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Kinsella & Kenny



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'Is comparative education another form of colonialism?'

Michelle Kinsella, Research Assistant, **REGIONAL**¹ - European Life Long learning - Comparative analysis of regional policies for adult learning -

Project. <http://www.regionalproject.eu/index.php>. Maynooth University (Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad) <http://www.nuim.ie/adult-and-community-education>

Michael Kenny, Lecturer Department of Adult & Community Education, and Principal Investigator: **REGIONAL** - European Life Long learning - Comparative analysis of regional policies for adult learning - Project. <http://www.regionalproject.eu/index.php>. Maynooth University (Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad) <http://www.nuim.ie/adult-and-community-education>

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Comparative Education/Research in Education

According to Noah and Eckstein (1985) comparative education has four purposes:

1. To describe educational systems, processes, or outcomes.
2. To assist in the development of educational institutions and practices.
3. To highlight the relationships between education and society.
4. To establish generalized statements about education that are valid in more than one country.

Majgaard and Mingat (2012, p.1.) suggest that “[a] comparative perspective is useful not only to show the range of possibilities in key education policy variables but also to learn from the best performers in the region”. Mallinson (1980) referring to Hans (1949) notes that the purpose of comparative education is “... not only to compare existing systems but to envisage reform best suited to new social and economic conditions” (1980, p.1.). Mallinson expands on Hans suggesting that comparative education is also a comparison of educational philosophies evident in educational practice prevailing in that setting.

Comparative education asserted itself as an educational discipline in the 1960s and early 1970s (Watson 2001, p.9.) and has become increasingly prominent in the last 20 years. Comparative education examines education within one country, or between countries, using data and insights drawn from the practises and situations in that country or countries. Vernon Mallinson notes that various attempts have been made to define comparative education since Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) and Sir Michael Sadler (1861-1943) presented the concept and concludes that it is clear that “... no satisfactory definition can be obtained until the whole purpose of education as a social force has been closely examined” (1980, p.1.).

The purpose of education is an intrinsic question in comparative education as, according to Meade (1980), there can be no society of human beings without some kind of education system and the problems of education cannot be isolated from those of society as a whole (Mallinson 1980, p.7.). Mallinson notes, when we study the purpose of education we are engaging in comparative education (1980, p.10.). Watson (2001, p.28), referencing Raivola (1985), notes “All research that seeks to offer general explanations must be comparative” and, referencing Le Than Khoi (1986), Watson suggests that “comparative education is a field of study that covers all disciplines that seek to understand and explain education” (p.28). Arising comparative education is difficult to define but, directly or indirectly, encompasses all discussion on education.

Society and the people who compose that society are in a constant process of change. The education needs and demands of citizens change over life time and life situation. Mallinson suggests that as education is increasingly influenced by globalisation comparative education invites “... a systematic examination of other cultures and other systems of education deriving from those cultures” (1980, p.10.), and encourages comparativists to engage in “... ever closer contact with ... other cultures” (Mallinson 1980, p.11.).

However engaging in comparative educational research is an engagement with tensions for which the researcher needs awareness and preparation. Delors (1996, p.15) identifies such tensions and warns of the “Tensions of the Twenty First Century” including tensions between the global and the local, the traditional and the modern, the universal and the individual, etc. Yet increasingly these tensions are being ignored especially in relation to the developing and less developed countries in



the name of cost effectiveness and efficiency. Watson suggests that "...quick-fix ideas or principles ..." are increasingly being borrowed from one society and transferred to another without thinking of the consequences" (2001, p.11.).

Interpreters of comparative education research should also be aware of the influence of history. Sadler noted that "A national system of education is a living thing, the outcomes of forgotten struggles and difficulties of battles long ago" (Sadler 1900, pp.309-310). All educational systems are either products of the history of that setting or it is influence by its (the education systems') attempt to ignore that history. Cowen reminds us of the embeddedness of ones history, identity with one's culture, and the uniqueness of our individual interpretation in referring to terms such as "... "National temperament", "national sentiments", "national traditions", "national aims/ideals", "national character/characteristics"" (Cowen 2009, p.44).

The REGIONAL Project

While there is an extensive body of literature discussing the importance of adult learning for the society as a whole and for the individuals that constitute this society, there exists very little research to date that discuss the reasons behind "the regional disparities in terms of adult participation in lifelong learning in the EU" (EU commission, 2012). The REGIONAL Project is carrying out a comparative analysis of Adult Learning policy initiatives to better understand how regions across Europe formulate, implement and fund Adult Learning as a key engine for growth and crisis recovery. The Maynooth University Department of Adult and Community Education, along with 6 European partners, are compiling this research presently. It is in the process of planning, collecting, and now analysing the outcomes of interviews across six European countries that questions about the importance of being aware of the implicit contradictions in blindly comparing research outcomes that this paper arises.

For the purposes of this paper, and arising from the comparative research in the REGIONAL project, the authors are seeking to address the hint of colonialism that could arise in two aspects of comparative research interpreting language and coding for analysis

Interpreting Language

All words have the taste of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life according to Bakhtin, 1981 p.293). If we consider what Bakhtin says to be true, language is inextricably linked to culture and context which has huge implications for conducting social research. It implies that in order to fully understand the language or dialect of another person we must have a shared history or at least be somewhat familiar with the cultural underpinnings of the social group we are working with. Without such understanding how can we determine if the findings from our research are without cultural and social bias.

Linguistic anthropologists maintain that 'meanings emerge in specific social interactions, and interviews are no exception. (Ahearn, 2012 p.37), for the reasons outlined by Bakhtin that it is 'not



possible' to wholly objectively interpret data which comes from another region, country or social group with which we are not familiar. Is it not feasible that we might read the transcript of an interview from an ethnocentric position and apply, albeit unwittingly, meaning that is culturally relevant to us as the researcher. The result of this can be a misinterpretation of data when we come across a term that has different cultural meanings for both the interviewee and the data analyst.

For example, taken from qualitative analysis of interview transcripts in the REGIONAL project, when asked questions such as; 'what are the main drivers of policy in your region? One respondent answered; 'everything is economic driven at the moment'. Another respondent from a partner country responded to the same question with 'Government departments and educational institutions'.

This is a subtle example which highlights the different cultural meanings which can be inferred from terminology. The first respondent clearly understands drivers as extrinsic forces which come to bear on the policy making process whereas the second respondent clearly understands the question to be specific in its intention, seeking to find the literal drivers of policy making, the second answer alludes to institutional drivers rather than conceptual drivers such as the state of the economy which the first answer claims are the policy drivers.

Given that I have seen this recur in my current research piece, I would argue that coding interviews is inherently biased due to the cultural position of the researcher being different to that of the research group. The reason for this as I see it is that a people who are set apart socially from others will most likely be set apart linguistically also and vice versa (Ahearn, 2012). When I come across interview answers such as the example given above, I have found that my natural tendency is to try to fit the alternative answer, or the one that is not culturally familiar to me, into a framework that I understand. Undoubtedly this will result in the final report being biased by my own cultural assumptions which will have implications on how the results are interpreted and subsequently implemented across the research group.

Modes of research

Ball (1998 referring to Harvey 1996) notes that globalisation can be used to explain almost anything and everything. He applies the term Globalony to this tendency. Comparative research conducted in increasingly competitive market driven arenas is in danger of becoming a 'one armed bandit' of research leading to a colonisers interpretation and application. Ball (1998 p.119) notes that researchers must be aware of the general patterns of commonalities across localities to fully interpret research outcomes.

The increasing tendency towards qualitative research, particularly when applied to researched diverse communities, carries the danger of robustly enabling researchers of a colonising mind to apply their conclusions, supported by their analysis, to a wide range of settings. Some would argue that quantitative research does not carry the same danger. However increasing understanding of the malapplication of league tables for purported objective purposes is evident that quantitative modes of research is manipulatable.



The experience of applying comparative research methods to interviews over a number of European countries has suggested that the researchers decision about the codes applied in the research process are subjective and open to interpretation. Indeed, as these researchers coded for six separate European countries it became evident that the bank of codes arising from the analysis of interviews within their own country were qualitatively and numerically different from the bank of chords that emerged from the data collected through the same process but collected in countries not native to the researchers. This experience suggests that there is a danger of data misinterpretation when comparative research is undertaken unless very stringent and detailed research procedures are in place. These research procedures must be cognisant of a wide range of cultural variables that can impact on data interpretation.

Conclusion

Comparative education intended to help national reformers in their efforts to build national systems of education. Increasing emphasis on globalisation, marketisation and league tables as performance indicators introduce soft comparison (Nova 2003) that enables globalisation true world domination of a particular educational model (Broadfoot 2000 in Nova 2003). As researchers we must be ultra aware of our complicity in new colonisation. We contributed to this colonisation by our inattentiveness to subtle latitudes in research interpretation. This paper highlights concern with language and mode of research. This paper suggests that development in comparative education need to be placed within a larger framework of historical and social transitions that, the experience of the REGIONAL analysis exercise suggests, can only be fully understood by the research being undertaken and interpreted by indigenous researchers.

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