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Does Context Still Matter? The Dialectics of Comparative Education

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This is a special issue dedicated to revisiting fundamental issues of comparative education and their relevance to the 21st century in a broad sense, as well as their value for the Asia-Pacific region in particular, in the context of the *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*. This special issue was generated from the International Symposium on Comparative Education, held at the National Institute of Education of Singapore on 17 February 2012. The academic symposium was conducted as a preamble to the strategic planning meeting of the office bearers and the standing committee chairs of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES). It became a significant opportunity for intellectual exchanges for the academics involved in this exercise as everyone tried to rethink, reframe and reconceptualise comparative education, in terms of its changing nature and roles in today's world. There were more papers presented in the symposium than those that were selected for publication in this special issue. We hope that readers would agree that this is a serious set of academic and reflective papers, all touching on the crux of the matter crucial for our understanding of the nature, roles, vision and mission of comparative education and giving special attention to the Asia-Pacific region.

Does context still matter?

Concern for context “penetrates to the heart of comparative education”, observed Crossley (2009, p. 1173). He argued that context remains important within each genre of comparative education, although in different ways and for different reasons (2010, p. 421). In this section, we attempt to elucidate the importance of context, likened to a *ritornello* (a refrain or instrumental interlude), albeit played in different intensities, in historical and contemporary comparative education research. Sir Michael Sadler (1861–1943) was a precursor of a research tradition which views education as inextricably bound to its social and cultural context, as his oft-cited passage stated: “things outside the school matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside” (1900, p. 310). A century later, a millennial special issue of the journal *Comparative Education* edited by Crossley and Jarvis (2001) took on the title “Context Matters”. This was followed a decade later by an editorial in *Prospects*, where Acedo (2010) introduced the issue as one which could fittingly have been entitled “Context Matters”. The *ritornello* continues to be heard.

So, does context still matter? Will it still matter in the future? As we explain in a later section, and as this entire special issue illustrates, context does matter and it may matter even more in the present times and in the real and imagined future of comparative education. In the discussion to follow, we turn to a review of the epistemological roots of comparative education and how they translate to different genres of comparative education and methodologies. As a precursor to this, we consider briefly the broader global context on the question of a “new world order” that formed the broad backdrop against which the evolution of comparative education ensued. This

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perspective is important for consideration of some papers in this issue that address the regional reconfiguration in the Asia-Pacific region and the comparative education research therein which highlights the importance of context.

The emergence of a “new world order” was the topic of much debate and writing as the 21st century drew to a close. It was natural for the world’s leading thinkers, writers and politicians to ponder the prospects for the coming new millennium. Since the US had so dominated the global arena in the 21st century, much debate focused on the future role of the US globally, on the form that new configurations of power and influence would take in subsequent decades, and of the shifts in status quo and power relations. Given the appearance of what have been termed the four “Asian Tigers” (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) also termed the newly industrialized economies (NIEs), and also of the eight “high-performing Asian economies” (HPAEs) that included these four, plus Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand that have experienced unprecedented growth, the global economic and political focus necessarily shifted to include this hub of development. At the same time, the Asia-Pacific region still contains vast populations across several countries that suffer extreme poverty and disadvantage; significant issues of (in)equity and access exist within the developing member countries (DMCs); and the region’s disparities in a variety of aspects are perhaps more striking than the impressive growth in economy and quality of life mentioned previously. Lee (2004) documented the details of inequities and access in education in the DMCs of this fast-changing region. These realities form an important contextual foundation for comparative education research in and on the region.

From afar, as these Asian regional changes unfolded, there were realizations that some form of “new world order” was inevitably emerging and that the superpowers such as the US were faced with the imperative of re-examining their positions regarding who or what would prevail. For instance, Huntington (1996) was among the prominent conservative leaders who warned of the looming new world order, of the need to guard the (American) national interest, to consolidate Western interests in general, and to accept the reality that “an image of an emerging universally Western world is arrogant, false, and dangerous” (p. 28). Huntington acknowledged the new significance of East Asian societies (as well as the pull of Latin America and Europe), noting that “the United States is pulled westward by the increasing wealth and influence of East Asian Societies, by the ongoing efforts to develop a Pacific community, epitomized in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, and by migration from Asian Societies” (p. 43). In short, he warned of the “threat” of a looming new world order with a clear new hub of activity, influence and focus in the Asia-Pacific region. Subsequently, Huntington (1997, p. 49) reiterated the need to “develop plans for lowering American involvement in the world in ways that will safeguard possible future national interests”. In similar vein, Brzezinski (1997) drew attention to Eurasia as “the world’s axial supercontinent” containing two of the world’s three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia (p.50). Brzezinski predicted (incorrectly) that China was not likely to maintain the levels of growth seen in the early 1990s, and while emerging as a “regionally dominant power, it is not likely to become a global one for a long time” (p. 59). However, more aptly, he argued for the emergence of a transcontinental system, a new way of thinking about the emerging world and about the role of the US within it (p. 64). Similarly, a notion of “transgovernmentalism” as the ideal in a new world order was promulgated by Slaughter (1997, p. 194) with “globe-spanning networks” as “government for the information age” in a real new world order (p. 197). Further, Mahbubani (1997, p. 155) argued that the Asia-Pacific region was the region to watch, that “the Asian renaissance is here to stay, with or without American involvement”...and that “with expanding trade, investment,

telecommunications, telemedia (sic), and travel flows, the Pacific Ocean is shrinking to a pond. Interdependence will certainly increase”.

To sum up, one can discern broad shifts in the global status quo that crystallized around the turn of the century, as the Asia-Pacific region (and particularly within it the East Asia sub-region) demanded radical rethinking of a Western-dominated world order, which in turn demanded rethinking of intellectual and other activities to accommodate and address the new realities. These circumstances and shifts underscore just how important considerations of context are for understanding issues and realities within and across countries, with special relevance for the Asia-Pacific region that is the focus of this special issue. The evolution of the field of comparative education, in its own right, reflected significant shifts in thinking about the needed and desirable ways we do research to document and understand the realities in education and society. Comparative education research in the Asia-Pacific region reflects these evolutionary shifts on multiple levels and the need for a careful consideration of contextual factors. The dialectic of the global and the local was to become a prominent theoretical notion in the field of comparative education (see discussion below) and it highlights the need for considering these broad shifts in thinking about global status-quo, with ramifications down through all levels to the local. Next, we turn to an examination of the epistemological roots of comparative education, connections to evolutionary shifts in conceptions of “world order”, and how they translate to different genres of comparative education and methodologies.

Addressing context and reality: the evolution of comparative education research traditions

Epstein (2008) contended that comparative education has three *epistemological* platforms—positivism, relativism and historical functionalism—each of which can be traced to three scholars of the 19th century: Marc-Antoine Jullien of France (1817), K.D. Ushinsky of Russia (1857), and Wilhelm Dilthey of Germany (1888), respectively. He claimed that the field “has developed along parallel lines, not by one stage eclipsing another but by the positioning of conceptual frameworks in juxtaposition and in tension with one another” (2008, p. 384). Thus, Jullien’s positivist approach endures alongside Ushinsky’s relativist methods as well as Dilthey’s historical functionalism. These normative epistemological benchmarks all offer a framework for generalization, but they view reality through different lenses and thus lead to different approaches.

In the first place, he positioned Jullien’s *positivism* as the founding epistemology. Positivism is the philosophy whose name originated with the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), which explains the physical facts by themselves, verifiable through observation. It views phenomena as subject to invariable laws. Jullien, who was ahead of Comte by more than a decade, proposed a systematic observation of educational phenomena in order to discover law-like principles to improve public systems of education. As Jullien stated in his *Esquisse* (cited in Palmer, 1993, p.171):

Education, like all other arts and sciences, is composed of facts and observations. It thus seems necessary to produce for this science, as has been done for other branches of knowledge, collections of facts and observations arranged in analytical tables, so that these facts and observations can be compared and certain principles and definite rules deduced from them, so that education may become an almost positive science....

To this end, Jullien designed tables with six main categories of education and a questionnaire of over 100 questions. National educational data was to be collated and juxtaposed in tables in order to discern trends and rank their performance, as well as determine their underlying causes

and identify what best practices might be transferred to other countries. The questionnaire, however, was never implemented and was soon forgotten, until its re-discovery in the 1940s at the International Bureau of Education in Geneva, where Pedro Roselló brought it to international fame through its publication in 1943 and 1962, respectively. Jullien's positivist platform gained dominance in the field of comparative education in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in North America (e.g., Anderson, 1961; Noah & Eckstein, 1969), and gained further prominence in the International Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies (Husén, 1967), as evidenced through the high visibility of PISA and TIMSS in contemporary international political discourses. Positivism is thus at the root of large-scale cross-national comparisons of a highly quantitative or statistical nature.

Epstein's second epistemological platform for the field is *relativism* (2008). It succeeds positivism, but does not surpass it, and continues on a parallel line in juxtaposition with positivism. This form of relativism, which embodied the concept of "national character", became dominant around the second half of the 19th century. K.D. Ushinsky of Russia and Michael Sadler of England are both noteworthy authors of this relativist epistemology in comparative education. Ushinsky's essay, entitled *On national character of public education* (1857), and Sadler's conference address (1900), *How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education?*, are both regarded as paradigmatic texts. They both expounded on the concept of "national character" and viewed education as inextricably bound to its social and cultural context. Thus, knowledge derived from its study was not transferable to other contexts. Key representatives of relativist "national character" approaches in comparative education include Mallinson (1957), King (1968), and Masemann (1990). This epistemological platform gives salience to the importance of context in comparative education.

A third epistemological platform, according to Epstein, is *historical functionalism*, attributable to the late 19th century German historian and philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey (although he himself denied that he was a historical relativist). Both Friedrich Schneider (1961a; 1961b) and Isaac Kandel (1933; 1955) ushered in this platform in comparative education, taking inspiration from Dilthey. Epstein defined historical functionalism as a fusion of (relativistic) history and (positivistic) macro-sociology. It examines education as "interrelated with other social and political institutions; and it can best be understood if examined in its social context" (Kazamias & Massialas, 1982, p. 309). Epstein explained that this inextricable relation between education and other social institutions, viewed from a macro-sociological perspective, exhibits universally generalizable features. But, historical functionalists would argue that such positivist laws governing education can best be understood within their historical (and therefore relativist) context. Epstein thus contended that historical functionalist epistemology in comparative education synthesizes positivist cross-national generalization—to show the universality of theories about education—relativist in-depth understanding of "national character" and the mutual influence between education and its socio-historical context.

Having laid down the root epistemological platforms of comparative education, it appears that the second and the third—relativism and historical functionalism—give due recognition to the place of context in comparative studies of education. In the next section we correlate these three epistemologies with the "types" of comparative education discourses which they vivified in order to trace the historical trajectory of the importance of context in comparative education research.

In his historical review of comparative education, Kazamias (2009a) categorized comparative education discourses into five dominant types or generations:

- (1) proto-scientific and administrative meliorist (late 18th to early 19th century);

- (2) administrative melioristic/reformative (19th century);
- (3) historical-philosophical cum liberal-humanist (20th century);
- (4) re-inventing the social scientific canon (late 1950s to early 1960s); and
- (5) re-inventing the historical (late 1980s and 1990s).

The first three discursive generations correspond in the same order with Epstein's three root epistemologies, respectively. These five types have occurred unevenly across time and space, and have co-existed simultaneously, as along parallel lines. With respect to the first type of discourse, the *proto-scientific and administrative meliorist* generation is associated with Jullien de Paris who initiated in the late 18th century an empirically based nearly *positive* science of comparative education that would provide a basis for the reform and improvement of education. It is called "proto-" meaning the "first" or "earliest form", in this case, of the scientific comparative study of education. As a prototypical social science, this discourse served as a preliminary version from which later forms are developed.

The second type of discourse, the *administrative melioristic/reformative*, pioneered by Sadler in the late 19th century, corresponds to the *relativist* root epistemology in Epstein's framework above. According to Kazamias, Sadler ushered in the historical-meliorist and cultural canon. Within this discourse generation, educational issues are studied in the context of their underlying societies, with a primary aim of understanding, in a sympathetic spirit, the real working of a foreign national system of education by finding out the historical, non-school "intangible, impalpable spiritual force" that vivifies it, in order to help us study and understand our own and help us improve it (Kazamias, 2009a, p. 142).

The third generation of comparative education discourse is the *historical-philosophical cum liberal-humanist*, of which the salient exponents in the early 20th century were Isaac Kandel (a student of Sadler), Nicholas Hans, Robert Ulich, and Friedrich Schneider. This generation corresponds with the historical-functionalist epistemological platform described by Epstein. Kazamias (2009b, p. 39) delineated the epistemological, methodological and ideological commonalities of these scholars with Sadler in their view of comparative education as a human (not an empirical or positive) science, shaped by an explanatory/interpretive *episteme* that aims at understanding and interpretation rather than prediction or policy-making. Its dominant approach was to analyze forces and factors (political, social economic and cultural) from a historical perspective as causes or influences of educational problems and of the similarities and differences in national systems of education. In continuity with the Sadlerian discourse, this strand was "historical-meliorist" because from understanding in historical perspective other national systems and their attempted solutions to educational problems can one attempt to improve domestic education. Likewise, it focused on national education systems and tended to be qualitative in research orientation. It was also "liberal-humanist" in that its proponents viewed comparative education as a positive force for the development of a liberal democracy. It displayed continuities with the second type of discourse in underscoring context, in terms of "forces and factors".

The fourth discourse type, *re-inventing the social scientific canon*, marks the neo-scientific era of comparative education which took shape during the late 1950s and early 1960s, particularly in the US, or what Cowen (2003) designated as the "Chicago and New York Schools", characterized by the salience of the empirical social sciences and the eclipsing of the historical-culturalist and interpretive strand. This generation marked the attempt to (re-)make comparative education into a positive and predictive "science", viewing historical-philosophical-humanist discourses, which tended to be purely speculative and descriptive, as unscientific. A

diversity of forms of neo-scientific discourses arose reflecting, in some sense, what Paulston (1994) described as the era of paradigmatic heterodoxy. Kazamias (2009a) identified five forms under this discourse genre: functionalism, methodological empiricism, the problem approach, a synthesis of history, social science and comparative education, and the conflict paradigms. Of these, we will comment on three for their relevance to this article. The first two, functionalism and conflict paradigms, both take societal structure as their foci, yet view education-society relations from completely opposite poles. *Functionalist* comparative education was led by C. Arnold Anderson, founder of the Chicago School of structural-functional thought. Functionalism explains social phenomena in terms of their function in or contribution to the operations of a larger social phenomenon, institution or society. Educational institutions and their various organizational components thus evolve in response to or as a function of the needs of the larger society. It views society optimistically as a unitary system and assumes that consensus and equilibrium are preferred states. While sharing with historical functionalism an understanding that education is properly understood in its societal context, structural-functionalism diverges from the former tradition in its attempt to make comparative education research scientific, empirical and grounded on quantitative methods, in search of law-like and ahistorical generalizable propositions. Functionalism was challenged by the conflict theories at the turn of the 1970s. The *conflict paradigms* underscore the effects of educational (macro) structures on maintaining social inequality and stratification. Two main forms of conflict theory are neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian conflict theories. Kazamias (2009a) also included world-systems theory, which was influenced by neo-Marxist theory. The importance of context in comparative studies of education viewed from these conflict paradigms remained, with an emphasis on the locus of power structures and social relations of production in some, and on the “‘international’ or ‘world’ context and dynamic of such relationships and transactions” (Kazamias, 2009a, p. 152) in another. Moreover, in the case of world-systems theory, context is perceived as being of a “‘hierarchical, unequal and exploitative nature existing or taking place within a ‘core- or centre-periphery’ dependency framework” (Kazamias, 2009a, p. 153).

Still within the scientific canon, but serving as a bridge to the next type of comparative education discourse, is the advocacy in the 1960s by Kazamias and associates to revise the historical approach to comparative education and bring about a *synthesis of history and social science* (Kazamias, 2009a, p. 151). Addressing the false dichotomy between historical and scientific studies, Kazamias (1963) argued that it was possible to make generalizations from comparisons of historical phenomena. His approach thus sought to bring together the social sciences and history in their common interest for the general and particular, albeit from diverse emphases and objectives.

The above approach leads to the fifth type of comparative education discourse: *reinventing the historical in comparative education*. New paradigms such as humanist and radical humanist theories (including feminist, postmodernist theories) were incorporated into comparative education research in the 1980s and 1990s. Kazamias (2009a, p. 155) highlighted the “British traditional and lately reinvented emphasis on *contexts* and *cultures*, both of which figured prominently in the millennium special issue of *Comparative Education*”. Steiner-Khamsi reinforced Kazamias’s stance by citing the cultural turn in the social sciences in the 1980s as a catalyst for the rediscovery of contextualized comparison in comparative education. Pointing to the existence of “researchers that simultaneously contextualize *and* compare”, particularly in the research domain of cross-national policy borrowing and lending, she commented: “Comparativist after comparativist, from Michael Sadler to Brian Holmes to Robert Cowen,

warned against analyzing education out of context and using comparison in ways that blindly advances cross-national policy borrowing” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2009, p. 1155). Within this genre, the work of Jürgen Schriewer is noteworthy. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann’s (1927–1998) theories of self-referential social systems, Schriewer and associates viewed educational theorizing as “rooted in and determined by varying contextual conditions and particular problems and issues, and by the distinct intellectual traditions and value systems characteristic of its respective system of reference and its related context of reflection” (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004, p. 31).

This historical overview of comparative education discourses has demonstrated that context has played an important—essential—role in research conducted in the field, albeit with varying intensities and with discontinuities in place and time. An influential core text that has recently been published in its second edition, *Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods* (Bray, Adamson & Mason, 2014), reaffirmed not only the importance of contextual understanding in research design of comparative studies, but also illustrated the nested nature of contextual factors across multiple and interdependent spatial units. Context thus continues to be heard as a *ritornello* in comparative education research up to the present day. And, as the articles in this special issue elucidate, context becomes even more important especially in an era of globalization of educational knowledge where there is a renewed interest in international comparisons and also where one is considering a rapidly reconfiguring world region such as the Asia-Pacific region that demands attention in a new world order. Comparative education runs the risk of being “used and abused”, borrowing a term from Noah & Eckstein (1969), if the role of context is underplayed.

Going a step further from the abovementioned dialogues, paradigms and approaches in comparative education, we would like to offer an additional perspective towards comparative education—comparative education as a dialectic. The dialectic approach to comparative education is particularly apposite in using comparative education as a means of reflection, especially in challenging a particular viewpoint that may have emerged from comparative education. The set of papers in this special issue points out that whereas comparative education may have generated international standards, these international standards may become decontextualized impositions to localities that are not useful for them unless the cultural contexts are taken into consideration (and when doing so, the international standards may have to be adapted and revised) (cf. Steiner-Khamsi’s paper). The history of comparative education epistemology has been one that has been dominated by empiricism. However, moving towards the extreme, when empiricism moves towards the denial of the transcendent source of knowledge, it will lead to another extreme of epistemology that is also subjective (cf. Amos’s paper). Yet, by their very nature, fields of knowledge are shaped by the dialectic of epistemological *and* sociological forces, wherein intellectual legitimacy and institutional expansion at times diverge. A constructive dialectic between the necessary and contingent dimensions of the field is vital for the development of comparative education (cf. Bray and Manzon’s paper). Meanwhile, religion and secularism may not necessarily be in opposition to each other. As will be explained, dynamic secularism may be a better context for religions to flourish, as it at the same time allows for religions to co-exist with secularity (cf. Davies’s paper). The emergence of English as an international lingua franca may be a good development of comparative education, as we can have a common language to *compare* differences between localities, but the dominance of English at the same time eliminates the richness of meanings that can only be understood by a particular expression in a particular language (cf. Majhanovich’s paper). That is, universality (as

developed by comparative methodologists) may not be, and should not be, a better alternative to particularity. In this vein, new regionalisms are taking shape in the context of a more globalized world (cf. Fox's paper). The set of papers in this special issue argues that universality co-exists with particularity, and because of this, comparative education always works in dialectics, considering views that seem to be in opposition, but at the same time generating richer meanings in the process of considering such opposing views.

The dialectics of comparative education

Comparative education, be it an academic discipline, a field of study, a method or a perspective, is always *busy*—either in performing the act of *comparing*, or defining what comparative education is (see e.g., Manzon, 2011; Wiseman & Anderson, 2013). Thus, comparative education, since its inception, has never been quiet. Interestingly, unlike other academic disciplines that have clearer definitional boundaries in terms of their knowledge scopes and enquiry approaches, comparative education, being loose from its inception continues to be loose (as Bray & Manzon described in their paper), functioning in whatever way people see it to be. This can be seen in its institutional expansion, such as in the World Council of Comparative Education Societies, and in the impacts of its institutionalization, including the IEA and OECD-organized international studies which have captured worldwide attention.

The significance of comparative education rides on the increased significance of globalization, whether in its politico-economic terms or cultural influences. More and more people realize, or argue for, the need of doing more comparative education (e.g. Arнове, Torres & Franz, 2013; Wilson, 2003). Within our field, this recognition speaks to the much broader contextual landscape of thinking about globalization, of “new world order” and of “transcontinentalism” mentioned earlier as debate occurred over prospects for a different world in the 21st century. Under the banalities of globalization, as Cowen (2006, p. 562) put it:

[A]ll who write about education are—courtesy of globalization—becoming comparative educationists. Already, philosophers and historians and sociologists and psychologists and anthropologists of education, and specialist sub-groups within education (such as music educators, higher education specialists, teacher educators, policy studies people, and effective and efficient schoolers) “do” comparative education.

Comparative education is a dialectic itself. When Bray and Manzon's paper pointed out the growth of comparative education in its institutionalization, both in terms of the expansion of the **World Council of Comparative Education Societies** and its constituent societies, the process of institutionalization has not tightened the intellectual boundaries of comparative education. Instead, institutionalization has enhanced and continues to enhance its intellectual looseness. Institutionalization generally functions as organizational formation, formalization, standardization and certification, etc. However, this has not worked for comparative education. Instead, the institutionalization of comparative education, as Bray and Manzon identified, has become a process of “embracive-ness” and inclusiveness in its membership admission and representation. The constituent societies are a mixture of national, sub-national, regional societies and language-based associations. Most are basically geographical units, but their geographical demographics always cross boundaries. Instead of making comparative education more standardized, the defining lines of nations, cultures, geographical boundaries and thus contexts are becoming more blurred and complex. As Wiseman and Anderson (2013) observed,

[A]s regions develop, the areas that comprise various affinity groups within those regions shift boundaries resulting from different exogenous influences and endogenous legitimacies. Reflecting on and understanding these shifts are the challenge for comparative and international education as a field. (p. 277)

There are therefore dialectics between institutional and intellectual legitimacies at the heart of comparative education. These dialectics pose a challenge and an opportunity for the field's development over time.

Amos's reflective paper further pointed out the dialectic nature of comparative education. First, comparative education by nature is a culture-sensitive discipline, but because of the strenuous efforts of comparativists to establish it as an academic field or discipline, efforts of scientization have unintentionally and ironically led to, and reinforced, decontextualization. Rigorous work on contextualized terminologies—such as competence, self-regulation and self-efficacy—that would vary according to contexts, has not become a forte of comparative education. Second, Amos highlighted another contradiction that while the focus of empirical research is on individuals, thus offering possibilities of rich contextual analysis, yet these studies claim to generate universal and transnational terminologies transcending the contexts of those studies. Finally, Amos's paper somewhat responded to Bray and Manzon's paper in indicating that the entry of scientization in comparative education may be one of the reasons why comparativists agonize about the field's disciplinary identity. Comparative education, unlike modern science which is organized in homogeneous and unified classifications clearly demarcated from neighbouring fields, is an interdisciplinary field that does not fit well with scientific disciplinary patterns.

The dialectics of globalization ideologies and context in comparative education

According to Cowen (2006), the growing significance of comparative education is also related to its symbiotic relationship with many terminologies and ideologies emerging within the globalization phenomenon, such as internationalization, regionalization, harmonization, lifelong learning, social capital, skill formation, and international development. In addition, the emergence of neo-liberal ideologies that call for accountability has led to governmental interest in international benchmarking and demands for accountability that can now be internationally located with the availability of large-scale cross-national studies such as TIMSS and PISA, as well as in university ranking exercises. There is therefore renewed interest in comparative education with these nascent ideologies emerging from globalization. Cowen (2006) likewise highlighted the relations between educational policy transfer and context and traced its genesis in the comparative education literature, noting that despite the fact that many researchers have written about its significance (e.g., Crossley, 2009, 2010), still “we are nowhere near having sorted out, intellectually, the problem of context” (p. 567).

In this vein, various contributors to this special issue offer warnings about the adoption of these globalization ideologies or about practices generating from them. For instance, Steiner-Khamsi cautioned that policy borrowing is a complicated matter. Context has to be the prior concern in any consideration of policy borrowing. Only policies that address contexts and become useful to these contexts will be worthwhile and effective. Without being relevant to the underlying contexts, many of the policy borrowing undertakings can become clichéd, lip service, or an extreme way to justify existing practice as already aligned to the successful practices in international benchmarks. She cited ample examples in her paper, such as the introduction of outcomes-based education ending up as a reinforcement of the existing system of teacher

surveillance in Mongolia, and the ongoing “Finlandization” debates in Japan and Germany that have hardly brought any change. Steiner-Khamsi identified a process of three stages to note in any policy borrowing endeavour: externalization, recontextualization and internalization; a framework which resonates with Cowen’s conceptualization of transfer, translation and transformation (2006, p. 566).

Majhanovich’s paper offered another cautionary note, in that she showed how neo-liberalism, globalization and knowledge economy become hegemonic ideologies imposing upon many countries and regions in the form of the adoption of the English language as an official language, even though the language may not mean anything to the majority of the populace. Therefore, many populations, the majority of whom are socially and economically disadvantaged, have to cope with a language that has nothing to do with their daily lives and which only benefits minority elites who are also the privileged class of the society. Majhanovich further indicated that under the ideology of neo-liberalism, governments across the world redefine the normative attributes of human capital as having to possess globalized perspectives and competencies, including the mastery of English as a fundamental requirement. The adoption of English in postcolonial societies has become a form of neo-colonialism. For those countries without colonial backgrounds in the Asia-Pacific region (e.g., Cambodia, Vietnam or Thailand), the adoption of English has become a neo-liberalist market response. Further, the proliferation of offshore universities (that normally adopt English as the medium of instruction) in the age of education export has created a situation in which people have no choice of language. In addition, Majhanovich commented that many countries, especially those in the Global South and Africa, actually have no choice but to adopt English. She thus argued that the imposition of the English language is a decontextualization movement, as it requires people to speak a language not related to their cultures and contexts. For comparative education, although the commonality of English provides a common language to enable various cultures and contexts to be engaged in comparative dialogues, it also eliminates many meanings that can only make sense in a particular language. The hegemony of the English language in global discourse, as well as within the Asia-Pacific region, is a theme that is echoed by Bray and Manzon and by Fox in their respective papers in this special issue.

Davies’s paper brings us to another dimension of the global-local dialectic: secularism and (extremist) religion. Davies defined secularism as the separation of church and state, such that a religion does not interfere in the workings and institutions of governance, including education. She maintained that secularism is not antithetical to religion, but can be a friend to religion, acting as an umbrella for all faiths and ensuring that none is privileged. Davies began her paper by pointing out, with due respect, that religions, especially extremist religions, can be exclusive, and this exclusiveness may lead to destructive behaviours. Actually, many wars in human histories are and have been religious in nature. Davies proposed a “dynamic secularism” that is adaptive to different contexts in time and space while having over-arching insistence on human rights. She argued that practising secularism with critical thinking and human rights, a society can be receptive to religion, not to one, but to various religions in peaceful co-existence. She provided ample and compelling examples that demonstrate how, even in secular countries, there are many religious groups holding substantial political power and many prestigious schools run by missionary and religious bodies. To put forward the notion of dynamic secularism, Davies called for an open mind and an embracing attitude in comparative education.

Davies’s paper is the second of the two papers in this special issue touching upon religion and comparative education. Amos’s paper cited the secularized foundation of empiricist or scientized

(comparative) education as problematic, since the denial of a transcendent foundation of social reality in a God or the gods leads to an aporia and ends up in immanence and subjectivity. Davies tangentially discussed secularization—described as the idea that the world is becoming less religious—as distinct from secularism, which is the stance she proposed and in which comparative education has a role in providing the contextual lenses for its application in different times and spaces. Both Davies and Amos identified the dialectics of secularization. For Davies, secularism can contain religions, and religions can flourish in dynamic secularism. For Amos, the secularization of knowledge itself assumes the prior religious ontology of knowledge. Davies offered several illustrations in the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere to illustrate her argument that a non-religious context, i.e., dynamic secularism, can be a better context for religions, in contrast to *a* religion, to flourish.

The dialectics of regionalism and partnership

Another set of dialectics in this special issue focuses on regionalism and partnership. Fox's paper observed the change in regionalization in the process of globalization. Perhaps above all other papers in this special issue, Fox's paper highlights the crucial re-arrangements of power and focus in the region that now exist within a radically transformed global landscape that Huntington and others (cited previously) were bracing to accept. The so-called old regionalization formed blocs of countries that were more politically organized to protect regional interests. However, Fox viewed the emergence of a new regionalism which originates from spontaneous partnership and later becomes formalized into a regional partnership. New regionalism, in contrast to the old version, is a manifestation of re-bordering in postcolonial times and is a move away from the unequal power dynamics of globalization. Fox cited the growth of regional constituent societies in the **World Council of Comparative Education Societies** as one outgrowth of these reconfigurations in the regional context. In consonance with what Bray and Manzon observed in their paper on the institutionalization of comparative education in the form of professional societies, the boundaries of these new regional societies of comparative education are loose and overlapping. In the process of formation and admission of these societies into the World Council, there were doubts and concerns as to whether there could be conflict, or overlap, of interests, but in the spirit of embrace-ness and inclusiveness, they were admitted to the World Council, infusing new dynamics into the fraternity of comparative education. Fox offers other specific examples of organizations and alliances in the Asia-Pacific region that illustrate this phenomenon of the new regionalism.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, comparative education is an open, inclusive and embraceive field of study. Thus, even though its institutionalization has become stronger and the size of the **World Council of Comparative Education Societies** is ever growing, the institutionalization and expansion of comparative education have not brought comparative education towards a particular entrenched paradigm—comparative education continues to be loose or flexible. Looseness may not be a comfortable terminology to many academics, but it may fit the ideology of the 21st century nicely, referring to the need for openness to uncertainty, flexibility, creativity and adaptability. Actually, all academic fields are changing in one way or another and the phenomenon of interdisciplinarity is growing significantly. Perhaps this is the nature of comparative education:

an interdisciplinarity that continuously and consciously redefines itself to offer meaningful alternatives to academia. Collectively, the set of papers in this special issue points to the very real importance of considering context in a variety of ways as we undertake comparative education research. As a region experiencing significant change, the Asia-Pacific provides numerous examples of comparative education research and consideration of contemporary issues in our field. As comparative education is a field that is fundamentally grounded on an interest in learning from each other's experience (that is, generated from each other's contexts), context has always mattered and *still* matters, even more so now with the growth of ethnographic studies in comparative education, despite the tremendous efforts that empiricism has exercised and still exercises on providing universal principles for understanding developments across nations and across cultures. The authors of this special issue in one way or another remind us that, if we are not careful, comparative education can be used to become an external standardization in the name of globalization or internationalization that will, instead of appreciating and tapping the richness of cultural and contextual diversities, become an imperial imposition on the recipients, albeit well intended. The critical reminders by our authors in this special issue presented as sets of dialectics point out the looseness of comparative education and show the need for comparativists to continuously challenge any convergent appeals, or at least to be aware of the potential danger of any overriding move towards convergence in the name of *comparative education*. Real comparativists are those who continuously challenge the status quo.

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