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CASE STUDY IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION:
PARTICULARITY AND GENERALIZATION

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Comparative education is not, I think, a science seeking general laws; nor is it a discipline of knowledge either in the sense that it provides a structure to support the growth of mind, or in the sense that it has distinctive conventions by which its truths are tested. I think none the worse of it for that, because I do not aspire to validate the study against attack from those who regard "science" and "discipline" as terms of approbation rather than description. Joseph Lannerys was conceding too much to positivist social science when he wrote of comparative education that its "hope is that it may become possible to provide a body of general principles which would help to guide policy-makers and reformers by predicting with some assurance, possible outcomes of the measures they propose".⁽¹⁾ I feel that here he is straining after a predictive power that is not comfortable or productive within the structure of comparative study, and that general principles are, within comparative education as within history, not the characteristic products of the study, but rather means towards the illumination of the particular. The figure or centre of attention is the individual: the general is the background which serves to throw the individual into clear relief.

In its essence comparative education is less concerned with predictions and possibilities than with that which is accepted as actuality occurring in time and space. Its happenings are located within the co-ordinates of living rather

(1) Lannerys, Joseph "What is comparative education?" xi-xiii in Education at Home and Abroad edited by Joseph Lannerys and Graham Taylor. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1973. p. xi

than within the co-ordinates of theory. It is descriptive rather than experimental. It deals in insight rather than law as a basis for understanding.

Let me explain this claim. When Lannerys writes of "general principles which would help to guide policy-makers and reformers by predicting, with some assurance, possible outcomes of the measures they propose", he seems to be aspiring to laws sufficiently well established to allow the actor to accept their predictive power rather than rely on his judgement of likelihood in the light of experience. If such laws exist, then the actor has less "figuring out" to do: he can exercise his judgement within the areas where the laws do not hold or do not guide. Within the areas in which general laws or principles do hold, they command his assent rather than appeal to his judgement.

In science, the appeal is to the logic of the process by which the result has been reached: to replicability, to the conventions of the scientific method. If you have conducted your investigation properly, then your result should be more assured than my judgement. Science penetrates the world of mere appearances to reveal a more real, or at least more demonstrable world than that which confounds the eye. "Scientists tell us that . . ." the saying goes; and we'd better believe them.

But in human affairs what the scientists tell us does not take us too far. "Other things being equal . . ." they begin, but other things never are. So we have to judge the effects of interacting laws which have never been systematically studied in interaction. And there remain large areas where we have no laws at all.

Thus we need to tutor our judgement, not simply to discipline it. The normative studies of ethics and politics serve to tutor our aspirations; but our grasp of realities - or as I might prefer

to call them, actualities - is improved by descriptive human studies, of which comparative education seems to me to be one. It is the fruits of these I am describing when I speak of "insight rather than law as a basis for understanding".

The most intelligent aim of the comparative study of human conduct in educational settings is the development of personal professional insight. Such personal insight is the characteristic source of that understanding on which we found our capacity to imagine the feasible yet surprising and the capacity to grasp rapidly and react intelligently to the unexpected developments we inevitably and frequently encounter. It is in life as in games the basis of the creative initiative and the creative response. It is such understanding that guides us beyond the reach of prediction. Literature and the arts foster it with a high degree of freedom to invent the revealing. History and comparative education seek the revealing in the authenticated. As history is, so to speak, a critical refinement of memory by evidence which makes it public, so comparative education is a rendering of educational travel into public experience.

Experience is made public to invite judgement in dialogue, and such judgement rests upon the possibility of an appeal to evidence. This evidence, the fundamental data source for comparative education, must be description; and I am going to argue that, since it became a self-conscious and academic study, comparative education has paid too little attention to observation and description, preferring to emphasise such abstractions as statistics and measurements on the one hand and school "systems" on the other. It might appear from the travels of its exponents that comparative education is an observational study, but in fact the typical comparative educationist collects records when abroad and writes his study largely from documents. His observations of the living educational process are generally used to give life to generalizations they are insufficient to support, or to provide the student with some protection against misreading his documents. No doubt they also underlie the conclusions he

offers us, but they are not presented in such a way as to allow us to criticize these conclusions.

I want to say: "Give me your evidence. Discuss it with me. Appeal to my judgement. Do not simply tell me your conclusions and ask me to trust your wisdom." And in some sense this must be a call to description.

Now, of course, description is itself a complicated business. Let me turn to intelligent professional description which is relatively unselfconscious in the nineteenth century educational traveller whose work I happen to know best: Hartvig Nissen, the Norwegian policy-maker, reformer, educational administrator and teacher who received a travel grant to visit Scotland in 1852. He wrote:

When one walks into a Scottish school, one almost always notices various large geographical maps hanging on the walls, and beside them, a lot of cardboard sheets, on which biblical matter is printed. Generally, one finds also coloured natural history diagrams accompanied by a text, These things, one can well say, give the Scottish school its physiognomy . . . One finds in places one, or more often, several blackboards, sometimes on easels, sometimes hanging on the walls and these "wallboards" are much used in teaching, especially in arithmetic and geography, but also in other subjects. There are also globes and different sorts of diagrams. Wall maps are now and then left without names; these are aids for teaching general or physical and mathematical geography.

Among the elementary schools I visited the 10 Heriots schools were certainly those best provided with a comprehensive selection of such teaching aids. Boards were fixed round about in the walls. In one of the schools I wrote down the following about their contents.

Ist board with religious knowledge.
 1. Introductory 2. Christology
 3. Basic knowledge which all must know.
 Each of the three divisions of this board contained the most important material with bible references.
 IIInd Chronology (Biblical and British)
 IIIrd Chronology (General)

IVth with physiological teaching aids (Picture of a human skeleton and other things.)

Vth Instead of the board, various weights, balances and other mechanical contrivances and small machines.

VIth Large scale representations of pillars. (The Ionic, Doric and Corinthian), friezes and other architectural features.

VIIth Rules

VIIIth A whole lot of mathematical figures and also drawings illustrative of vegetable physiology.

In addition to these inscribed blackboards, there were two others set on the wall. There was also a simple barometer and thermometer, and good maps on stands, together with natural history diagrams.(2)

Nissen is, in a relatively unselfconscious way, attempting the task of providing evidence through description, and although I don't think this is the place for elaborate methodological analysis, it seems to me worthwhile to reflect a little on what he is doing.

At one point he is offering a description of the contents of the blackboards in a school. He does not actually give us a reproduction of the contents, but a list of topics. He does not tell us whether the topics were headings on the boards or are his own characterizations of the content. He does tell us about what contemporary field-workers might call "data gathering and recording": "In one of the schools I wrote down the following about their contents." He also roughly locates within a distribution the case which he describes by telling us that it was one of those Heriot's schools "best provided with . . . teaching aids". His description then is concrete and particular, its

(2) Nissen, Hartvig. Beskrivelse over Skotlands Almueskolevaesen tilligmed forslag till forskjellige Foreanstaltninger til en videre Udvikling af det norske Almueskolevaesen. Christiania: Malling. 1854. pp. 47-49.

evidential base in record-keeping is adequately described, and some attempt is made to locate his case within a population of cases.

In the previous paragraph he offers us a generalized impression of the physical characteristics which give the Scottish school what he calls its "physiognomy". This is abstracted from the kind of observational visit recorded more particularly in the case of the Heriots school. It is a survey based upon a sample. From the context of his book we can obtain information about the sample of schools he visited though we have no way of establishing that the sample was representative of the total population of Scottish schools. The generalizations are, so far as we know, not based upon statistical techniques but on personal impression. The use of the indefinite pronoun, one (man in Norwegian) suggests an implicit claim that the same impression would be gathered from the same range of visits by most of the readers who are being addressed.

Nissen describes not only the appearance of the school, but the educational process. Here he is writing of the model school attached to the Normal School in Edinburgh:

In English some pieces were read from the reading book. All, without exception, read well, some remarkably finely. Thus, there was a lively thirteen-year-old boy, who had to read a short rhetorical piece, whose opening was: "Liberty is commensurate with and inseparable from British soil; British law proclaims even to the stranger and the sojourner, the moment he sets his foot upon British earth, that the ground on which he treads is holy, and consecrated by the genius of Universal Emancipation!" He read with absolute certainty, with strong and true intonation and with an expression in which deep and noble British self-esteem proclaimed itself, and he carried away all the people who were present to such an extent that an involuntary burst of applause broke out. The reader may feel reserve perhaps because this doesn't tally with our point of view; but when one is oneself present, it seems quite natural. One is oneself gripped by the same feeling and one is not offended that the feeling is allowed expression.

And even looked at in the light of reflection such a scene has its deep meaning. Here the common school shows its power to implant a feeling for freedom and nationality in its pupils' breasts; the love of fatherland is strengthened and nourished by the power of sympathy, and when thus the simplest working man's son in the common school and through the use of the materials of instruction prescribed for him is in a position to strike the finest heartstrings of his superiors and carry them with him in the stream of emotion, then one gets not only the understanding but the feeling too that the people are one and that the training even if different in grade yet is similar and common for all parts of the people.(3)

At the root of this there is also observation. There is the careful transcription of a passage from a reader. (4) There is the statement that this passage was read by a thirteen-year-old boy as part of an oral examination in English, the latter information given in the paragraph preceding those quoted, and there is the statement that a burst of applause broke out. But there is also evaluative comment as, for example, in the description of the lad as "lively" and in the description of the quality of his reading. And there is interpretation of the responses to behaviour and of its motivation. The audience were "carried away". Their applause was "involuntary". Finally, we are offered by Nissen an interpretation of the situation as a whole - "such a scene has its deep meaning" - which is reflective and deliberate, or to express the point more familiarly, is theoretical.

Now it is clear that any description, even if it is far more controlled than that of Nissen, rests upon the judgement of him who observes and describes, both in respect of what he selects as worthy of notice and in respect of interpretative perception. There may also be evaluative comment and reflective interpretation, and indeed it may be argued that these make the description more accessible to criticism because they provide

(3) Ibid. pp. 144-145

(4) The passage may be found in A Course of Elementary Reading in Science and Literature by J.M. McCulloch (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 43rd Edition, 1864 pp. 272-273 with a preface suggesting first publication about 1830) and is attributed to Curran.

evidence regarding the position of the observer. All description derives its form from falling into place within a perspective whose structural principle is inseparable from the point of view of an observer.

Now, I want to make two claims. First, if one takes comparative education to denote the activity of studying outside one's own cultural boundaries, then there is a perspective provided by it which cannot be provided by any other principle of study. Crudely, "tae see oursel's as ithers see us". More elaborately, to contribute patterns of descriptive selection and interpretations which question those within the culture in which the observation is made. If, like me, you believe that there are grave problems in making social sciences self-critical through falsifiable predictive theory - problems we can assume have been solved when it becomes necessary to bar social scientists from filling up football pools because of their power to predict the results - then a comparative base for critical interpretation is of very great importance.

Second, the aspiration towards positivist and predictive social science models in the hope - to return to Lannerys - "that it may become possible to provide a body of general principles which would help to guide policy-makers and reformers by predicting with some assurance, the possible outcomes of the measures they propose", has led to an undervaluing of observation and description, an overvaluing of the written source, of the statistical, of the accounts educational systems offer of themselves. Such studies tend to aspire towards objectivity and thereby to lose the critical perspective which is inseparably linked to the cultural location of the observer.

While comparative education has been weakening its investment in particular and concrete observation, the area of interest which I had developed - research in curriculum and teaching - has

been moving towards the reinstatement of field observation, the feeling being that much work cast in the paradigm of psychometric experiment has only tenuous connection with the recognizable world of the school. Hence an aspiration to check carefully the characteristics of the school, an aspiration already carried far enough to throw doubt on the implicit assumptions about educational reality which underly research conducted without the polluting intimacy of fieldwork.

I feel sure that comparative education will miss making an important contribution to the understanding of schooling if it does not participate in the current development of case-study approaches to educational process and educational institutions. Indeed, I should like to see this society and the British Educational Research Association getting together to discuss the potential and problems of case study based on fieldwork, either by jointly sponsoring a conference or by making the two annual conferences coincide in date and place so that some sessions can be shared.

Towards such a meeting let me contribute a line of thinking.

A readiness to return from analysis based upon the statistical manipulation of components to descriptive or holistic approaches is detectable at the moment in applied social sciences. The statistical assessment of probabilities is the basis of a decision-making strategy which works rather well in industrial or agricultural settings and in discriminating between hypotheses derived from theory. But many feel that the attempt to deploy it to evaluate educational and social programmes, thereby guiding decision-makers by law-like predictions, has exposed serious weaknesses in the paradigm.

Reactions to this have been diverse, as one might expect. The distinction which has emerged is often posed as it is in the

current issue of Anthropology and Education Quarterly ⁽⁵⁾ as one between qualitative and quantitative. I do not myself believe this to be the crucial distinction, but rather one created by the distribution of skills among research personnel. Let me, therefore, reach after an alternative way of characterizing the dilemma.

All events or existences may be regarded as unique or as recurrent. All study is the study of cases. All study of cases implies classes because to name a case is to make it an instance of a class: that is to say to speak of a particular school is to designate a case of the class, school.

Now, in respect of any question or group of questions we care to pose a case may be regarded as representative of a class or as exemplary, but not representative, of a class.

In the case of my stopping writing to apply heat to the water in my kettle in the expectation of its boiling I participate in a case of applying heat to water which is representative of its class other things being equal and the protective reservation is not in practice an onerous one. Social scientists working outside controlled laboratory conditions soon discovered that their cases could not be related to classes in this regular representative way, for their classes contained relevant multivariate factors in which the individual components varied independently of one another or entered into complex interactions. So they moved to the strategy of using a sample of cases because this enabled them to devise statistical techniques capable of assessing the probability of the sample of cases being representative of the class.

However, this leads in applied social science to the relation of probabilistic predictions to action. For example, such a prediction as that a new Nuffield Science Course will lead to greater mastery of science. Now the trouble about issues posed in this form is that they regard the instance as unimportant. If it were necessary for the action taken in all social cases to be uniform and consistent, that is for social policy to be absolutely uniform throughout the policy area, then the strategy might be acceptable. But it is not. If our curriculum leads to improvement in 50% of cases, no change in 10% and deterioration in 40% (a situation which can yield significance at .05 level of experimentals over controls), there is no need for 100% of schools to adopt it. So we must get down to cases; and, as soon as we do, we are caught in the task of tutoring the judgement of participant actors rather than shaping the rulings of policy-makers. The statistical and the judgemental assessments of probabilities are quite different in logic.

In statistical procedures the problem is the light thrown on the class by the case. But in judgemental areas the problem is the light thrown on my case by other cases. The method is the comparison of case with case.

There is a problem in comparative education as it is normally practised parallel to the problem of the experimental paradigm. Educational systems and generalizations about them are abstractions subject to reservations similar to those I have expressed in respect to predictive laws. And generally they lack empirical foundation. I have been struck for many years by the success Sweden has had in changing the structure of its school system without innovating in its classroom system. But the classroom has been little studied by comparative educationists.

To sum up. Criticism of the experimental sample paradigm in educational research has led to a resurgence of interest in

case study. I am mounting a like criticism of the tradition in comparative education of studying and writing about the systems of other countries, and asking that we develop in our field a better grounded representation of day-to-day educational reality resting on the careful study of particular cases. The accumulation of cases may yield some generalizations in due course; but these will never supplant the need for shrewd practical understanding which can only feed on the descriptive representation of practice.

In short, if you want to make a contribution to comparative education, I urge you to document very closely biology teaching or staff meetings or headship or individual schools as institutions in several countries.

Two principal lines of method are open to you. One is the ethnographic tradition of participant observation. One, which I call the historical tradition, is that of gathering oral evidence by interview. There are variations within each tradition and compromises between them. I am myself planning work on the comprehensive school in Europe based upon institutional case studies in an historical tradition.

Whichever way individual workers go, they must be meticulous about their records and as soon as they have completed their study such records of first-hand observation and interviewing need to be lodged in national archives which could be replicated internationally on microfiche.

Historical studies made a gigantic leap forward in the nineteenth century when the governmental archives of most European countries were opened to historians. I believe that a parallel revolution in comparative education could occur if detailed fieldwork data became available in the form I have proposed, and if comparative studies which have not taken account of such data became unacceptable to scholars in this field.