

## **Editorial Introduction: Rethinking Culture, Context, and Comparison in Education and Development**

Samar Farah  
*Teachers College, Columbia University*

Gita Steiner-Khamsi  
*Teachers College, Columbia University*

In this issue, CICE brings together noted scholars in education who were invited to reflect on the theme Rethinking Culture, Context, and Comparison in Education and Development. This special issue can be seen as a sequel to the most recent one, entitled Comparative and International Education: The Making of a Field and a Vision into the Future. The previous issue addressed meaningful theoretical contributions to the field of comparative and international education since its establishment.

In April 2013, the International and Transcultural Studies Department at Teachers College (TC) held a symposium entitled *Rethinking Culture, Context, And Comparison in Education and Development*. At the symposium, four invited speakers—Karen Mundy (OISE, University of Toronto, Canada), Frank-Olaf Radtke (University of Frankfurt, Germany), Joseph Tobin (University of Georgia, USA), and Antoni Verger (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)—as well as faculty and students from Teachers College, Columbia University, gathered to discuss “how best to conceptualize context and rethink distinct levels and scales in educational research...”

More specifically, the goals of the symposium were to:

Understand how and why similar phenomena are, for cultural or contextual reasons, translated, interpreted and received differently. Investigations of educational policy are interrogating the system logic and system processes of educational policy. In response to these challenges, researchers have developed new research methods, including multimodal approaches that deserve further scrutiny. Taken together, these questions, conceptual developments, and research techniques pose provocative questions about the shifting nature of comparison in educational research.

In an effort to share this discussion beyond the confines of a two-day symposium, the editors of CICE have chosen to publish a special fall issue that includes two featured papers written by Joseph Tobin from the University of Georgia, and Antoni Verger from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, as well as the response pieces of Teachers College faculty who participated in the symposium, including Lesley Bartlett, Gita Steiner-Khamsi, and Herve Varenne. The end product, as seen in this issue, is a thought provoking set of articles that address contentious aspects within the field which attempt to push the methodological and theoretical boundaries of the field of comparative and international education, provoking us to question our understandings of culture, context and comparison.

In “Comparative, Diachronic, Ethnographic Research on Education” **Joseph Tobin** presents his ground breaking method of inquiry for exploring early childhood education in three different

countries and across two unique time periods. To use his own words, “the trick is to think simultaneously about space and time, in a sort of ethnographic version of physics’ unified field theory” (Tobin, p. 2). Rather than drawing on traditional methodologies to do so, Tobin uses a “video cued multivocal ethnography” to reveal reflections and reactions of educators across different cultural contexts. More importantly, however, his study redefines the type and scale of ethnographies that can be conducted comparatively.

**Antoni Verger** masterfully applies the example of PPP (Public-Private Partnership) in education as an illustration to demonstrate why a preoccupation with culture, context, and comparison matters for understanding the rapid global expansion of the education industry. In his article “Investigating Global Education Policy: Toward a Research Framework on Policy Adoption and the Multifaceted Role of Ideas in Educational Reform,” he probes deeply into why some specific ideas are deemed more attractive than others and under what circumstances, suggesting that the process of policy change cannot be disentangled from the local context and the politics that come along with it.

In “Vertical Case Studies and the Challenges of Culture, Context and Comparison,” **Lesley Bartlett** reviews the works of both Tobin and Verger and the varied ways in which they emphasize the importance of context. She then advocates for using the vertical case studies approach to address current challenges in comparative and international education (CIE), arguing that society is interconnected and no phenomenon can be studied separate to or outside the context of its greater physical, socio-cultural, political, and temporal environment.

**Gita Steiner-Khamsi** makes a strong appeal to “bring culture, context, and system back into the study of globalization.” In her article on “Comparison and Context: The Interdisciplinary Approach to the Comparative Study of Education,” she explores the long-standing debate between disciplinary versus interdisciplinary perspectives in CIE, calling on scholars to free themselves of disciplinary boundaries that may inhibit their ability to explore new and relevant methodologies and theoretical approaches to the comparative study of educational systems, beliefs, and practices.

Finally, in “Comments on Tobin’s Contribution to Comparative Research in Anthropology and in Education,” **Hervé Varenne** reiterates the importance of comprehensively exploring the question of culture. He does so through a review of Tobin’s article from an anthropological perspective, in which he studies cultural differences and the extent to which they are time and context-bound. Through his critique of earlier anthropologists, he argues that society cannot be freed of culture and that it is best studied from a comparative perspective, that is, in relation to the “other.”

This special issue seeks to stretch the thinking of researchers who are dedicated to the comparative study of education. Differences in methodological approaches reflect frequently, but not always, differences in interpretive frameworks. Thus, we tend to choose the method that helps us to say what we see conceptually, that is, how we tend to explain differences and similarities in educational systems, beliefs, and practices. By implication, interpretive frameworks are at the same time indispensable and coercive. On the positive side, we need them to succinctly express what we see and how we explain “things.” They enable us to use vocabulary that members of the (same) academic community understand, either because the terminology reflects a particular discipline (sociological, anthropological, economic, etc.) or a theoretical orientation (e.g., world systems theory, functionalist, constructivist, etc.). On the other hand, every “confession” to a particular interpretive framework, such as the choice of a

particular discipline or theoretical orientation, is a decision *against*, or to put it more mildly, a hesitation to embrace alternative frameworks.

The co-editors of this special issue do “believe” in the value of interpretive frameworks. In fact, we find it an issue of concern that so many studies are simply pragmatic. In other words, they are produced without laying bare, and as a corollary putting up for debate, the disciplinary approach or the theoretical foundation from which the author operates and draws conclusions. Having and identifying a clearly defined interpretive framework is better than none. Nevertheless, these interpretive frameworks channel our ways of thinking and seeing in particular ways. This special issue is about how we use the method of comparison depending on where we stand in terms of an interpretive framework.

**Samar Farah** is a Doctoral Candidate in International and Comparative Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Email: [sf2585@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:sf2585@tc.columbia.edu). **Gita Steiner-Khamsi** is Department Chair and Professor of International and Comparative Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Email: [gs174@columbia.edu](mailto:gs174@columbia.edu).