the consequent need for an interdisciplinary approach" (1999,

p. 227). For instance, doctoral studies would consist both of a multi-year area studies sequence in a region of the student's choice, an introduction to multidisciplinary approaches to educational problems, and a sequence of discipline-based courses appropriate to the research project the student envisions. Students would also take qualitative and quantitative research methods courses to prepare them for the fundamental task of developing multiple levels of understandings in the case they decide to study. By developing depth through the study of a discipline alongside the study of a language and the history of a region, students would be prepared to design a study that has local relevance and to carry out research in which the community is engaged. By requiring breadth of methodological and theoretical training, students would be better prepared to use a multiplicity of tools to enable them to develop a thorough understanding of their particular case. This process not only improves the ecological validity of doctoral research; it also lays the foundation for long-term engagement with a community in which a researcher continues to deepen her understanding of educational issues at the micro-level.

Conclusions

In the past half century, much has changed in the field of comparative and international education. The meanings of comparison have shifted; the relationship between "comparative education" and "international education" has been modified. In the context of radical shifts in international relations, bi- and multilateral educational development institutions have altered their common-sense explanations of the relationship between education and development, as well as their funding priorities. In order to accompany these changes, scholars in comparative and international education need to concentrate more attention on the fundamental questions of what we can know and how we know it before we can adequately address methodological questions. Attention to the contextual limits of knowledge is, we argue, an important step toward developing not only trustworthy knowledge but also an adequate conceptualization of comparison among current and future scholars in comparative and international education.

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