Methodology of comparative studies in education

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Methodology of comparative studies in education

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Abstract

Comparative Education as a scientific paradigm is relatively new. Despite numerous theories, models, Pattern and researches in this field the comparative education is still faces enormous challenges. Since the foundation of modern and efficient education systems is dependent to new ideas and techniques, then the comparative studies by comparing the content and processes of successful education systems can be useful in designing and implementing educational changes. This article, along with the introduction and evolution of research in comparative education, studies the epistemological approaches and researches methods. Furthermore Methodological issues in comparative research (qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, validity, reliability and methods of data and information analysis) have been studied and finally the challenges of educational comparative research have been discussed. Comprehensive understanding of the challenges and Issues of Comparative studies through inhibition of surface and simplified views facilitate the effective use of research findings in this area.

Keywords: Approaches, Comparative Research, Methodology ;

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1. Introduction

A comparative study can be considered when individuals or teams study particular topic or phenomenon in the formation of two or more countries. The individuals or teams must take notice to the set of social, cultural (institutions, customs, traditions, systems assessment, lifestyle, and language and thought patterns) to complete the secondary analysis of national data on new experimental work or manage the use of research tools. They may explain the search for similarities or differences, in whole or in bringing them to achieve greater awareness and deeper understanding about the social reality in different areas of the nation. Wilson (2003) defines comparative education as “an intersection of the social sciences, education and cross-national study which attempts to use cross-national data to test propositions about the relationship between education and society and between teaching practices and learning outcomes”.

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However, since the nineteenth century, philosophers, anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists have used cross-cultural comparisons to achieve various objectives; the comparative approach to the study of society has a long tradition dating back to Ancient history. Wilson notes:

“Writers since the beginning of recorded history have described aspects of education in countries they visited, with the notion that the educational structures and practices they examined might be useful for adoption and adaptation in their own countries... Such works include the philosophical and rhetorical treatises on education by Herodotus (484-425 BC), Thucydides (471-399 BC), Xenophon (430-355 BC), Plato (427-347 BC), Aristotle (384-322 BC), Cicero (106-43 BC), Scipio Africanus (185-129 AD), and Tacitus (70 AD) from ancient Greece and Rome; the descriptive and narrative accounts of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela from pre-Inquisition Spain (1165-1173 AD), who voyaged as far as India; Niccolò and Maffeo Polo (the father and uncle of Marco Polo) writing about China (1254-1324 AD); and Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 AD) of Tunisia.(p19).

2. Comparative research approaches:

There are a number of approaches in comparative education studies. We can summarize these approaches in the six categories. They are historical, social, methodological, philosophical and scientific approaches. Detailed description of these approaches isn’t our goal in this article. These approaches are shown in table (1). Overview of approaches in the study of comparative we notice strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. In the historical approach researchers seek the previous causes of educational theory. Their strong opinions on the effectiveness of this approach in comparative education have tended to emphasize adults and other factors were ignored. In this approach the model origin and development through the experience. As evidenced, this approach is retrospective. The scientific approach to the study of comparative education is based on the comparison. The contrast between the scientific analyses is an essential aspect of educational issues. Through comparative analysis we are able to reasonable questions.

Table1) Different approaches of research in comparative education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>approach</th>
<th>The main emphasis</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The historical approach</td>
<td>History and Culture</td>
<td>Identify and evaluate in order to understand the true meaning of a given date. Comparative growth and development of each community depending on the date of recognition</td>
<td>The test subjects cannot easily be imagined. This is a retrospective approach.</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social approach</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Emphasize the educational values that are comparable to higher education at all levels, all education systems can be identified through research can focus simultaneously on several cases to identify similarities and differences.</td>
<td>The Impossibility of the generalization of result. The Complexity of research</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research in the social approach is an analytical method to identify similarities and differences on several different focuses. In this approach we can study all the issues by identifying educational systems, such as economic, political, social and cultural. Sadler stressed that education systems are intricately connected with the societies that support them. Friedrich Schneider and Franz Hilker in Germany, Isaac Kandel and Robert Ulich in the USA, Nicholas Hans and Joseph Lauwerys in the UK, and Pedro Rosselló in Switzerland, all paid much attention to the social causes behind educational phenomena. As the name implies the philosophical approach to philosophical problems, especially the epistemological aspect is education. This approach attaches great importance to childhood. I believe that this period in human development is essential for full human and animals on the additional support needs of adults (Bray et al, 2006).

3. Epistemology and comparative education:

Unlike many votes in the ontology and aesthetic, Philosophical views on epistemology have two directions. They are positivistic and interpretivist. The positivist position is grounded in the theoretical belief that there is an objective reality that can be known to the researcher, if he or she uses the correct methods and applies those methods in a correct manner. The positivist paradigm of exploring social reality is based on the philosophical ideas of the French philosopher August Comte, who emphasized observation and reason as means of understanding human behavior. According to him, true knowledge is based on experience of senses and can be obtained by observation and experiment. Positivistic thinkers adopt his scientific method as a means of knowledge generation. Hence, it has to be understood within the framework of the principles and assumptions of science. These assumptions, as Conen et al noted, are determinism, empiricism, parsimony, and generality (Dash, 2005). Interpretivist views have different origins in different disciplines. Schultz, Cicourel and Garfinkel (phenomenology/sociology), the "Chicago School of Sociology" (sociology), and Boas and Malinowski (anthropology) are often connected with the origin the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm developed as a critique of positivism in the social sciences. In general, interpretivists share the following beliefs about the nature of knowing and reality (Cohen & Crabtree,
2006). Interpretive approaches rely heavily on naturalistic methods (interviewing and observation and analysis of existing texts). These methods ensure an adequate dialog between the researchers and those with whom they interact in order to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality. Generally, meanings are emergent from the research process and typically, qualitative methods are used (Dash, 2005).

There is a certain pressure within the field for the use of quantitative methods. This goes along with a shift over time within the field of comparative education from historical, explanatory studies towards studies employing statistical information and quantitative data analysis procedures. Some researchers are drawn to the quest for generalizable explanations and universal principles applicable to educational phenomena across societies and cultures. Concomitantly, there is an attraction for some scholars and policy makers to the transfer of educational theories, practices, and policies across international borders, and a desire to seek global solutions to global problems. Large-scale databases from international studies of educational achievement, and education statistics gathered by international agencies, can be tempting to experience and novice researchers alike because of their availability and influence. Finally, research commissioned by governments or international organizations may carry a preference for particular method and theories. From other quarters there is comparable pressure for qualitative studies, sometimes in reaction to the perceived shortcomings of quantitative methods. Qualitative researchers in comparative education share a strong belief in the importance of cultural, political and social contexts, and the position that education cannot be decontextualized from its local culture (Bray et al, 2006).

Elley (1999) mentioned several of the advantages and disadvantages of large-scale, international quantitative studies for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. First, he pointed out, these studies provide a systematic body of evidence of kinds and levels of literacy achievement among national samples of students. At the same time he acknowledged several weaknesses of these studies, including potential translation problems and the difficulty of ensuring comparable samples.

Hamilton and Barton (2000) maintained that the standardized tests used in cross-national quantitative researches ignore culture and are weak, limited and simplistic proxy measures of literacy. They added that such measures are not valid because test items have no relation to respondents' actual everyday literacy practices or to the role of literacy in different societies and contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research paradigms</th>
<th>Research approach</th>
<th>Research methods</th>
<th>Example Research</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivism</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Longitudinal</td>
<td>A Longitudinal Comparative Study of Student Perceptions in Online Education</td>
<td>Mortagy &amp; Boghikian-Whitby (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Effectiveness of basic clinical skills training programs: a cross-sectional comparison of four medical schools.</td>
<td>REMMEN et al (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).</td>
<td>1996 and 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>Program for International Student Assessment</td>
<td>OECD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Methodological challenges of comparative research:

Guba and Yvonna (1994) define the concept of reliability as a criterion by which to judge qualitative research as belonging to the positivist or post positivist paradigm. They mention that those working from a constructivist paradigm would prefer the concept "dependability." Bechger et al (1999) define comparative validity as “appropriateness, meaningfulness and usefulness of comparative inference made from test” (p19). Dogan (2004, pp324-340) discuss the limits of quantitative (statistical) methods include: 1) Cross-national comparisons use national averages. Most countries are characterized by important internal diversity, either regional or vertical in terms of social strata.2) limits of survey research in comparative studies such as errors generated by sampling procedures, weighing of data, unclear questions, insufficient training of interviewers, and so on.3) invalidity of worldwide statistical comparisons because of discrepancy between the quality of statistical data for the advanced countries and for the developing ones. That is we are dealing with material of unequal accuracy. The lower the level of development is associated with the lower the validity of quantitative data. 4) Invalidity of gross national product (GNP) as an indicator in comparative studies 5) scoring and scaling which is used as a substitute for formal statistic is visionary and subjective.6) Single isolated indicators are often misleading and are likely to be ineffective measures. 7) The neglect of the temporal dimension limits the explanation of variance.8) neglect from the shadow economy and as a result tee use of inaccurate statistics. Other researchers in the comparative education have been mentioned the limits of quantitative methods. “Shalev’s (2007) critique of the use of multiple regression in comparative research brings together and synthesizes a variety of previous critiques, ranging from those focusing on foundational issues (e.g., the persistent problem of limited diversity), to estimation issues (e.g., the unrealistic assumption of correct model specification), to narrow technical issues (e.g., the difficulty of deriving valid standard errors for regression coefficients in pooled cross-sectional time-series models).
Altbach and Kelly identified four main challenges that had emerged since previous ‘state of the art’ reviews of the field were published in 1977. These were seen as (I) challenges to the nation-state as the exclusive research framework; (ii) challenges to input–output models and reliance upon quantification; (iii) challenges to structural functionalism, and (iv) the emergence of new substantive concerns, most notably gender research, institutional studies and critiques, the content and processes of education and the legitimization of educational knowledge (Crossley and Watson, 2003.p117). Hantrais cites problems in cross-national comparative research, included: Managing and funding cross-national projects, Accessing comparable data, Concepts and research parameters (Hantrais, 1995). The advent of web pages at international organizations and national statistical services has revolutionized how basic research is undertaken in our field. The development of Internet search engines a decade ago and meta-search engines has also transformed our research capabilities. The internet does, however, bring its own baggage, including an emphasis on English that contributes to the dominance of that language (Mouhoubi 2005, p. 62).

5. Discussion

Comparative study of different systems of education in general, has many achievements and can lead to improve the functions and processes. There are different approaches in the comparative researches and studies. Each of these approaches has advantages and limitations that are mentioned some of them. The quantitative, qualitative and mixed researches and studies can be used in various comparative education projects. Trough applicant of mixed designs the validity and reliability of the studies can be enhanced. With different purposes, the comparisons can be occurred within a system of education or in the wider educational system. These objectives may be discovery of facts and issues through analysis and understanding of educational systems in other states, establish and develop cultural relations between different countries, the Promote and dissemination of the Peace and friendship between people and collect the latest information about education and compare them in order to find pervasive problems and solve them. Two important points should be considered in any comparative study: First, in comparative education, the territory of the other sciences such as economics, sociology and anthropology are engaged. Beliefs, customs, traditions and ethnic characteristics of the moral and social, economic and political issues affect educational processes and outcomes. Therefore, Comparative Study must be done with a holistic approach. Second, Different methods should be used according to the position and purpose of study.

References