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**Why do we engage in international comparison? A review of the motives
researchers in education have for comparing nations.**

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Chorus was ‘a peer-reviewed, open access, online journal based at Sa’naa University in Yemen. It link[ed] doctoral researchers from Sa’naa University with doctoral researchers from British Universities, it [was] supported by the British Council.’ (Chorus, 2010). Chorus is now defunct.

In this article I will be reviewing the reasons why people compare education internationally. I developed a systematic approach to building this article in order to identify the motives people have for researching in this field. Firstly, I took as my starting point the journal *Comparative Education Review*. I read each article published therein in the last three years with an emphasis on finding the motive given for conducting the piece of research. I then took a longer time span of fifteen years, searching for any common themes that emerged in terms of motive and field of study. This larger time span was needed as this journal occasionally publishes themed editions, which with a smaller time span could give a distorted perspective. I searched for common themes in both omission and inclusion over this period. For example, I discovered only one article on education in The Gulf States (Mazawi, 1999) and this was on the history of education in the region. I perceived this as a significant pattern of omission. Finally using the references sections of these articles I identified significant writers and found their books and articles. This was supported by another route into the literature in this area, which was to read each doctoral and master's thesis, comparing education internationally, written at Cambridge University in the last three years (this article was written in 2009). Once again I trailed references back to find commonly referred to books and articles.

Defining comparative international research

Within the field of international comparative literature there is considerable debate over how the term 'comparative research' should be defined. As Bray (2007a) writes unless followed by a caveat the terms 'comparative research' are usually taken to mean research which compares education between two different nations. However, the 'Bray and Thomas cube' model of comparative research (Bray, Adamson & Mason, 2007) emphasises that other comparisons on a smaller scale could be given the same title. Bray et al. (2007) believe that a more useful term would be 'international comparative research' when this is what is meant. Cook, Hite and Epstein (2004) are concerned that the term 'comparative research' is often used for studies that are focussed on just one country and that a disproportionate number of articles in journals on comparative education are of this type. As they go on to explain with articles of this nature comparison is at most implicit, in that the researcher has travelled to research the other culture or has travelled to study abroad. This is a pattern I also found.

Some examples of single location studies that were only comparative by implication in the last four volumes of *Comparative Education Review* include: Andrabi, Das and Khwaja (2008), Dejeaghere (2008), Fairbrother (2008), Blasco (2009), Carney and Bista (2009). However, this debate is beyond the scope of this article. In choosing literature for review I have selected literature according to the following two criteria:

- if it is defined by the author as comparative either within the text or title
- if it is published in a journal or collection of articles specifically on comparative education (largely *Comparative Education Review*).

Within this article I have used the term ‘international comparative’ when appropriate, taking my lead from Bray et al. (2007), as like them I believe it is clearer.

The deductive framework used to review this literature

From an initial reading into this area I created a deductive framework with which to analyse the motives of international comparative researchers when reading further. This framework is based on Arnove (2002, 2003) with a fourth motive added which is based on Bray’s (2007a) modification of Arnove’s framework. According to these authors there are four potential motives for comparing education internationally:

- Firstly, a reflective motive to understand other systems and practices as a way of reflecting on our own systems. Researching others simply for the ‘value of knowing both them and ourselves’ (Arnove, 2003, p.482).
- Secondly, a developmental motive, looking for new strategies and practices, researching others ‘to borrow’ from them (Arnove, 2002 p.483).
- Thirdly, a motive of enabling global understanding or ‘contributing to international understanding and peace’ (Arnove, 2003, p.10).
- Fourth and finally, a competitive motive to learn from others so as to compete against them within a global economy. Bray (2007a) specifically attributes this motive to large-scale government funded statistical research.

This outline for an initial framework is supported by Ross, Cave and Blair (1992, p.9-10) who found that most researchers either wanted to ‘study other systems so that they may be better placed to understand one’s own’ or ‘to revitalise and reform their own systems’. It is also supported by Cook, Hite and Epstein (2004) who found that the word most commonly used by researchers explaining their motives for research in this field was ‘globalization’.

This framework provided the outline for the initial structure of this article. However as I read further another issue emerged. This was a pattern of certain countries where a large amount of research had been conducted by British and American researchers, specifically the Far East and especially Japan. Conversely it emerged that there were other nations where little comparative research seemed to have been conducted at all. Exploring this led to the writing of an additional sub-section.

Using an evolving deductive framework, as I have chosen to, when comparing internationally is emphasised as being the most appropriate approach by Holmes (1965); one of the most influential writers at the beginning of the modern era of comparative studies. More recent authors (Rust, Soumare, Pescador & Shibaya, 1999) support this. They describe its strength as being that within a complex field, without clear boundaries, it enables research to be focussed while remaining flexible. The following sections are structured according to the framework described above.

The reflective motive

The reflective goal has been present as a motive in international comparative educational research since it first developed as a distinct area of study. Bereday (1964, p.5) wrote that ‘we study education systems simply because we want to know’. More recently Dimmock (2007, p.284) took a similar stance writing that there is something ‘compelling and attractive’ about studying for interests sake alone. This is a position which is also supported by Dolby (2004). Many writers emphasise the validity of reflection as a motive for international comparative research, partly on the basis of the dangers implicit within any other. Mason, (2007) writes that the biggest differences in practice are potentially between teachers in the same school rather than between stereotypically representative teachers in different nations. He points out that trying to learn from others can lead to simplistic stereotyping, as he writes, ‘it is a brave researcher’ (p.177) who attempts to compare cultural differences in teaching practice. Manzon (2007, p.95) supports this writing that it is easy and risky to assume a teacher is representative of a school, a school representative of a country or a country representative of a region. He is supported by Leung and Postlethwaite (2007) who argue that comparing between nations is comparing the incomparable because the differences are both so many and

so subtle. To some extent this is also supported by ‘the Bray and Thomas cube’ (Bray et al., 2007), which stresses the potential value of comparing within smaller geographical areas including inter-classroom and inter-school.

This caution is to some extent challenged by Givvins, Herbert, Jacobs, Hollings and Gallimore (2005) who argue that teaching is distinctly different in different nations for cultural reasons. They argue that a cultural ‘teaching script’ (p.313) is learnt as a child and replicated as a teacher. However, even they accept that there are other factors at play in any lesson. They also found that only in Japan was their strong enough evidence for them to conclude that there is a ‘national teaching pattern’ (p.314). Li (2006) and Van Reis Saari (2008) in their research also looked for cultural differences in classroom practice, in these cases in approaches to maths teaching. However, in all the cases referred in this paragraph the primary goal was discussion and reflection. Givvins et al. (2005) for example, were unsure whether cultural scripts could be successfully exported.

In summary, reflection is seen by many working in the field of international comparative education as being a valid motive for conducting research. However, as discussed below it is not the most common reason expressed.

The developmental motive

From this review of literature it seems possible to say that it is a significant minority of writers working in the field of international comparative education who are content with reflection alone. Most researchers find that at least some lesson can be learnt from the comparison they have conducted even if they express it in cautious terms. For some, pressure to discover concrete strategies by looking abroad comes from others connected to their research. For example typically the institution researched into may want more concrete results. This is an issue that appeared for Szelengi and Rhodes (2007) in a study into how overseas students are shaped by their experiences in the USA. There may also often be a difference between the desired outcome of conversations between participants from different nations in different economic circumstances and with different academic traditions. Potts (2007), for example, writes about how for him the primary goal for his research was initially,

and increasingly came to be, a process of reflection, However, he found that his Chinese colleagues wanted to learn and transfer concrete practices.

Several writers such as Baker, Kohler and Stock (2007) openly acknowledge that they found that they discovered within themselves, without outside pressure, a tension between the goal of reflection alone and a temptation to discover practice that could be transferred between nations. Others such as Law (2007) do not find this a problem. She feels that although reflection is a valid reason for research it is equally valid to accept that concrete lessons can be learnt from researching internationally even and perhaps especially when the research is small in scale. She writes that there is a 'dangerous paradox' (p.370) with international comparison. This is that it is at its most interesting when it involves trying to learn from the detail of pedagogy but this is also when the risk of drawing erroneous conclusions or falling into stereotypes is at its highest. However, to her this does not mean that this motive should be rejected just that conclusions should be approached with caution. Bray (2007b) identifies a similar problem but feels that in avoiding attempting to learn from the detail of classroom practice there is a danger of simply 'producing descriptive work of a very low calibre' (p.359), which he believes is unfortunately more prevalent in international comparative research than in any other field.

Mosselson (2007) is an interesting example of a researcher studying with the clearly expressed motive of discovering concrete strategies. She had particularly strong motives as she was analysing why her own Bosnian ethnic community, especially young women, seemed to be under-achieving academically. This was a situation she wanted to assist in remedying. This motive to compare to improve a community one is part of or involved in is reflected in the work of many others researching in this field. The table below shows a sample of writers who have conducted international comparative research and who openly state that one motive for their research was to find strategies to help a community they are connected to.

Sample of writers who have conducted international comparative research in order to find strategies to help a community they are connected to.

| Author and date | Community they conducted research into and which they were connected to prior to the research. |
|---|---|
| Blasco (2009) | The urban poor in Mexico. |
| Chinas (2008) | Cypriot students |
| Cosic (2008) | Croatian teachers |
| Llewellyn Smith (2008) | American graduate students |
| Marshall, Tulio, Aguilar & Aguilar (2008) | Rural Honduran children |
| Nordtveidt (2008) | Senegalese children |
| Brown & Conrad (2007) | Secondary school students from Trinidad and Tobago |
| Hannum, Kao & Zhang (2007) | The rural Chinese community |
| Heynemann, Johnson & Silova (2007) | Azerbaijani university students |
| Mosselson (2007) | Bosnian women living in the USA |
| Hinderlitter, Ortfloff & Fey (2007) | Ethnic returnees to Japan and Germany |
| Stanisic (2007) | Montenegrin students with special needs |
| Wang (2007) | Chinese students studying abroad |
| Chang (2008) | Chinese children attending school in the UK. |
| Gaiyabu (2008) | Children in Nauru |

A significant number of these researchers used small-scale qualitative methods (Brown and Conrad, 2007; Hinderlitter et al., 2007; Hannum et al., 2007; Stanisic 2007; Wang, 2007; Chinas, 2008; Blasco, 2009).

In summary it seems that there are considerable pressures both personal and professional that lead researchers to want to be able to find practical strategies from their research even when it is small scale and qualitative.

The motive of enabling global understanding

Bray (2007a) argues that the motive of enabling global understanding dominates amongst the least formal kinds of international comparative research, that which might not be conventionally defined as research at all. However, as by definition there is very little written about research of this type, in this sub-section I will be analysing the role this motive plays in academic research. Arnove (2003) opens a series of collected articles with the statement that the aim of the book is ‘global peace and justice’ (p.10). Post (2009, p.1) similarly writes that the reason for the existence of the journal *Comparative Education Review* at all is that such research is ‘essential for a peaceful world’. Spring (2007) attempts to create a vision for how schools can learn from each other internationally based on a hypothetical global curriculum. Spring defines himself as unusual by the standards of the academic community in being driven by the motive of creating global understanding. However, I would challenge this. This motive is not only mentioned by both Arnove (2003) and Post (2009) but also by many others. Examples include:

- Myers (2007) who explores how a shared concept of citizenship could be developed world wide;
- Suarez (2007 a and b) who focusses on developing political understanding in South America and the Caribbean;
- Hasumi (2008) who explores how education can be used to improve civic society and combat racial intolerance in Japan;
- Beckerman, Zembylas and McGlynn (2009) who compare citizenship education in conflict areas of the world.

The motive of enabling global understanding is also mentioned in the literature of large organisations, which fund international comparative research in education. The first sentence of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s constitution is ‘since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed’ (UNESCO, 2009). UNESCO launched the first international human rights focused educational programme as far back as 1953. The world’s three largest non governmental organisations: UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development all support universities in conducting research in international comparative education under the banner of idealistic constitutions (Bray, 2007a). University based international comparative research is not necessarily lacking in idealism even though it

arguably has a higher level of academic rigour than other international comparative connections.

Globalisation as a motive

A significant number of writers in the field of international comparative education state that one motive for conducting their research is to provide a response to the process of globalisation (Green 1997; Arnove & Torres, 2003; Chabbott & Elliot, 2003; Baker & LeTendre, 2005; Levy, 2006; Spring, 2007). People who acknowledge that their writing is a direct response to globalisation can be divided into two schools of thinking. Firstly, those who adhere to a set of assumptions about the nature of globalisation as reflected in not only academic literature but also much non-academic literature on this topic published today, including British Council literature. These assumptions, which could be described as mainstream thinking on globalisation include the following:

- it is new
- it is accelerating
- it involves greater interaction between individuals across nations (socially, politically, economically)
- it will affect the role of the nation state and national governments
- it is driven by changes in technology connected to computing and the internet.

To these writers (Arnove, 2003; Bray 2007 a and b; Kennedy, Hahn & Lee, 2008; Carney, 2009) globalisation is a process, the nature of which is largely accepted and research is needed to generate an educational response to it.

Using education as a lens

Secondly, there is another school of writers who challenge some of this mainstream view of globalisation. These writers use education to act as a lens with which to understand the process of globalisation and for questioning some aspect of the mainstream view. To some extent these writers discussed below should not be described as international comparative educational researchers at all. They are rather sociologists, historians or political scientists who find education a useful vehicle and others sit on a blurred boundary between two or more fields. However, articles of this nature are frequently published in comparative educational journals. Below are some examples:

- Green (1997), Popkewitz (2000) and Sidhu (2007) use an historical approach to education to try to understand globalisation.

- Apple (2000), Burbules and Torres (2000), Lingard (2000), and McCarthy and Dimitrades (2000), all writing at the start of the Bush era, argue that globalisation within world education systems would lead to an increased emphasis on decentralisation. They use the study of education to understand larger economic and political changes as does Hanson (2008).
- Meyer (2006) analyses Japanese approaches to human rights via the lens of textbooks.
- Keating (2007) explores how citizenship education reflects concepts of democracy and citizenship in different European states.
- Toreiphi (2007) uses educational statistics to argue that among the most globalised people are the world's poorer communities including the Nagas.
- Fairbrother (2008) uses education to as a lens with which to tentatively critique Chinese political systems.
- Ichilov (2008) analyses Arab-Israeli relations via educational policy.
- Tsvetkova (2008) does the same but in the context of Cold War relations.

In summary the motive of increasing global understanding is certainly prevalent in the decision to conduct international comparative educational research. The temptation to use education as a lens for understanding complex global processes is also understandably strong. By definition comparative and international studies into education have a large and fascinating space for the expansion of ideas. However, one could argue as Arnove (2003) does that for comparative international research to be relevant to teachers it should ideally be conducted at teacher, student and classroom level.

The competitive motive

Cabbott and Elliott (2003) state that although most international comparative research is small-scale and qualitative most funding in this area is directed towards large scale quantitative surveys. Two of the most well known of these regularly conducted large scale studies are the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) with a sample of 250,000 students in 32 countries and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which compares 500,000 students in 50 countries. The intention behind national involvement in these reports as stated by Bray (2007a) is educational improvement

so as to compete within a global economy. They are not done for interest's sake alone. The intention is that policy makers are able to discover which countries are successful at what and then, it is presumed, researchers will look further to find out why. These studies are not intended to be an end in themselves. It is important therefore to distinguish between criticism of the existence of these studies and criticism of how they are portrayed and used by governments.

Many writers are critical of the use made of such studies. Chabbott and Elliott (2003) describe them as leading to a lot of 'national breast beating' (p.15) but very little deep understanding of different educational systems. They go on to write that 'results issued with much fanfare may dominate public debate long after smaller studies with much smaller budgets call them into question.' (p.17). They also state that the biggest failing of governments in terms of funding comparative research has been to be prepared to fund large scale data collection but not to fund further research into establishing the meaning and relevance of this data. Baker and LeTendre (2005) see the discrepancy in funding large scale data collection but not subsequent in-depth research informed by this data as being due to politicians with 'solutions already in mind waiting to find a problem that justifies this policy.' (p.154). Theirs is a long term historical approach. They identify three moments of educational reform in American post war politics each provoked by a sense of national crisis, the most recent of these following the first publication of TIMSS in 1995. They argue that following this, policies were brought in that the US government claimed were developed by learning from other nations but that actually came from a domestic political agenda.

In summary however, this is not to criticise the motive behind the practice of compiling large scale statistical reports that compare internationally. They are, as Fairbrother (2007) points out fascinating, as a picture into the field of education worldwide and a potentially valuable starting point for further research. However they are in the eyes of some academics often simplified by politicians and the media beyond all usefulness.

Western approaches to comparing with various nations

In this section I will be exploring the argument that there are nations which historically Western educationalists have looked to for ideas, specifically the Far East, and conversely

others where this is not the case. The issue this then raises is: if comparative studies and linked work with these countries is a learning experience with other countries is it purely for interest; is it to learn ourselves in the West, is it supportive expertise, and is there ever a danger that it can become preaching? Sugrue (2009) spoke about westerners working in Africa, including educational advisors or researchers as being either ‘mercenaries or missionaries’. Although very different roles what they have in common is that both of these are experts bringing knowledge into a culture rather than taking knowledge out.

Western approaches to comparing with Japan

From my review of literature it became clear that a disproportionately large number of articles published in *Comparative Education Review* over the past fifteen years were about the Far East and specifically, Japan (Gerbert, 1993; Lincicome, 1993; Sorenson, 1994; Robinson, 1994; Leng, 1996; Takahaza, 1998; Ban & Cummings, 1999; LeTendre, 1999; Givvins et al. 2005; Meyer, 2006). This was especially the case from 1994-1999 but continues to this day. Bray (2007a) contextualises this perception of mine by describing how comparative international educational research as a field of study has two historical points of origin Japan and the West. Samoff (2003) takes this even further arguing that schooling as it is commonly practised across the entire world is a model which was exported via empire from Europe and Japan.

However, several writers (Baker & LeTendre, 1995; Green, 1997; Chabbott & Elliott, 2003; Tamer, 2005; Watkins, 2007) are critical of many articles written about the Far East and especially Japan. These writers describe some of these studies as simplistic and stereotypical. This perception that Western researchers may sometimes idealise the Japanese system is also reflected by some Japanese researchers such as Takayama (2007, p.423), who writes that ‘in striking contrast to the international acclaim during the 1980s and 90s for Japanese schools, the Japanese continued to perceive their countries schooling as steeped in crisis.’ An extraordinary sentence by Mason (2007, p.179) illustrates the complexity of the relationship Western researchers have with Japan, ‘It is the cultural production of the ‘western’ centre (including of course Japanese cultural capital) that dominates that of the periphery.’ The description of a Far Eastern culture as Western and the use of the word periphery seem to show something about Western approaches to both the Far East and to other nations.

Western approaches to comparing with poorer nations

As Bray et al. (2007, p.18) write, poor countries try to learn from rich countries, rich countries try to learn from rich countries but no-one tries to learn from poor countries. Yang (2007, p.248) supports this with the blunt quote ‘it remains quite difficult for those in poorer countries to argue with foreign consultants’. McCarthy and Dimitrades (2000) take this a stage further asking whether the motives richer countries have for participating in conversations about education with poorer countries may involve a degree of cultural propaganda. They argue this particularly in the context of textbooks. Luke and Luke (2000) feel that conversations about education are important between all nations but that researchers and participants should reflect on motive before any dialogue begins to ensure that it is equal and relevant.

Samoff (2007) and Kubow (2007) both write about how advice to poorer countries can be tied to funds and how even when intentions are good this can lead to pressure being put on the poorer country to modify its systems. An example of this is a booklet of advice for those working in education in crisis areas (Arnhold, Bekker, Kersh, Mcleish, & Phillips, 1998). In it the writers describe ‘emergency training to assist teachers with new teaching and learning styles’ (p.23). The question needs to be asked though of the motive behind introducing new presumably Western teaching styles into a culture in crisis. Westerners working in these areas may feel uncomfortable with local teaching strategies, but it may also be the case that a crisis is not a time for change. The result of all this could be that countries outside the West, Japan and some of Japan’s Asian neighbours are switched off from international discussions about education. Bray (2003) for example points out that while India has dynamic internal conversations about education its universities are hardly involved in international comparative studies at all and when they are there seems to a sense that India has little to teach the world, despite it now being one of the world’s fastest growing economies.

Western approaches to comparing with Islamic nations

There are very few articles written on education in Islamic nations compared to other regions of the world. In Comparative Education Review’s themed edition on education in Islamic nations in August 2006 the majority of articles were on the history of education rather than on current practice (Bashkin, 2006; Gesiak, 2006; Gunther 2006; Terc 2006). Only one involved any fieldwork (Boyle, 2006). None of the articles were on the Gulf nations. In fact only one

article has been published in *Comparative Education Review* on education in the Gulf region in the last 15 years and this was also an historical account (Mazawi, 1999).

One of the few articles about current educational conversations with the Islamic world including the Gulf region is by Christina, Mehram and Mir (2003). They accept that much of the form of most modern schooling worldwide is a Euro/Japanese creation. However, they also write about the deep educational traditions in the Islamic world. As they write ‘Islam’s regard for learning remains an integral component of educational culture’ (p.357). However, they ask whether the West is prepared to converse as equals and acknowledge the possibility of learning from this tradition of education. They perceive Westerners as too often seeing Islamic cultures as rejectionist cultures, which have little to teach the West. They particularly write extensively about Western views on the education of women in Islamic countries. As they point out Westerners often perceive this as monolithic across the Middle East, while in fact the education of women varies enormously from nation to nation to the extent that the provision of educational opportunities for women in Qatar and Egypt is amongst the highest in the world. They are also concerned about the impact upon the Middle East of trying to import Western educational methods wholesale. In some large institutions of the Euro/Japanese model they find unorganized and incoherent planning and low quality teaching by teachers who do not perceive their profession as high status. They believe that by a process of historical reflection coupled with learning from other nations that it is possible to create educational systems that reflect local identity and are also successful. Their overall argument is that while it is important that comparative conversations with the West happen it is equally important that there is not an assumption that the West can provide models that can be simply and entirely transferred into Middle Eastern countries.

In summary comparative international research between the Far East, especially Japan, and the West has a long history. There are debates about the nature of this dialogue but it is clear that many researchers believe there may be useful lessons to be learnt from each other’s practice. However, this raises questions regarding the nature of dialogue between the West and other nations including in the case of this article the Gulf States. This is not to criticise the practice of comparative research between the West and these nations, if anything more is needed. However, the motive for these conversations is an area worthy of research and understanding.

Conclusion

In conclusion it seems that a reflective motive is certainly present in much research in this field. However, it seems that many and perhaps a majority of researchers use international comparison to try to discover transferable practices or policies. Looking for concrete strategies can particularly dominate when the researcher is part of or is involved in one of the communities researched into. There is also another powerful motive of using educational research to increase global understanding and also to understand the process of globalisation. However, while much of this research is fascinating to read some of it may have little relevance for the day to day practice of teachers. In the last two decades the use of large scale statistical research comparing nations internationally has become established. However, while usually seen as valid in origin and intention these programmes are widely criticised by academics (Baker & LeTendre, 1995; Bray 2007a) who feel that they are too often misused in terms of their public presentation by politicians and the media. As with research related to globalisation these large scale statistical research programmes can also seem distant from the day to day practice of teachers. In geographical terms there is a considerable amount of dialogue on education between the West and the Far East, especially Japan, and a clear motive of learning from each other, although aspects of the nature of this motive can be challenged. This is interesting but it is also significant as it raises questions regarding the nature of the dialogue the West has with other nations.

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