

School and the Comparative Approach. New realities and new perspectives

RUI CANÁRIO

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Lisbon

ruif.canario@netcabo.pt

ABSTRACT:

This text provides a reflective synthesis on the big issues research is facing in the field of comparative education. This synthesis will be presented according to four main topics:

The first topic deals with changes occurring in the field of Education during the last decades which stem from a process of supranational accelerated economic integration. Having empirical evidence as a basis it is possible to notice a shift in the regulation of school systems as a result of a broader process of transnational regulation. The second topic is related to a growing blurring of frontiers (institutional, time and age frontiers) between school education and non-school education, between education and labour and between education and leisure. The third topic highlights the implications of ongoing changes for the re-composition of the “job families” operating in the educational field, with particular incidence on the teaching job. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the relevance and possible paths of a methodological renewal in comparative education, which has been kept hostage of the materiality of the nation-state as a unit of analysis.

KEYWORDS:

Comparative Education, Education Governance, Education and Globalization, Education and Teaching Job.

I would like to thank the organization for this invitation whereby during three days I had the opportunity to be an attentive and participative observer of all the scientific work presented to this Conference^a. The richness of information, both in quantitative and in qualitative terms, to which I only partially had direct access makes any attempt of synthesis an “impossible” mission. I will therefore share my personal view with you, the expression of an insight I have built on the way I lived these days of work. I’ll try to organize my communication in five key ideas underlying the whole range of contributions to this Conference.

- The first key idea corresponds to the emphasis placed on the *importance of theoretical work*, which simultaneously focuses on concepts and problems;
- The second key idea is related to awareness of most recent manifestations of the processes of *internationalization of education* and its implications for the selection of levels and perspectives of analysis;
- The third key idea is related to the emergence of a *broad concept of education- training* that undermines or at least renders to a secondary position the hegemonic place school world has been occupying until very recently;
- The fourth key idea concerns an ongoing process of *re-composition of educational jobs* which affects teachers with a particular incidence;
- Finally, a strong convergence has been manifest all along this Conference on the need for a *methodological renewal* of the scientific field of comparative education.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORETICAL WORK

In the opening session Régis Malet quite vehemently highlighted the role of “critical vigilance” attributed to this scientific event. On a broad assertion of research methodology this role of “critical vigilance” corresponds to an epistemological pole that determines not only the process of construction of study objects but also technical procedures involved in gathering and treatment of empirical information (considered as “constructs” and not as naively as “data” existing per se). Any information gathering presumes a previous theoretical point of view that leads to select the information needed and to analyse it in a certain perspective. Permanent clarification and debate about the conceptual tools that support any possible theoretical perspective represents one of the main distinctive features of scientific research. It was in this sense that Jürgen Schriewer called our attention to the decisive importance of a deep understanding and analysis of all the constraints affecting and influencing the process of production of scientific knowledge. Such constraints either assume the form of mental bias, i.e., implicit non-criticised theories, or the form of different types of social conditioning. Only unveiling them will it be possible to review the units of analysis retained as pertinent and whose construction can only derive from a particular theoretical perspective. Only from this point of view can a theoretical attitude of “critical vigilance” prevent our working agenda from being conditioned or de-

terminated from outside. On defending his conception of science and rationality, Karl Popper highlighted the importance of the role played by theory and its indissociable link to problem solving. The value of a theory can be analysed, discussed and compared to a competing theory only in the extent to which it is capable of enabling us to solve the problems we have been tackling with. That's why theoretical production plays a central role in scientific research. Yet, such role can act according to different logics and therefore lead to different results: any theory guiding our observation can lead us either to processes of *knowledge* production or to processes of *acknowledgement* production which merely confirm what's already known. This is the sense in which Karl Popper (1999) uses the expression "mental prisons" when dealing with theories as fundamental tools for any kind scientific work.

In the scientific field we've been working in, I think two persistent mental prisons can be signalized which have also been present in the contributions to this Conference: the first "mental prison" consists of entangling and overlapping education and school education, which disarms us from the tools that would enable us to understand the full scope of ongoing changes in the field of education, which widely transcends the boundaries of school system; the second "mental prison", which is common to all social sciences, concerns our addiction to the nation-state as a framework that continues to be used as a unit of analysis and main referent in comparative research. Yet, the facts and problems we've been facing do quite sharply contradict and question this way of thinking. As I'll try to prove later on, the very work undertaken during this Conference provided us with the clues that can help us to overcome these mental constraints affecting our research activity.

EDUCATION IN A WORLD SOCIETY

The evolution of educational systems has been occurring during the last thirty years in a context of accelerated supra-national economic integration, a worldwide phenomenon of which the construction of the European Union is an example. This vast process of "mundialization" consists of a set of

changes mainly reflected in the economic field in the liberalization of the market of capitals regardless of national frontiers. We've been witnessing a process of capital trans-nationalization that questions our idea of a world economic regulation ruled by relationship among countries (Bernardo, 2000). Paradoxically this change corresponded to a political choice, consented and conducted by national political authorities, but at the same time it deprived national States from their capacity to control the fluxes inside and outside their frontiers, thus relegating their action range to a marginal status, though not less important. Their main role is now to assure the best possible integration of their societies in a worldwide context, thus contributing to the emergence of a "world society" that corresponds to a single world market (Mercure, 2001). From a political point of view, supra-national economic rationale overtops national political rationale. As Habermas (1998, p. 74) states, this change creates a situation of eviction of politics by market, materialized in a deficit of legitimacy of national political instances. Furthermore, such national instances face the double constraint of being responsible before two distinctive entities, their electorate, on the one hand, and the international market of capitals, on the other, while trying to extract from the democratic process those policies that might conform markets' requirements (Crough & Streeck, 1996).

The changes I've just summarized have strong implications for education. At stake is the creation of a new order that changes nation-based educational systems while rendering them obsolete. Their mandate to reproduce national culture and labour force does no longer make sense in a globalized perspective. Their aim to build national cohesion has been progressively replaced by a functional subordination of educational policies to requirements of economic nature inherent to a single global market. Having a multiplicity of comparative education studies as a basis it is possible to affirm the empirical evidence of convergence in the observable changes occurring in the regulation of several educational systems, which stem from a broader process of "transnational regulation" (Barroso, 2005a). This author highlights the core role played in this process by supranational organizations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, OECD,

UNESCO, European Commission, Council of Europe, etc., which by means of technical cooperation programmes and R&D programmes uniformly suggest or even enforce diagnoses, techniques and solutions. Transnational regulation of educational policies operates either through contamination of conceptions, policies and measures among countries or through “externalization” whereby measures taken at national level get their legitimacy from external examples (Barroso, 2005a, pp. 153/155).

Ronald Sultana (2005) very convincingly stresses the influence of economic lobbies on educational policy initiatives and decisions taken by the European Union. He namely mentioned the ERT^b case whose programmatic documents very closely preceded similar documents published by the European Union (take the case of the 1995 White Book). According to Sultana similitude and time coincidence between the educational agendas of such economic and political instances don’t happen by chance and they are far from being superficial. They do rather correspond to a tight network comprising all school levels even those closest to the top” (p. 182).

Emergence of a process of transnational regulation of educational systems can hardly be understood unless in the context of the nation-state political step-backwards. Besides, its mere existence is in part conflicting and it simultaneously constitutes an obstacle to the full affirmation of a “borderless education” materialized through “worldwide trade of educational services” as stated by Martin Lawn (2005): “Construction of the European education space became a symbolic expression of capital power legitimacy, freed from nation-states’ limits” (p. 46). At national level mercantilization of education is reflected both in public systems’ adoption of governance methods close to entrepreneurial criteria (growing importance of so-called “new public management”) and in implementation of “quasi-market mechanisms” reflected in competition among schools associated either with segregation strategies underlying parental choice and student selection methods or with transference to the private sector of traditionally public educational services. The influence of supranational bodies on policy definition and uniformization is mostly exerted through funding processes according to a logic of “free” and “voluntary” commitment programmes (student and teacher mobility,

equivalence of diplomas) which according to António Nóvoa (2005b) decisively contribute to the consolidation of an “education world market”.

Our difficulty in understanding the ongoing new modes of regulation stems from the emergence and success of a new word, simultaneously vague and polysemous, designating a process of construction of new rules that end up squeezing international law, in the absence of a global clear and legitimating decision-making system. At stake is the word “governance”. Its emergence is linked to the political erosion of the nation-state in a context where there are no legitimate mandates from supranational entities who do implement *de facto* regulation. The notion of “governance” has nothing to do either with the market’s invisible hand or with the authoritarian power of national States (Barroso, 2005a). It pleads for different regulation modes in a context dominated by the “interpenetration of frontiers from political and technical fields, public and private, national and international” (Defarges, 2003, p. 46). This situation urges us to find out new legitimacies that might allow us to rethink our “living together” in the world (Revel, 2006).

In this context we had the opportunity to witness Julia Resnick’s valuable contribution. Since the theoretical concepts we’ve been dealing with belong to a time when the nation-state was dominant, she reminded us of the need to question the relevance of such intellectual tools in our present societies. Shriewer, on his turn, presented us with another important contribution on this matter since he highlighted the need to build new alternatives to classical comparative approaches which focus on comparison among national realities. From his point of view we must evolve from this reductionist perspective to a new one where diversification of levels and units of analysis might enable us to grasp the field of societal inter-relationships beyond any country units.

EDUCATION-TRAINING: BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

The 19th and 20th centuries correspond to periods of intensive exploration and deep knowledge about our planet: the Earth has indeed been roamed in every one direction, continents and inhospitable regions have been explored, arctic expedition made,

sea depth reached and the highest mountains escalated. Yet, it was not until the 60's that it was possible to reach the moon through space exploration programmes and only then have we been given the opportunity to get a radically new perspective of the Earth taken from outside the planet.

Back to our Conference, we must admit our work here has been centred in the school world which can hardly be said to cover the field of education. That's why there's also the need to observe this school world "from the moon", i.e., from a point of observation susceptible of reflecting a more global and complex perspective.

The ever growing frequency of the use of the expression "education-training" in technical, political and scientific literature represents in a very symptomatic way the blurring and looseness of the frontiers (institutional, time, age, etc.) that have been separating school education from post-school education, education from labour, education from job, and education from leisure. We've been living at a time of "Lifelong Learning", a sort of materialization of the ideals of the "Permanent Education" movement, though deprived of concerns about the humanization of development that had been the trademark of UNESCO policies during the 70's (Finger & Asún, 2001) and in a context when expectations of full employment have come completely out of sight.

Nowadays school education practices and policies belong to a vaster and coherent set of education-training policies functionally dependent on imperatives from prevailing economic rationale and therefore from demands for "productivity", "competitiveness" and "employability". The emergence of such new reality, which derives from globalization, leads to an idea of education as a commodity to be traded in a labour market of "employable", "flexible" and "adaptable" individuals (Charlot, 2005). Present education-training policies, associated with the decline of nation-states, presume a process of "de-institutionalization" of school (Dubet, 2002) as one of its ground foundations (together with Church and Army). As the dominance of the economic rationale tends to weaken the political dimension and rationale, school can no longer play the role of a "civic religion" church whose aim is the production of good citizens.

At the pedagogical level, such shifts are reflected in the erosion of school education centrality, which includes the erosion of school centrality in the legitimate monopoly of knowledge certification, on the one hand, and the affirmation of the "learning individual" model, on the other. This model largely transcends the limits of school territories since it expresses an increasing emphasis on individual responsabilization, already dominant in the economic field. According to Lawn (2005), the goal underlying the individualization of education is the production of disciplined "self-entrepreneurs". This idea was quite clearly corroborated by François Audiguier in his plenary session contribution when he stressed that in a world dominated by employability-reigning economic rationale the sense of belonging becomes defined in relation to a world market and no longer to a political community.

This is the context that throws some light on a recently created neologism (cf. "governance") that is supposed to re-design our relationship with knowledge and learning strategies (Carré, 2005). At stake is the word "apprenance" defined as follows by Philippe Carré and Pierre Caspar in their "Treaty of education sciences and techniques":

"(...) a range of cognitive, affective and motivational dispositions that predispose to the learning activity in all formal or informal situations and in any possible way, either experiential or didactical, self-directed or not, intentional or casual. As a favourable attitude regarding commitment to "Lifelong" education, "apprenance" would than be a proactive self-educating attitude required in a knowledge-based society" (2004, p. 197).

Following the so-called "Lisbon strategy" (project aiming to make the European Union "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world") the European Commission produced a strategic document in 2002, under the meaningful title of "Education and training 2010: Diverse Systems, Shared Goals".

Prevalence attributed to requirements from labour market and job management is in tune with the emergence of a new educational paradigm where to "a new vision" corresponds a "specific vocabulary" in which competence becomes more and more spoken of and the word culture less and less

used (Lamarche, 2006). This document defines thirteen objectives structured around three strategic axes. Eight out of these thirteen objectives deal with acquisition of competences fit to a new type of labour market and to a broader economic space. One of these objectives is related to the promotion of citizenship and social cohesion, while two others concern the creation of new learning environments. Two of the remaining objectives point to improvements in educational effectiveness through development of teacher training and resource optimization. In the way they've been worded there's no mention to "school", either as a noun or as an adjective, neither in each one of the thirteen objectives nor in the strategic three that comprise them. The same happens in the summary. A quantitative analysis of the whole document reveals that the word school shows up thirteen times in a universe of 11,950 words, which represents a percentage of 0.09. Conversely, the term "education" records 150 references when isolated, which means a frequency identical to that of the word "training" (148). The association of both terms in the expression "education and training" records 121 occurrences. A clear shift in the vocabulary used can hardly be considered a mere detail. On the contrary, it unveils new educational perspectives linked to new policies and new regulation modes.

RE-COMPOSITION OF THE TEACHING JOB

Ongoing changes in the field of education bring about obvious consequences to the re-composition of job "families" operating in this field, with particular emphasis on the teaching job whose problems go hand in hand with changes, tensions and crises occurring in the school world. Simultaneously with business-oriented processes of reorganization affecting public services, according to Lise Demailly (2000), school has also been experiencing contradictory tensions between participative and neotaylorist management methods, with negative implications for the teaching profession. Promotion of a professional model of teacher envisaged as a "reflective-practitioner" (symmetrical to the model of pupil as a "learning individual") produces paradoxical injunctions related to the fact that "teachers

are invited to be autonomous through an heteronomously oriented via" (Cattonar & Maroy, 2000, p. 31). No wonder, then, teachers' social status tends to decrease, their professional identity tends to fade, legitimacy of their work tends to be questioned and effectiveness of methods and outcomes contested. In short, teachers tend to become the "scapegoats" of the problems and tensions negatively affecting the school world (Barroso, 2005b).

A recent comparative study carried out at the European level confirms a coincidence between new regulation modes in school systems — namely related to schools' increasing autonomy — and a growing erosion of teachers' individual and professional autonomy (Maroy, 2004). Awareness and analysis of this fact at a broader level constituted the most relevant feature of the contributions and debates carried out in a symposium devoted to this theme I had the opportunity to witness. Mention has been made to "speed slow-down" in the teaching profession (Maurice Tardif), to "erosion of teachers' professional autonomy" (João Barroso) and to intensification and precarization of teaching work, which is a widespread phenomenon in Latin America (Dalila Andrade). Autonomy as a double constraint driven both from the fact that it is heteronomously determined and from the fact that teachers live it as a constraint was Claude Lassard's key idea in his contribution to a round table devoted to the teaching profession. In that same session, Agnes van Zanten explained the extent to which the "crisis" of the teaching profession is linked to the crisis of a bureaucratic-professional regulation mode, which is simultaneous with the emergence of market logics, with the dissociation between professional logics and logics external to schools and with the reinforcement of internal and external regulations which contradicts widespread rhetoric related to professional autonomy.

RETHINKING METHODS

As already mentioned, a claim for methodological renewal was the key idea of Jürgen Schriewer's contribution to this Conference. In this same sense António Nóvoa (2005a) has been defending the need for a "methodological revolution" as a necessary

condition for a research production that might open up to new fields of possibility, overcome traditional silences and propose new interpretations. According to this author and despite all its evolutions, comparative education has been a hostage of the materiality of the nation-state as a unit of analysis. Moreover, neither a physical definition of space nor a chronological definition of time can adequately serve the purpose of comparative research. In this perspective re-conceptualization of time-space relations implies devoting less importance to physical spaces and more importance to interpretative instances. Such “methodological revolution” could then be synthesized as follows:

“Similarly to history, comparative research shouldn’t focus on ‘facts’ or ‘realities’, but rather on problems. Facts — events, countries, systems, etc. — are incomparable by definition. It is possible to throw some light on ‘singularities’ and ‘similarities’, but not any further. Only problems can be elected as the raw material [which will provide] new looking areas that might project in a space whose limits would be semantic but not physical” (2005a, p. 49).

This methodological redirection will allow us to prevent our research agenda from being externally determined while trying to catch up with what Schriewer ironically named as “hot news”. On the other hand and getting back to Popper’s critique, it will also allow us to avoid the perverse effects of specialization, atomization and fragmentation of the different research fields, which can turn our scientific meetings into something close to a Babel Tower. Methodological renewal and overcoming fragmentation will only be possible if we take as a reference a steady “work” on the big problems we’re trying to get answers to, though provisional answers, and which will guide our individual and collective research activity.

In my opinion, from the debates and contributions to this Conference four big problems emerged for which we haven’t obviously met the answers so far, which means they’ve been kept open as a fertile horizon for research and reflection:

The first big problem concerns the way we equate the *relations among the global level, the national level and the local level*. Similarly to what happened in the 80’s when the “discovery of school”

began to be spoken of as a meso level for analysis and action, the same type of terminology has been partially transferred to the so-called “discovery of the local” to which the “discovery” of a global level would have been added. Articulation among these three levels is built on the basis of a hierarchic, linear and stanch perspective, and as a juxtaposition of levels, where the nation-state unit continues to be its main referent. This way of equating the problem is neither satisfactory nor does it allow to account for the complex “nuances” we have already intuited and explained.

The second big problem is related to persistence of a *dichotomist and reductionist opposition between State and market*, which reveals the same difficulty in breaking off a State-centred perspective and in clarifying and working with concepts fit for a new reality. It should be reminded that market has historically preceded the birth of modern nation-states and that the capitalist market theorized by classical economists as a free-trade self-regulated market has never existed as such. In this context, the vulgarization of the concept of “neo-liberalism” represents not only an anachronism but also a misunderstanding of the meaning of current processes of supranational economic integration. We’ve been living in a world dominated by a logic of oligopolies rather than by a logic of free-trade. We’re most probably witnessing the development of a “new” sort of state although not yet visible by lack of proper conceptual tools. Therefore, it is possible to speak of “State loose frontiers” as it is possible to declare that there is by no means “less State”, there is otherwise a re-composition of public affairs, which refers to the similarly vague and loose concept of “governance” (Lamarche, 2006). It is in this same sense that Barroso quite incisively states that this question shouldn’t be equated in terms of “more” or “less” State, but rather in terms of “a different sort of State”.

The third big problem deals with the political *impacts of the “governance” modes* that in a complex way regulate different logics of action at different intervention levels. That is, the extent to which these new regulation modes (implying local, national and global interaction) articulate with modernity-due mechanisms of political representation and legitimacy. Here is the source of our concerns when

looking for a new public space or a new definition of public space that might be situated “somewhere between the State and the market-like civil society” (Whitty, quoted by Barroso, 2005a, p. 166).

The fourth big problem that should never be out of our questions’ range deals with the meaning of education and therefore with the re-introduction of a strong political and philosophical dimension in the theorization and analysis of educational policies and practices. This problem is all the more relevant as we live at a time when “market effectiveness has taken the place of significance”, as Martin Lawn (2005, p. 45) once wrote. Contrarily to what some say, we are not living at a time when great educational debates become superfluous. Such debates will be urgent if

our purpose is to encourage prolific communication among different researchers and different research fields and prolific relations between knowledge production and collective social action.

In relation to this latter problem, I’d like to conclude by leaving to your reflection philosopher Seneca’s words written in a letter to Lucilius whereby he very actually and acutely elaborates on the relationship between knowledge and the sense of education: “A mathematician teaches me how to evaluate my property (...) he teaches me how to count and makes my fingers eager about money [but] (...) what’s the use of knowing how to divide an area into four smaller parts if I don’t know how to share my property out among my brothers?”

ENDNOTES

1. This text corresponds to the written version of the speech I made in the closing plenary session of the AFEC International Conference, “School as a Place of Tensions and Mediations: What Impact on School practices? International Analysis and Comparisons”, held in the University of Lille 3 on 22nd, 23rd and 24th June 2006.

2. European Round Table of Industrials (a group of some forty European industrial leaders who seek to strengthen and develop Europe’s industrial and technical competitiveness)

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