

BOOK REVIEW

Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods (2nd edition)
By Mark Bray, Bob Adamson and Mark Mason (Eds.) (2014), 453p
ISBN: 978-988-17852-8-2, Hong Kong: Comparative Education
Research Centre and Springer

The first edition of this book was received with great acclaim. It has been widely reviewed, adopted as a basic instructional text in many universities, and translated into at least six languages. In the past seven years, however, we have seen an acceleration in the pace of internationalization of education, stimulated by increased comparison across countries. This trend has resurfaced arguments about whether, in fact, national education systems can be (or should be) compared given profound cultural differences across countries. Methodological advances have made clear the challenges in comparing systems on the basis of student performance affected by much more than schooling. Even as some degree of convergence has been noted in national systems, comparison has become more complex. Those new to comparative studies will find in this second edition a carefully structured guide to the field; more seasoned veterans will find a rich source of conceptual perspectives suggesting important research topics.

Rather than a collection of studies comparing countries, this book provides a variety of frameworks for understanding what comparison is and how it can provide valuable insights into education systems. Comparison of the utility of these different perspectives is improved by re-introduction of a complex categorical framework, the Bray-Thomas “cube” employing dimensions of content, levels and demographic groups.

The book opens with a review of historical perspectives, noting how changes in methods and perspectives have accompanied or been impacted by changes in political and economic systems as well as advances in academic disciplines. Education is a political and social instrument: systems vary widely in their purposes and systems of control; each discipline imposes a distinct framework; and a variety of analytic methods have been devised to fit the various approaches. Each of these chapters is well-structured and heavily documented including latest contributions. Even the expert in the field will find much of value in these chapters.

The second and major section of the book is 11 chapters each covering a particular focus of comparison. These include places, systems, times, demographic groups, cultures, policies, curricula, values, approaches to learning and to teaching, and measurement of outcomes. These are high quality state-of-the-art reviews of the literature that cover major perspectives, define unresolved issues and suggest possible solutions. There is relatively little overlap in the cited references, which may indicate that comparative education is experiencing the same evolution as other fields or disciplines before it, generating isolated specializations. Or it may reflect an explicit decision by the authors and editors to include as much of available literature as possible.

Each of the chapters demonstrates how comparison can be structured to reveal the impact of otherwise unnoticed factors on educational outcomes. In effect, comparative analysis reminds of the complexity that underlies most events. Even as we become increasingly aware of the universality of certain principles, there is also increasing evidence of the multiple ways to produce learning and of the advantages that can accrue to maintaining that diversity.

I found particularly enlightening the chapter about comparing curricula. Most empirical research addresses other aspects of education, limiting both conceptual development and my understanding of its issues. The authors provide a scheme for classifying curricula that links ideologies to content, method and assessment, implying a number of researchable hypotheses. In another scheme they differentiate between purpose, focus and manifestations; and then provide a set of specific questions

for each. They then suggest which research methods would be most appropriate for studying each of the combinations. In only 20 pages they provide a rich research agenda, as well as an extensive bibliography that provides examples. Other chapters are equally stimulating: the text has enough to support a year-long course on comparative research topics and methods.

The editors warn that the book is neither a research manual nor a meta-analysis of the comparative research literature (nor is it an encyclopedia of invidious comparisons). As well-explained in the final chapter, this marvelously coherent collection has been written in a meta-cognitive style: its objective is to raise researchers' awareness about how their decisions about foci and tools shape the reality their actions will affect. Had I taken a course which used this text as it should be, no doubt my career would have taken a different path.

*Noel McGinn
Emeritus Professor
Harvard University Graduate School of Education*