Reflections on comparative education and international development

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The relationship between international development and comparative education in the fields of scholarship and policy has been especially strong and significant over the past 50 years. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the field of comparative education focused on the relationship between levels of educational attainment and economic development. How else to explain the phenomenal growth of the German and Japanese economies despite the devastation wrought by war? Certainly, according to comparative education theorists, these countries were able to develop rapidly because of the stock of human resources that existed. When I was studying in what was to become the Stanford International Development Education Center (SIDEC) in the mid-1960s, economists such as Nobel Laureate Theodore Schultz (1967) were articulating the need to look at education as an investment in human capital (a notion to be revisited below) rather than as a mere consumption expenditure. At about the same time, political theorists such as James S. Coleman (1965) and Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba (1963) were documenting that education was a key to political capacity building and the formation of a more tolerant civic culture in the emerging new nations of Africa, Asia and Oceania, as well as in the industrialised societies of Europe and North America.

Beginning in the 1970s, my own writings on education and social change in Latin America favoured the point of view that political development was related to political participation. Depending on the nature of a particular political regime, education could be shaped to control people and limit their world views of what was possible or it could be an agency equipping individuals to question their existential realities and take action to improve their life circumstances and societies as a whole. I was greatly influenced, as were many of my peers, by the writings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) provided a vision of a humanistic, liberatory education for the most marginalised populations of the world.

Other theorists/activists who caught the attention of students of comparative and international education included economists Denis Goulet (1971) of the University of Notre Dame and Dudley Seers (1971) of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, who wrote about the ethics of development and about measuring development in relation to eliminating poverty and improving the quality of life of everyone. Literacy and education were essential components of what, in normative terms, could be considered to be development.

Over the ensuing decades, notions of development were viewed in even more comprehensive terms related to the self-determination of individuals, their communities, and nations to pursue courses of action in accord with their values and vision of
both a good life and a just society. In addition to capacity building and participation, development necessarily had to be related to equitable access to a society’s goods and services – education being a critical, valued asset – as well as to environmental sustainability both locally and globally (Fuenzalida 1985).

Furthermore, development, according to Noble Peace Laureate Amartya Sen (1999), is closely linked to freedom. For Sen, freedom is related to the enhancement of capabilities in individuals (also see Nussbaum 2001). One such capability, in my view, is a multicultural-global efficacy, as championed by multicultural education pioneer James A. Banks (2009).

By the 1980s, development was viewed not only with regard to more equitable relations within but also between societies, notably between the core metropolitan countries of the North and those of the developing South (Fuenzalida 1985). Development and comparative education theorists, moreover, by the 1990s, were examining what could be learned from the study of the rapidly growing economies of Asia, which built on traditional values. East Asian scholars, such as Ruth Hayhoe and Julia Pan (2002), championed cross-cultural studies contributing to a dialogue among civilisations that would lead to a greater knowledge of how education systems reflected their societal contexts, especially those imbued with Confucian values. Such studies offer a strong contrast to modernisation theories with their unilinear assumptions that less developed countries necessarily have to abandon tradition to evolve towards some ideal model of western society.

Today, the dominant theme in comparative education studies is globalisation. The comparative study of education systems is viewed not only in relation to what we can learn from other societies to improve educational policy and practice within one country, but also with regard to how the field might contribute to a safer and more equitable world. Comparative education, as I noted in my CIES 2001 Presidential Address (Arnove 2001), was in a particularly advantageous position to contribute to public understanding of the major international forces shaping societies and events around the world. Its advantage resides in the systematic, multidisciplinary, and cross-national and cross-cultural perspectives that are its standard conceptual and methodological tools. These perspectives, in my judgement, stem from the development focus the field assumed in leading university centres teaching international and comparative education.

In my various writings and speeches about comparative education I have consistently argued that the field has three principal dimensions that contribute to scholarship and policy/practice as well as to enhanced international understanding and, it is hoped, world peace. The so-called ‘scientific dimension’ of the field relates to theory building with comparison being absolutely essential to understanding what relationships pertain under what conditions among education system-society variables – for example, the relationships among society, family, school variables and outcome variables such as educational achievement and attainment, socio-economic status, income and political participation. At its very best, comparative education examines these interactions among variables – and in qualitative studies, the actions of individuals and groups in particular contexts – in relation to transnational, national and local forces.

The better the theory and the more inclusive the levels of analysis (from the global to the local) in any study, the greater is the probability that the field of comparative education can contribute to more informed and more enlightened education policies – the second principal dimension (the ‘practical/ameliorative’ one) of comparative education. Since its very inception in the nineteenth century, the studies of French
pioneer comparativist Marc-Antoine Jullien aimed at not only informing and improving educational policy but also contributing to greater international understanding.

A third and significant dimension of the field – what I call the ‘global dimension’ – has been an abiding concern with contributing to international understanding and peace. I believe the international dimension will become an even more important feature of comparative education as processes of globalisation increasingly require people to recognise how socio-economic forces, from what were previously considered distant and remote areas of the world, impinge upon their daily lives.

These three dimensions have come together in current efforts of comparative education scholars and decision makers to understand better the dynamics of globalisation and how transnational economic, political, cultural and social forces have an impact on educational policy and practice in specific contexts. Comparative educators, in my judgement, can serve scholarship and policy by pointing up the positive and deleterious consequences of globalisation and the economic and education agendas that accompany the increasing interconnectedness of societies. Information technology can contribute to linking teachers and students as well as progressive grassroots movements together in analysing common problems and taking concerted action to remedy social ills affecting individuals and their communities across national borders. Technology can also be used and is used to disseminate certain worldviews and a discourse that increasingly views education in strictly instrumental, economistic (human capital) terms rather than in more humanistic traditions (Arnove 2009). They include contributing to the development of the potential of all individuals to lead meaningful and dignified lives and be participating members of more democratic and inclusive societies. Comparative education, as in my national case studies of political and education change in Nicaragua (Arnove 1994, 210–11) can point out the limitations as well as the potential of education systems. Instead of viewing education primarily as a means to develop a new model of economic accumulation or a transformed political culture (frequent goals of public policy in societies undergoing radical change), education should be viewed more comprehensively as an agency for nurturing in individuals a critical conscience, analytical abilities, ethical commitments, aesthetic sensibilities, and tolerance of diversity, as well as a desire to contribute to the well-being of others not only at home but across the globe. These are noble developmental goals that comparative education, as a field of scholarship, can and has served.

Notes
1. See, for example, the writings of dependency theorists Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Ernzo Faletto (1970) and Theotonio dos Santos (1969) on the impact of various forms of colonialism on underdevelopment in Latin America, and, similarly, the writings of Walter Rodney (1972) and Samir Amin (1976) on unequal development in Africa.
2. Interestingly, SIDEC, by 2005, had been renamed the Stanford International Comparative Education (ICE) concentration.
3. Comparative education, as a field of study, may also contribute to other areas of social policy – for example those pertaining to family welfare and public health. This close relationship between the scientific and ameliorative roles, in my judgement, differs from the distinction Colclough identifies in his essay in this volume between the orientations of scholars in comparative education and those in development studies.
4. The roots of international education can clearly be traced to the philosophical and pedagogical writings of Erasmus (c.1466–1536) and Comenius (1592–1670) and are found in the more contemporary poetic visions of non-western educators and philosophers such as Rabindranath Tagore (see Gutek 1993, 20–3).
References


