

# *Case Study in Comparative Education particularity and generalisation*

LAWRENCE STENHOUSE

Comparative education is not, I think, a science seeking general laws; nor is it a knowledge either in the sense that it provides a structure to support the growth of the sense that it has distinctive conventions by which its truths are tested. I think worse of it for that, because I do not aspire to validate the study against attack from regard 'science' and 'discipline' as terms of approbation rather than description. Lauwerys 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" [2]. I feel that here he is straining 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, 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 generalisations than with that which is accepted as actuality occurring in time and space. Its home is located within the coordinates of living rather than within the coordinates of the abstract, descriptive rather than experimental. It deals in insight rather than law as a means of understanding.

Let me explain this claim. When Lauwerys 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 the situation in the light of experience. If such laws exist, then the actor has less 'figuring out' to do and can exercise his judgement within the areas where the laws do not hold or do not guide him. In 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 achieved, to its replicability, to the conventions of the scientific method. If you have conducted an 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 dependable, world than that which confounds the eye. 'Scientists tell us that ...' the saying goes, and we had better believe them.

However, in human affairs what the scientists tell us does not take us too far. 'All men are being equal ...' they begin, but other things never are. So we have to judge the

need to tutor our judgement, not simply to discipline it. The normative studies of politics serve to tutor our aspirations; but our grasp of realities—or as I might prefer, actualities—is improved by descriptive human studies, of which comparative seems to me to be one. It is the fruits of these I am describing when I speak of more than law as a basis for understanding’.

The 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 of that understanding on which we found our capacity to imagine the feasible yet not and our capacity to grasp rapidly and react intelligently to the unexpected events we inevitably and frequently encounter. It is in life as in games the basis of the initiative and the creative response. It is such understanding that guides us beyond the conventional tradition. Literature and the arts foster it with a high degree of freedom to invent the history and comparative education seek the revealing in the authenticated. As I have to speak, a critical refinement of memory by evidence which makes it public, so that education is a rendering of educational travel into public experience.

What is made public to invite judgement in dialogue, and such judgement rests upon the authority 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 habit of us and academic study, comparative education has paid too little attention to the evidence and description, preferring to emphasise such abstractions as statistics and generalisations on the one hand and school ‘systems’ on the other. It might appear from the work of its exponents that comparative education is an observational study, but in fact the comparative educationist collects records when abroad and writes his study largely from reports. His observations of the living educational process are generally used to give authority to generalisations which they are insufficient to support, or to provide the student with a defence against misreading his documents. No doubt they also underlie the generalisations he offers us, but they are not presented in such a way as to allow us to criticise his conclusions.

One might say: ‘Give me your evidence. Discuss it with me. Appeal to my judgement. Do not expect me your conclusions and ask me to trust your wisdom’. In some sense this must be the basis of description.

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

When one walks into a Scottish school, one almost always notices various large wall maps, historical 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 illustrations accompanied by a text. These things, one can well say, give the Scottish schoolmaster a 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 almost everywhere left without names; these are aids for teaching general or physical and geographical geography.

Among the elementary schools I visited, the 10 Heriots schools were certainly those provided with a comprehensive selection of such teaching aids. Boards were fixed



ple who were present to such an extent that an involuntary burst of applause  
out. The reader may feel reserve perhaps because this does not tally with our  
of view; but when one is oneself present, it seems quite natural. One is oneself  
d by the same feeling and one is not offended that the feeling is allowed  
sion.

even looked at in the light of reflection such a scene has its deep meaning.  
he common school shows its power to implant a feeling for freedom and  
ality in its pupils' breasts; the love of fatherland is strengthened and nourished  
power of sympathy, and when thus the simplest working man's son in the  
on school and through the use of the materials of instruction prescribed for him  
position to strike the finest heartstrings of his superiors and carry them with  
the stream of emotion, then one gets not only the understanding but the feeling  
at the people are *one* and that the training even if different in grade yet is similar  
ommon for all parts of the people. [4]

oot of this there is also observation. There is the careful transcription of a passage  
der [5]. There is the statement that this passage was read by a 13-year-old boy as  
oral examination in English, the latter information given in the paragraph preceding  
ed, and there is the statement that a burst of applause broke out. But there is also  
comment as, for example, in the description of the lad as 'lively' and in the  
a of the quality of his reading. And there is interpretation of the responses to  
and of its motivation. The audience were 'carried away'. Their applause was  
ry'. Finally, we are offered by Nissen an interpretation of the situation as a  
*such a scene has its deep meaning*"—which is reflective and deliberate or, to express  
more familiarly, is theoretical.

is clear that any description, even if it is far more controlled than that of Nissen, rests  
udgement of him who observes and describes, both in respect of what he selects as  
notice and in respect of interpretative perception. There may also be evaluative  
and reflective interpretation, and indeed it may be argued that these make the  
a more accessible to criticism because they provide evidence regarding the position  
erver. All description derives its form from falling into place within a perspective  
ctural principle is inseparable from the point of view of an observer.

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

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

teaching—has been moving towards the reinstatement of field observation, since cast in the paradigm of psychometric experiment seems to have only tenuous contact with the recognisable world of the school. Hence an aspiration to check carefully the claims of the school, an aspiration already carried far enough to throw doubt on the assumptions about educational reality which underly research conducted without the intimacy of fieldwork.

I feel sure that comparative education will miss making an important contribution to our understanding of schooling if it does not participate in the current development of new approaches to educational process and educational institutions. Indeed, I should like to see the Comparative Education Society and the British Educational Research Association join together to discuss the potential and problems of *case study based on fieldwork* jointly sponsoring a conference or by making the two annual conferences coincide in 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 data to descriptive or holistic approaches is detectable at the moment in applied social science. The statistical assessment of probabilities is the basis of a decision-making strategy valued rather well in industrial or agricultural settings and in discriminating between educational programmes derived from theory. But many feel that the attempt to deploy it to evaluate educational social programmes, thereby guiding decision-makers by law-like predictions, has serious weaknesses in the paradigm.

Reactions to this have been diverse, as one might expect. The distinction which is often posed (as it is in a recent issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*) 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. We must therefore, reach after an alternative way of characterising the dilemma.

All events or existences may be regarded as unique or as recurrent. All study is 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 of schools.

Now, in respect of any question or group of questions we care to pose, a case is 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 event of its boiling I participate in a case of applying heat to water which is representative of a class of *other things being equal*, and the protective reservation is not in practice an onerous one. 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 were not defined by 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 individual cases because this enabled them to devise statistical techniques capable of assessing the probability that the sample of cases would be representative of the class.

However, this leads in applied social science to the relation of probabilistic prediction to action. For example, such a prediction as that a new Nuffield Science Course would yield a greater mastery of science. Now the trouble about issues posed in this form is that the instance is unimportant. If it were necessary for the action taken in all social science to be uniform and consistent (that is, for social policy to be absolutely uniform throughout a policy area) then the strategy might be acceptable. But it is not. If our curriculum changes yield improvement in 50% of cases, no change in 10% and deterioration in 40% (a situation which can yield significance at 0.05 level of experimental over controls), there is no need for all schools to adopt it. So we must get down to cases; and, as soon as we do, we are

nal procedures the problem is the light thrown *on the class* by the case. But in areas the problem is the light thrown on *my* case by other cases. The method is son of case with case.

a problem in comparative education as it is normally practised parallel to the the experimental paradigm. Educational systems and generalisations about them ons subject to reservations similar to those I have expressed about predictive laws; y they lack empirical foundation. I have been struck for many years by the success had in changing the structure of its school system without innovating in its ystem. However, the classroom has been little studied by comparative educa-

p. Criticism of the experimental sample paradigm in educational research has led nce of interest in case study. I am mounting a like criticism of the tradition in education of studying and writing about the *systems* of other countries, and we develop in our field a better grounded representation of day-to-day educational ng on the careful study of particular cases. The accumulation of cases may yield lisations in due course; but these will never supplant the need for shrewd practical ng which can only feed on the descriptive representation of practice.

if you want to make a contribution to comparative education, I urge you to ery closely biology teaching or staff meetings or the role of the principal or hools as institutions in several countries.

incipal lines of method are open to you. One is the ethnographic tradition of *observation*. One, which I call the historical tradition, is that of *gathering oral interview*. There are variations within each tradition and compromises between a myself planning work on the comprehensive school in Europe based upon case studies in an historical tradition.

er way individual workers go, they must be meticulous about their records and, as ey have completed their study, such records of first-hand observation and g need to be lodged in national archives which could be replicated internationally e.

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

## NOTES

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