THE USE OF EMPIRICAL METHODS IN
COMPARATIVE EDUCATION:
A PILOT STUDY TO EXTEND THE SCOPE

by Arthur W. Foshay, New York

The development of a discipline of comparative education awaits agreement on both the nature of the domain and on the logic (or logics) that seem fruitful. Numerous articles in the pages of the journals ¹ make it evident that no such agreements have been reached, and that it is therefore difficult for knowledge in the field to be cumulative. The mode of inquiry most frequently used in comparative education is cultural analysis. The method of cultural analysis is relevant to one of the central questions in the field: in what sense is the formal system of education an expression of the culture from which it arises? The investigations this question entails are indeed fruitful. However, one must admit the limitations of both the question and the method. The question emphasizes the centrality of the cultural tradition at the expense of other possible emphases. The method, while it yields intriguing findings, is so implicit in the question that it has had the effect of limiting, rather than expanding, the field.

If cultural analysis is central to the field of comparative education, certainly the methods associated with it should deal with as many educational questions as possible. Among these, those questions that have to do with achievement in school are certainly prominent. One of the most subtle questions that bears upon school achievement is this: in what sense does the conception of school achievement reflect a conception of knowledge? In general it may be said that we know much more about the measurement of school achievement than we know about what it is we are actually measuring. We know a good deal about the extent of achievement of individual students and national groups, but we know very little that makes the comparison of achievement across national borders meaningful, since we know so little about what this achievement consists of. The latter question – what achievement consists of – is subtle precisely because the conception of achievement in a given system of education is deeply rooted in the tradition of education from which the system sprung; so deeply rooted as to make the conception very difficult to examine from the inside.

The point of the present paper is that such an analysis can be undertaken by comparing school systems, using the methodology of test construction to provide empirical data.

If the conception of knowledge behind estimates of school achievement were to be examined, it would be necessary to find a way of examining achievement in a larger-than-national context, and to gather comparable information concerning the achievement of a given segment of the population in identical school subjects. This would have to be done for several nations simultaneously, without regard to language differences. It would be necessary to look at several school subjects simultaneously, in order that possible intellectual styles (which may exist independent of particular subject matters) might be discerned.

Methods of this kind exist, of course. If they are to be used in comparative education, one must agree that they offer a satisfactory working form of the original question concerning the way formal educational systems reflect their underlying cultures. Tests consist of details within a discipline. Where the discipline is international (as mathematics, geography, science), then different national patterns of achievement on the same test presumably reflect the impact of the national culture on the discipline as learned.

The method that is implied here is empirical in character. It would lift the student’s achievement out of his culture, so that it might be examined of itself. Such an examination should make it possible to consider the conception of knowledge operating in the schools.

For a purpose of this kind, the well known limitations of short-answer objective tests would seem outweighed by their advantages. While short-answer tests by no means deal satisfactorily with all the forms in which knowledge must be expressed, they do deal satisfactorily with some crucial forms. For purposes of international comparison, the great advantage of such tests is that they yield strictly comparable responses from student to student. The principle difficulties in a project that makes use of such tests on an international basis would appear to be the following: the meaning of test items might be altered in the process of translation, thus rendering responses non-comparable; the populations tested might not be comparable; the test items might be inadequately representative of the field they seek to measure; the technical assumptions made by researchers in different countries might be in conflict, thus making it impossible to agree on the significance of the results; a project involving populations from several countries, tested in several subjects, might be too cumbersome to carry out.

There have, of course, been several international testing projects. While they bear in some measure on the above questions, none of them