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# Comparative Education

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*Philip G. Altbach*

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# Contents

## Introduction

1. Approaches and Perspectives / ROBERT F. ARNOVE,  
GAIL P. KELLY, AND PHILIP G. ALTBACH 3

## PART ONE: World Trends in Education

2. Global Patterns of Educational Institutionalization /  
FRANCISCO O. RAMIREZ AND JOHN BOLI-BENNETT 15

## PART TWO: Education and Development

3. Educational Expansion and the Drive for Social  
Equality / JOSEPH P. FARRELL 39
4. The Human Capital Revolution in Economic  
Development / IRVIN SOBEL 54
5. Education and Development: A Conflict of  
Meaning / JOHN C. BOCK 78

## PART THREE: National Educational Policies and Their Implications

6. Educational Planning and Social Change: A Critical Review  
of Concepts and Practices / HANS N. WEILER 105
7. The Stranger Within My Gate: Ethnic Minorities and School  
Policies in Europe / FREDERICK M. WIRT 119
8. The Socialization of Children in China and on Taiwan: An  
Analysis of Elementary School Textbooks /  
ROBERTA MARTIN 137

#### **PART FOUR: School and Classroom Practice**

9. Different Knowledge for Different Folks: Knowledge Distribution in a Togolese Secondary School / KAREN COFFYN BIRAIMAH 161
10. Teachers and the Transmission of State Knowledge: A Case Study of Colonial Vietnam / GAIL P. KELLY 176

#### **PART FIVE: Achievement Outcomes of Schooling**

11. Success and Failure in School / T. N. POSTLETHWAITE 197
12. National Differences in Scholastic Performance / ALEX INKELES 210

#### **PART SIX: Status Outcomes of Schooling**

13. Sex Differences in Educational Opportunities and Labor Force Participation in Six Countries / AUDREY CHAPMAN SMOCK 235
14. Sexual Equality Through Educational Reform: The Case of the USSR / GAIL WARSHOFKY LAPIDUS 252
15. Equalization of Educational Opportunity and Racial/Ethnic Inequality / JOHN U. OGBU 269
16. Education for Status Improvement: The Use of Positive Discrimination for Scheduled Castes in India / MATHEW ZACHARIAH 290

#### **PART SEVEN: Educational Reforms in Nonsocialist Societies**

17. The Dilemma of Comprehensive Secondary School Reforms in Western Europe / HENRY M. LEVIN 319
18. Nonformal Education and Change from Below / ROLLAND G. PAULSTON AND GREGORY LeROY 336
19. Educational Underdevelopment in Kentucky / EDWARD H. BERMAN 363

#### **PART EIGHT: Educational Reforms in Socialist Societies**

20. Education and Equality of Opportunity in Eastern Europe / JOSEPH R. FISZMAN 381

- 21.** Educational Reform and Development in the People's Republic of China / JOHN N. HAWKINS 411
- 22.** The Nicaraguan National Literacy Crusade of 1980 / ROBERT F. ARNOVE 433

**PART NINE: New Directions in Comparative Education**

- 23.** Comparative Education and World-Systems Analysis / ROBERT F. ARNOVE 453
- 24.** Servitude of the Mind? Education, Dependency, and Neocolonialism / PHILIP G. ALTBACH 469
- 25.** Educational Outcomes and School Processes: Theoretical Perspectives / LOIS WEIS 485

**PART TEN: Overview**

- 26.** Trends in Comparative Education: A Critical Analysis / GAIL P. KELLY, PHILIP G. ALTBACH, AND ROBERT F. ARNOVE 505



**INTRODUCTION**

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# Approaches and Perspectives

ROBERT F. ARNOVE, GAIL P. KELLY, AND  
PHILIP G. ALTBACH

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This book is intended as a graduate-level text in the field of comparative education. Many of the chapters are original contributions by well-known scholars on key topics of educational policy and practice. Typically, texts in the field of comparative education are based on country-by-country descriptions of the organization, content, and functioning of education systems within their national settings. We diverge from this pattern by focusing on salient issues with which education systems around the world are grappling and by providing perspectives for viewing them.

*Comparative Education* examines how countries plan for the expansion, upgrading, and democratization of their education systems. This pattern, we hope, will lead to greater insight into the nature of problems educational policymakers and practitioners confront—the origins of these problems, both within and outside the school system, the range of solutions attempted in various countries, the outcomes of planned interventions in the schools, and factors that may be associated with the success or failure of educational reforms. Special attention is given in *Comparative Education* to the opportunities for and outcomes of schooling for traditionally disadvantaged and excluded groups—namely, women and minority youths. By illustrating the complex realities of schooling within a general framework of societal relations, opportunities, and constraints, we also hope this text will provide a basis for further and more sophisticated theoretical work.

Not unlike the other cultural and social foundations of education (the history, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology of education), the field of comparative education has theoretical and practical significance. Comparative education contributes to the professional training of educators, to informed policy and practice, and to the creation of knowledge by providing an expanded set of analytic categories and modes for examining the realities of education and society. The comparative perspective aids researchers, teachers, and decision makers in examining education in more complex, comprehensive, and far-ranging ways.

There has always been an ameliorative strain in comparative education. A common question posed is, "What can the study of other countries contribute to improved practice in our country?"<sup>1</sup> Comparison often has a chastening effect, for in studying education systems around the world we discover the limitations and possibilities of schooling to foster fundamental reforms in a society. At the same time, comparison has a humanizing effect in that we come to realize the common problems that virtually all societies and school systems confront. In the endeavors of certain countries to find new solutions to old problems, to break with past patterns, and to effect promising changes, there is some cause for optimism.

Related to this pragmatic aspect of comparative education is a theoretical-scientific strain. All sciences are comparative in the sense that they attempt to generalize and determine the extent to which their postulates are universally applicable. For example, do the relationships between social class background and education persist even in socialist countries? How do such factors as level of economic development and type of political system affect these relations? Science and comparison have always been wedded in the sense that Eckstein and Apter note: "The effort of science through comparison is in . . . [a] sense as old as science itself, for science begins with the effort to order and classify the objects of the universe."<sup>2</sup> Comparison assists the researcher in discovering that which is common and that which is unique to any society. Lipset observes, "To understand . . . American religion, American education, American law, or any other institution, it is necessary to know how it differs from the comparable institutions in other cultures. Only when one knows what is unique on a comparative scale can one begin to ask significant questions about causal relationships within a country."<sup>3</sup>

Researchers working in the field of comparative education share many of the same constraints and challenges in theory building that sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and social historians face in classifying, analyzing, and reaching conclusions about vast social units over time. Experimentation in a laboratory with rigorous manipulation of variables and controlled conditions is out of the question. Instead, comparison substitutes for experimentation. Comparison permits certain controls to be introduced; it enables researchers to find instances where different variables are present or absent and in varying amounts—a process of analysis known as concomitant variation.<sup>4</sup> Although experimental design is not possible, different quasi-experimental designs are. For example, in studying the impact of schooling on indigenous social institutions in West Africa, Foster has suggested the use of a quasi-experimental design that would involve selecting one tribal group split between two neighboring nations and, conversely, selecting two or more tribes within the same nation. Such a design would facilitate the determination of the relative influence of national policy on access to and success in schools for children from different ethnic backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

Problems also emerge in the use of the comparative method. There has been

considerable disagreement in the field of comparative education over what comprise the units of comparison: are they to be national systems? or subunits of national systems? and are they to be compared at different points in time? Can we, for example, compare the United States and Western Europe in the nineteenth century with the countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia today? As a number of chapters in *Comparative Education* indicate, much of the research in the field has been dominated by modernization theory, which assumes, in part, that all societies follow the same path to development and the countries at different stages of development represent different points on the same continuum or trajectory. This assumption is known as unilinear evolutionism. However, as various authors in this text note, the meaning of nation states, the relationships of the various countries and regions in an interconnected world economic system, and other factors make a unilinear explanation of development inadequate.

Other problems in using the comparative method to discover universal patterns or principles concerning education systems and their relations to their social contexts have been that researchers frequently abstracted educational systems from their historical contexts; in making comparisons, historical reality was sacrificed to theory. Countries were inappropriately grouped together to "prove" causal propositions. But the quasi-experimental designs that researchers use, the cross-sectional (rather than longitudinal) studies they commonly conduct, and the correlational analyses they engage in cannot establish causal relations. At best, certain assumptions or propositions may be refuted.

In an imperfect and complex world, intelligent and cautious comparison may still be the best analytic tool researchers have to make generalizations about social reality over time and across societal units. In collecting material for this book, we have been aware of the complexities and limitations of the data available and of the explanatory schemes put forward by the authors to interpret educational reality.

## CONTENT

Comparative education, although long established in the academy, has diverse origins and perspectives. In bringing together this volume, we have endeavored to present the various scholarly concerns, methodological perspectives, and genres of study in the field.

It is useful, we believe, to consider analyses of the unprecedented worldwide expansion of education since World War II. The sources, nature, and consequences of this expansion constitute one of the main themes of this volume. Part One charts the rapid growth of education in all countries, both in the Third World and in the more industrialized nations of North America, Western and Eastern Europe, and Asia (see Ramirez and Boli-Bennett). Traditionally, comparative educationists

have viewed educational expansion as being impelled by national policy reflecting the economic and political imperatives of development. As Ramirez and Boli-Bennett point out, the phenomenon is international, not national, and may be guided by the dynamics of an increasingly interconnected world system.

The essays in Part Two discuss in greater detail the rationales for educational expansion, the assumptions underlying them, and some of their limitations. A number of these rationales derive from modernization theory. The theory postulates that education makes individuals and societies "modern" (more rational, efficient, and effective); that national systems of schooling contribute to political stability and national unity in pluralistic societies and enhance the capacity of political regimes to perform a variety of functions; that education represents a profitable economic investment (in human capital) that would contribute to individual advancement and overall national economic growth; and that education is the surest route for disadvantaged individuals and groups to follow in order to achieve social mobility and social justice. As the authors in this section point out, the results of educational expansion are frequently quite different from those predicted by modernization theory.

The chapters by Irwin Sobel, John Bock, and Joseph Farrell indicate the current state of thought concerning the potential and reality of education, and schooling in particular, to resolve the multiple problems confronting diverse nations. In effect, their chapters represent a debate in comparative education. Although Sobel shows the limitations inherent in human capital theory, he neither rejects the theory in its totality as a basis for national policy nor renounces schooling as a means to accomplish national goals. Neither, for that matter, does Farrell in his essay. Rather, Farrell questions the assumption that expansion and reform of education will always lead to greater social equality. Bock, however, rejects the premises underlying modernization theory. He argues, much in the vein of contemporary Neo-Marxists, that educational expansion has very little to do with human advancement; instead, expansion is related to extending government control and legitimating systems of inequality that sustain those in power.

Part Three focuses on policy formation and planning. A basic premise underlying educational expansion is that both the content and form of education can be manipulated by states to further national goals. But belief in the efficacy of planning to accomplish wonders of social transformation has, as Weiler suggests in Chapter 6, passed from an age of innocence to one of skepticism. According to Weiler, more realistic perspectives are required if planning is to move from an ineffectual reactive stance to a proactive force serving large numbers. More realistic appraisals of the possibilities and limitations of educational policy to achieve intended results must take into account the political dimensions and context of educational decision making. Planning can no longer be perceived as a neutral, technical process, but, as Weiler underscores, is a political one as well.

Can planned change cure social ills? This question is explored by Wirt in

Chapter 7. The volatile decision areas concern national language policies for distinct linguistic groups and national education policies to incorporate or exclude minorities. National policies may be designed to perpetuate existing systems of stratification (with well-defined boundaries delineating insiders and outsiders), but underclass groups frequently attempt to turn existing policies, as best they can, to their own advantage.

The first two essays in Part Three address the planning of education and the political context in which it occurs; they scarcely touch on whether differences in educational policies and political systems result in different educational content. Roberta Martin's contribution, which concludes this section, addresses this issue through an analysis of textbooks in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. She shows how national policies are translated into textual content.

The chapters in Part Four question the notion that schools teach what national governments would have them teach and that students learn what they are taught or expected to learn. Biriamah and Kelly underscore the disparity between policy and practice. Biriamah's study of a Togolese secondary school indicates that gender differentiation is transmitted by curriculum and teachers, despite the relative absence of such differentiation within the society. She implies that schools attempt to create new inequalities. Whether the difference in findings between the two studies relates to national settings, level of a nation's industrialization, differences in systems of social stratification, or other such factors is certainly worthy of further research.

Kelly, in a consideration of colonial Vietnam, posits that teachers do not always represent the goals of those who set policy but mediate knowledge in ways that are favorable to their own class, cultural, and social interests. In some cases, that mediation may engender student resistance to the power and prerogatives, including the ability of the elites to define what is culture and what knowledge is most valued.

The research presented in Part Four represents an area of study relatively new in comparative education. The field has tended to neglect the internal dynamics of the classroom and the linkages between classroom practice and the success or failure of educational policy. The essays in this volume suggest that such research may contribute to our understanding of the outcomes of educational policy. The challenge to the field is to consider the school itself as a key element and to design studies that examine the internal dynamics of schools cross-nationally rather than in a single country.

Although post-World War II educational expansion has not led to modernization, other questions remain to be answered. For example, has educational expansion contributed to the democratization of educational attainment (years of schooling completed) and academic achievement? To what extent has government intervention equalized educational outcomes for children from different backgrounds—especially those who have been most disadvantaged in the past (females, minorities, and children from working-class and rural families)? Which

factors (school- and nonschool-related) appear to influence most educational outcomes? The chapters in Part Five examine these issues by reviewing differential achievement patterns and explanations of these differences. The essay by Postlethwaite indicates a number of schooling and nonschooling factors that appear to be positively associated with cognitive achievement and educational attainment. Inkeles, in Chapter 12, suggests that these patterns vary between industrialized nations and those of the Third World. Generally, the research suggests that educational policy variables have greater impact in the less-developed nations. There remains a need for studies that examine the impact of policy variables on the learning of youth in countries differing on such relevant dimensions as economic mode of production (capitalistic versus socialistic) and political system style (authoritarian versus nonauthoritarian).

Part Six continues the discussion of the effects of educational expansion and reform, with regard to the educational status and attainment of specific socially disadvantaged groups, especially females and minorities. Chapters in this section underscore the difficulties inherent in considering all disadvantaged groups in the same light and the inability of educational expansion and reform to redress all types of inequality. Ogbu distinguishes between class- and caste-based inequalities and explains why strategies designed to alleviate one have little or no effect on the other. Caste-like inequality is much more resistant to change for a variety of reasons.

The chapters by Smock and Lapidus treat one type of caste-like inequality, that based on gender. They marshal both country-specific and cross-national data to show that whereas females are making substantial gains in access to lower levels of schooling, there are still significant differences between males and females as to who completes the highest level of the education system, who has access to the most prestigious and modern curricula and types of schooling, and who is able to convert educational credentials into income, influence, and elevated social status. The authors point out that females systematically do not fare as well as their male counterparts in enjoying the benefits of formal education. These inequalities persist even in such societies as the USSR, which consciously has set about to change the status of women as part of a radical restructuring of past policies, institutions, values, and behaviors. As Lapidus shows, educational policies have been directed toward removing inequalities only in the work force; they have not attempted to deal with the sex role division of labor within the family that has impact upon women's ability to use their education in the same way as men.

Ogbu's study explains the persistence of caste-like inequality in terms of both the nature of intentional reform and caste resistance to reform. Zachariah's study of positive discrimination for scheduled castes in India adds a further dimension. He highlights some of the contradictions inherent in affirmative action; in the Indian case, positive discrimination had mixed results, one of which was to reinforce caste boundaries and prevent full equality from being attained.



Within comparative education there is a growing debate as to whether schools and educational programs, by themselves, can contribute significantly to social justice. The chapters in Part Seven focus on reforms in educational systems and strategies independent of fundamental changes in society. These reforms involve comprehensive high schools (Levin) and a variety of nonformal education programs (Paulston and LeRoy), including Paulo Freire's highly political approach to adult education (Berman).

Whereas Part Seven examines reforms in education independent of transformations in the social structure, Part Eight chapters concentrate on radical restructuring of both schools and society, using as case studies the USSR, Eastern Europe, Nicaragua, and China. The Lapidus and Fiszman studies of the USSR and Eastern Europe historically trace the dramatic changes in those societies and their repercussions in the education and cultural systems. The Arnove and Hawkins chapters on Nicaragua and China tend to be more suggestive, in part because of past and continuing difficulties of gathering data on those societies.

The interplay between the educational and cultural domains and those of politics and economics are chronicled by Fiszman. With historical perspective, we are able to discern the difficulties all revolutionary societies face in extirpating past traditions and in overcoming deep-rooted inequalities (particularly with regard to male-female relations, roles, and statuses) and enduring notions of what constitutes valued knowledge. Arnove, in Chapter 22 on the Nicaraguan literacy campaigns, discusses mass mobilization and involvement of youth in significant social action as a means of helping form a new political culture.

As Chapter 21 by Hawkins illustrates, the content of that political culture is constantly undergoing change in a revolutionary society such as that of China. The different role assigned to education, as well as its content and method, is a matter of debate reflecting shifting political alignments and national and international forces.

The nature of the changing world system and its effects on national education systems are explored in Part Nine. This section on new directions in comparative education discusses the significance of global perspectives that take into account the international context of country-specific educational systems, and the educational and cultural relationships between countries in a stratified international order. The Arnove and Altbach chapters represent these macro approaches to the study of educational phenomena, such as the rapid and massive expansion of educational systems in the post-World War II period, the similarity of educational reforms in many countries, and the failure of these externally induced innovations to effect fundamental improvements in either school or society.

Another promising line of research is at the micro level, which examines the internal life of schools. These studies are critical of traditional survey research, which examines inputs and outputs of schooling but not what occurs at the level