



Crossing borders: Research in comparative and international education

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ABSTRACT

Published articles permit mapping international and comparative education research. We reviewed 605 articles published 2004–2008 in four major journals. Using title, abstract, and entire text we explored thematic focus, geographic focus, level/type of education studied, method, and funding. The economic, political, and social context of education receives far more attention than its content. Comparative and international education research reflects more diversity than convergence in approach, theory, and methodology. The research community moves in multiple directions simultaneously, insisting that understanding education requires studying not only what happens within schools but also where the schools sit and who enters their doors.

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1. Context matters

Education policy, Education theory, Education attitudes and values, Globalization, Not computers and technology, Not HIV and AIDS, And less curriculum and pedagogy than anticipated.

Emphases in comparative and international education research have evolved to address changing circumstances. Earlier relatively obscure, girls' education, for example, has become a major focus. Still, two sorts of consistency stand out. First, education's context continues to attract more attention than its content, a trend noted by several analysts. While curriculum, pedagogy, and instructional materials remain of interest, the concentration appears to have shifted increasingly toward the economic, political, and social context of education, especially education policy. Second, notwithstanding periodic calls for a common body of theory and a standardized, shared methodology, comparative and international education research reflects far more diversity than convergence in approach, theory, and methodology. Scholars may share a strong sense of what matters and what warrants attention. In their research, however, they regularly and insistently crossfield, disciplinary, and methodological borders.

There is a long tradition of surveying published articles in comparative and international education to develop a picture of scholars' interests and priorities. Below we review several of the major contributions. Most common have been efforts to explore

the specification and content of comparative education as a field or discipline. The strategy is straightforward: to determine emphases in scholarship, review what scholars publish. As we indicate below, the practice has varied. Some commentators review articles in a single prominent journal, generally relying on article titles to categorize them. Other commentators survey publications in several journals and consider article summaries as well as titles. Some analysts are concerned with explicitly comparative research, while others focus on research in international settings, that is, research sites other than the primary country of the researcher.

Our starting point was somewhat different. To support planning for research funding within the framework of British foreign aid, Joel Samoff and Michele Schweisfurth developed an overview of major themes in recent research in international development education (Samoff and Schweisfurth, 2009; to date, unpublished). Surveying that research began with a review of publications in relevant academic journals. For that, Jesse Foster and Nii Antiaye Addy reviewed the 605 articles published over five years (2004–2008) in four major English language international and comparative education journals: Comparative Education (CE), Comparative Education Review (CER), Compare, and the International Journal of Educational Development (IJED). (The journal descriptions and summaries of that review are in [Appendices A, C, and D](#).)

While our review complements the earlier overviews of comparative and international education, it departs from them in several important ways. Our primary concern was to survey the terrain, rather than to weigh in on the debate on the status of comparative education as a discipline or field. We used the journal content to provide a primarily descriptive overview of the major thematic patterns within comparative and international education. Since our analysis of the terrain relies strictly on the data that

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emerged from the journal content; we are unable to address questions such as what is the appropriate characterization of comparative and international education, or who or what are its key influencers. While we consider why certain themes or patterns emerge more than others, our primary goal was to develop a picture of comparative and international education as it is reflected through the content of these four journals.

Additionally, our review sought to address the limitations of the methodological approaches employed to date by previous reviewers. First, to strengthen the accuracy of our categorizations and to reduce the confusion created by articles' different titling styles, we examined not only article titles and abstracts but surveyed the articles' full text. Second, unlike earlier reviews that generally used articles as the unit of analysis and organized them into unique categories, to capture scholars' multiple concerns our analysis developed an alternative unit of analysis for measuring journals' content and used non-exclusive categories. As well, rather than beginning with sets of exclusive categories, we sought to record what the researchers addressed. For example, a single article might be categorized as concerned with primary and secondary education rather than insisting that it be lodged in one or the other. That permitted us to use "multiple" to categorize research explicitly focused on several education levels rather than as a catch-all for "more than one level."

Though more extensive and detailed than most other reviews, our examination was necessarily constrained by its sources. Our window onto the research terrain was a selection of major English-language journals that publish research on education development. Accordingly, we cannot report on all research deemed comparative or international, for example articles published in foreign language journals, journals with a broader scope, or in the more specialized journals that concentrate on, say, curriculum or pedagogy or evaluation. To be clear: our review has the fidelity and limitations of a map that identifies major features but that does not indicate every hill and tree. That said, maps are quite useful. Relying on a careful review of the 605 articles rather than simply their titles and abstracts permits a nuanced report.

Our review of journals found both the expected and the unexpected. It is useful to summarize the broad patterns before proceeding to our more detailed analysis. As we have noted, our major concern was to develop a comprehensive and inclusive picture. This initial summary reports the percentages of articles that addressed each of the five dimensions of major interest: (i) thematic focus (ii) geographic region, (iii) level/type of education, (iv) research design/method, and, (v) funding source. Since the article has been the most common unit of analysis in comparative and international education journal reviews, we begin with that approach (though we use non-exclusive categories) to provide a broad overview of the distribution of articles across topics. Then, to provide a refined view of the content and to compare journals despite the differences in the number and length of their articles, we identified themes and topics within articles and recorded the frequency with which they were mentioned. We discuss our approach more fully in sections of the paper that follow after the summary findings.

We began with broad education themes. Overall, the journal content reviewed addressed education in society (social context) nearly a third more often than education administration and governance (direct education context), and more than twice as often as teaching and learning (education content). Specifically, far more of the articles reviewed (41%) addressed education policy and planning than any other topic. Other topics that received significant attention were education theory (addressed in 24% of the articles), attitudes and values (21%), and globalization (20%). Recall that these are overlapping, not exclusive, categories. Striking were several education issues that we expected to command

significant attention but that were scarcely visible in these journals (each addressed in 2% of the articles reviewed): information and communication technology, education leadership, examinations, and textbooks. To our surprise, health and nutrition, including HIV and AIDS, and the environment were not prominent topics in the articles reviewed. Less surprising was the limited attention to foreign study and the inattention to special needs education and the inspectorate.

Clearly, Africa and Asia are of special interest in this literature. (Geographic region was the sole dimension of our review where we employed exclusive categories.) Nearly one-fourth of the articles surveyed focused on Africa (24%), followed by Asia (23%), and Europe (17%). Twenty-one percent focused on more than one geographic region. The regional focus varied sharply across the journals: Africa was the focus of 37% of the articles in *IJED* and 8% of the articles in *CE*.

Next we considered education level or type. The global focus on education for all led us to expect an overwhelming concentration on basic, in practice primary, education. Scholarly research, it turns out, retains a broader range than the studies commissioned by funding and technical assistance agencies. Secondary education received as much attention as primary (34%), with substantial attention to higher education as well (18%). One fourth of the articles studied education across multiple levels. Technical and vocational education (3%) and early childhood education (1%) are hardly visible here.

More of these articles relied on document review and historical analysis (53%), case studies (44%), and surveys and quantitative analysis (35%) than on interviews and focus groups (27%) or observations (13%). Only five of the 605 articles reported on tracer studies or longitudinal analyses, whereas four articles employed experimental or quasi-experimental methods. Some authors combined several approaches.

Our effort to determine the funding sources for the research reviewed proved largely unsuccessful because most articles simply did not say. Where the funding source was identified, commonly the reference was to a university, a research institute, or a foundation, even though that institution may have been an intermediary, say between an aid agency and the researcher, rather than the principal funder.

Our mapping effort shows clearly the permeability of field, disciplinary, and methodological boundaries. The community of comparative and international education researchers moves in multiple directions simultaneously, does not feel constrained by the walls that commonly separate, say, economists from anthropologists or survey research from textual analysis, and regularly insists that understanding education requires studying not only what happens within schools' walls but also where the schools sit and who enters their doors.

2. Earlier reviews

One foundation for our work was earlier efforts to examine research in comparative and international education. The most common strategy has been the one followed here: to explore the terrain by examining publications in the journal or journals widely regarded as the most important and most influential in a field that regularly struggles to define itself and defend its disciplinary rigor. In education research and teaching, comparative education has generally involved attention to foreign settings. The terminology used here—comparative and international education—makes explicit that intersection of comparative and international.

The founding of several prominent comparative education journals beginning in the mid 20th Century helped to solidify the academic standing of an emerging discipline, especially in the United States and Europe. The four journals used for this review,

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