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Methodology and Focus in Comparative Education

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The preceding chapters in this book have raised many issues from a range of perspectives. This final pair of chapters summarises and elaborates on some of the lessons that may be learned from the analyses. The present chapter comments on the contents of the earlier chapters within the framework of existing comparative education literature, particularly addressing methodological features. It begins by considering the widely-accepted purposes for undertaking comparative study of education. It then turns to dominant foci in the field, and finally to the approaches and tools commonly used by comparative educationists. The next chapter, following the subtitle of the whole book, identifies conceptual lessons concerning continuity and change in education.

The Purposes of Comparative Study of Education

The purposes of comparative study of education may be wide and varied. Much depends on who is doing the comparing, and under what circumstances. For example:

- parents commonly compare schools and systems of education in search of the institutions which will serve their children's needs most effectively;
- policy makers in individual countries examine education systems in other countries in order to discern ways to achieve political, social and economic objectives;
- international agencies compare patterns in different countries in order to improve the advice that they give to national governments and others;
- practitioners, including school principals and teachers, may make comparisons in order to improve the running of their institutions; and
- academics commonly undertake comparison in order to develop theoretical models which promote understanding of the forces which shape teaching and learning in different settings.

This particular book is (co-)published by a research centre within a university. The book does not aim directly to help parents seeking to find the best schools for their children, since that would have required a very different format and set of contents. Likewise, direct assistance to international agencies, policy makers and practitioners is not a primary goal, though the editors and authors certainly hope that people in such groups will read the book and gain insights which will assist their work. Rather, the book has been conceived principally as an academic work which aims to deepen understanding of the forces that shape education in different societies. The book chiefly focuses on the

education systems and institutions in two territories on the south coast of China; but the work also aims at wider conceptual understanding.

In this context, it is useful to note some of the purposes of comparative education identified by scholars at earlier points in history. A good place to start is with one of the great-grandfathers of the field of comparative education, Sir Michael Sadler. Writing in 1900 (reprinted 1964, p.310), Sadler suggested that:

The practical value of studying, in a right spirit and with scholarly accuracy, the working of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and understand our own.

The emphasis in this quotation is of an individual looking outwards, identifying another society and then comparing patterns with those in that individual's own society. In the case of the present book, it would describe a resident of Hong Kong seeking to learn more about Hong Kong through comparison with Macao; and it would describe a resident of Macao seeking to learn more about Macao through comparison with Hong Kong. Sadler suggested (p.312) that the comparison might encourage appreciation of domestic education systems as well as heightening awareness of shortcomings:

If we study foreign systems of education thoroughly and sympathetically – and sympathy and thoroughness are both necessary for the task – I believe that the result on our minds will be to make us prize, as we have never prized before, the good things which we have at home, and also to make us realise how many things there are in our [own education systems] which need prompt and searching change.

However, while the editors and authors of this book certainly hope that the work will help residents of Hong Kong and Macao to value and critique their own education systems, the editors and authors also hope that it will prove instructive to readers elsewhere. These readers might include people who have never visited, and indeed do not expect to visit, either Hong Kong or Macao. Such an aspiration emphasises a higher goal of conceptual understanding and theoretical construction.

In aiming for such a goal, again the book has many antecedents within the field. Isaac Kandel, for example, was a key figure in the generation which followed Sadler's. Kandel's 1933 book (p.xix) listed a set of problems which, he suggested, raised universal questions. Kandel then pointed out that:

The chief value of a comparative approach to such problems lies in an analysis of the causes which have produced them, in a comparison of the differences between the various systems and the reasons underlying them, and, finally, in a study of the solutions attempted.

The tone of such a statement is more closely allied to theoretical goals; and Kandel's book to some extent established a tradition into which the present book fits.

Nearly half a century later, however, Farrell (1979, p.4) justifiably pointed out weaknesses in the quality of theorising in the field. He observed that:

There is a lack of cumulation in our findings; we have many interesting bits and pieces of information, but they seldom seem to relate to one another. We have little in the way of useful and concise theory.

This situation partly arose from the fact that comparative education is a field in which