Comparative and International Education
An Introduction to Theory, Method, and Practice

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Making Comparisons

Comparative education covers a vast field which does not correspond to any strict normative definition.

Debeauvais

Comparisons are, it is said, odious, particularly to the objects compared; nevertheless, the basis of all knowledge is comparison.

Hughes

The nature of comparative investigation in education

Even a cursory survey of writings in comparative and international education will reveal a preoccupation with defining the field. In contrast to many more established areas in educational inquiry, there seems to be a fundamental insecurity in terms of positioning the work that comparativists are engaged in, to the extent that they feel obliged to offer justifications for what they do and the methods they use. In this book, we aim to outline and develop some of these justifications while emphasizing the strengths and growing importance of the field, however difficult it may be to define its boundaries.

We are concerned in this study with what in the first instance appear to be two separate aspects of educational study and inquiry. Comparative and international education, by virtue of being associated in one phrase linked by ‘and’ are taken to be implicitly separate, and it is this perceived separateness that provides us with the starting point for an examination of what this important area of education covers. As we shall see, a comparative study is usually (though not exclusively) international in nature, and an international study is often comparative (though not necessarily or explicitly so.) In common usage in the UK and elsewhere, however, ‘comparative’ studies
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are frequently (and in our view absurdly) associated with the western industrialized world, while ‘international’ education tends (for us wrongly) to imply the study of education in all its forms in the developing world. These problems in usage have emerged largely as a result of the titles and focus of books and journals and from the nature of university courses.

Erwin Epstein has characterized ‘comparative education’ as referring to:

a field of study that applies historical, philosophical, and social science theories and methods to international problems in education. Its equivalents in other fields of academic study are those dedicated to the transsocietal study of other social institutions, such as comparative government, comparative economics, and comparative religion. Comparative education is primarily an academic and interdisciplinary pursuit.3

Here the emphasis is on interdisciplinarity and the parallel is established with other long-standing and more recently introduced comparative fields (which do not seem, incidentally, to need as much defence in terms of what they are essentially about). In his description of ‘international education’ Epstein argues that it:

fosters an international orientation in knowledge and attitudes and, among other initiatives, brings together students, teachers, and scholars from different nations to learn about and from each other. International education also includes the analysis and description of such activities. Many practitioners of international education are experts on international exchange and interaction. Their activities are partly based on a knowledge of comparative education.4

In Epstein’s view – despite international education apparently being dependent on comparative expertise – comparative and international education are essentially complementary, allowing academics and practitioners in both fields to collaborate closely. And it is this interaction between the two fields that will be the focus of much of our present study.

Epstein’s definition brings out an aspect of education that constitutes a field of its own, namely the investigation of education in international schools and in the context of efforts to educate for international understanding. Here the role of the International Baccalaureate (IB), for example, is a focus of inquiry. George Walker, one-time director general of the IB, has suggested the questions that characterized the twentieth-century research challenge for international education in this kind of context:
Can we describe the key concepts of international education that set it apart from other categories of education?

Is ‘international-mindedness’ one such concept and, if so, what does it mean in practice?

In what cultural environment does international education seem to grow the strongest roots?

Which administrative structures give it the best support in schools?

What pedagogic style is the most effective in achieving its goals?

But for the most part ‘international’ education embraces areas of inquiry way beyond a focus on international schools and their activities, important as they are.

The British comparativist and historian of France W. D. Halls produced a useful explanatory schema which describes how he saw the relationship between the various activities that can be subsumed under both ‘comparative’ and ‘international’ education. He regards international education as a sub-set of a wide range of activity within comparative education, which in turn constitutes ‘both a method and an object of study’. It is method inasmuch as comparativists have devised approaches to the analysis of educational phenomena in different countries and contexts; and it is an object of study insofar as it involves examining other countries and their education systems in much the same way as we might study French history (as Halls did) or the geography of Sweden. Halls’s schema is reproduced in Figure 1.

Halls sees the categories he lists as overlapping rather than being mutually exclusive, and he admits that there is ‘clearly no agreement among comparative educationists as to the use of terms’. But the schema is still useful in helping us to understand the inter-relationships between the wide range of activities that together make up comparative and international education.

Figure 1 Halls’s typology of comparative education
(Source: Halls, Comparative Education, p. 23)
In this typology ‘comparative pedagogy’ is defined as ‘the study of teaching and the classroom process in different countries’. (Though this would seem an obvious task for comparative research, it remains a clearly under-represented area.) ‘Intra-educational and intra-cultural analysis’ is seen as an investigation of education through various levels, with due attention to context (historical, social, cultural, etc.). ‘Education abroad’ is taken by Halls to mean ‘the study of an educational system or systems other than one’s own’.

‘International pedagogy’ is defined in terms of a wide range of possible investigation; it is the study of:

- teaching multinational, multicultural and multiracial groups
- education for international understanding
- peace education
- international population and ecology
- intra-cultural differences and their resolution, textbook development, the harmonization of curricula and international teaching norms.

Study of the work of international educational institutions covers policy issues such as the international recognition and acceptability of qualifications, educational exchange, and cultural agreements. (Now, it would include international surveys of educational attainment.)

Halls defines ‘development education’ as ‘the production of plans to assist policymakers, particularly in ‘new nations’, the development of appropriate educational methods and techniques, and the training of personnel to implement programmes’. The typology does not, however, reflect the essential connectedness of ‘comparative’ and ‘international’ education as the starting point for a ‘mapping’ of the field.

We shall consider ‘international education’ in greater detail in Chapter 4. First, however, we must look more closely at what we mean by ‘comparative education’ as a field of inquiry. Does comparative education fulfil the essential requirement for a discipline to be ‘a branch of learning or scholarly instruction’ with its own discrete rules and methods? Or should comparative education rather be seen, as Epstein and Halls indicate, as a contributing field within the cross-disciplinary activity that constitutes ‘education’ as a subject, in much the same way that educational philosophy or sociology or psychology or history provide necessary support within that multifaceted area of academic activity?

António Nóvoa puts the arguments against comparative education as a coherent discipline very forcefully when he writes:
It is quite easy to line up the arguments against a field which has never succeeded in defining either a proper objective or even a method, which is mid-way between scientific research and political intervention, which is shot through by working practices which depend rather on a certain academic folklore than a systematic production of knowledge, which despite some notable exceptions is peopled by researchers of little prestige in the academic world; we could even go so far as to denounce the illusion of being able to build a discipline on a method, comparison, which is inherent in every scientific approach.

That is a fierce verdict. But Nóvoa continues in the same paragraph to put the arguments in favour of comparative education as a multi-disciplinary activity:

It is also very easy to praise a field which looks for explanations beyond national limits, which calls on multi-disciplinary approaches, which does not hesitate to come to terms with the inevitable links between educational research and educational action; the plea in favour could go so far as to assert that comparative education is the quintessence of the educational sciences, since it is situated at […] 'a higher epistemological level'.

'A higher epistemological level' would situate comparative education in terms of the methods and validation of knowledge above investigative approaches which are more tied to the rules of any one of the contributing sub-disciplines of education.

A thorough analysis of comparative education as a field has been undertaken by Maria Manzon. She asks in particular: 'How can a field of study survive, develop, and perpetuate itself if its scholarly community are unclear, much less unanimous, about their field's identity, aims and contents?' And: 'Why is comparative education institutionalised as a distinct field when its intellectual distinctiveness seems to be blurred?' And the first section of a magisterial two-volume study edited by Robert Cowen and Andreas Kazamias contains ten articles which describe in detail the 'creation and re-creation' of the field.

In contrast to those who are concerned about the wide-ranging nature of the field, Rolland Paulston, who made a considerable contribution to the 'mapping' of comparative education, spoke of the liberating nature of involvement with a field that is not constrained by the dicta of any particular discipline:

Comparative education by definition is generic: it's a synthetic field. That's why I got into it in the first place. It offered me the most freedom … to create,
to work with my ideas and with other people's ideas. [...] In almost any disciplinary field you get hammered into a disciplinary way of seeing [...] and that's it. [...] Most people, once they are hammered into a disciplinary mould, a way of seeing – be it Marxist or positivist or humanist, whatever, find it very difficult to change to [...] different – let alone tolerate other – views to the point where they can be recognised as legitimate competing views.10

In this interpretation, the strength of the subject lies in its not being a discipline in the accepted sense.

We once heard a student remark – not unsupportively – that the problem with the comparative and international course he was following was that it was about all aspects of education in every country of the world throughout all time. The field is potentially as immense as that. Comparativists cover a huge range of topics which demand expertise in many areas of academic inquiry. What brings them together in an identifiably coherent way is the common attempt at comparison, and comparison is a method used by various disciplines rather than an activity which can conceivably be described as a discipline in itself.

Patricia Broadfoot has argued that 'the comparative study of education is not a discipline: it is a context',11 and it is perhaps her identification of the centrality of context that provides the clearest imperative for those in comparative education to develop understanding through a number of contributing disciplines (history, sociology, psychology, etc.) in their endeavours in comparative inquiry. Comparativists, operating as they do within a multidimensional subject, are essentially generalists, and among the many competences expected of them is a knowledge of and sympathy for the methods of such other kinds of inquiry. To them might be added the ‘culturalist’ approach advocated by Halls.12 It is axiomatic to expect that comparativists will take into account the historical, cultural, social, economic, etc., contexts in which educational phenomena are observed, and that they must be sensitive to and knowledgeable about what these contributing areas of expertise can offer. We can only properly understand an educational phenomenon in terms of the contextual factors that have created and shaped it. Indeed, it is essential in comparative studies to insist on the centrality of context for degrees of explanatory power.

George Bereday, a polyglot international scholar with formal qualifications in history, sociology and education, argued strongly that comparativists should also have a sound knowledge of the language of any country used in their comparative investigations and that they should immerse themselves
in the culture. What is more, they should also have a common ‘parent discipline’: Bereday suggests ‘political geography’ or political science insofar as it covers comparative government and international relations. We agree that the individual comparativist does indeed need a strong base in a parent discipline but we argue that it is one of the strengths of comparative scholarship and research that those engaged in developing the field have roots in diverse disciplinary backgrounds. That, for example, Edmund King was a classicist, Brian Holmes a physicist, George Bereday a historian by origin, reinforced their common effort in the field. Our readers will wish to know that one of us is a linguist and cultural historian by origin, and the other uses perspectives of critical sociology and interactionism in her work. While both of us are based at universities in the United Kingdom, one has close knowledge and experience of education in Germany, while the other, although from Canada originally, has taught and undertaken research in a range of developing and transitional countries. Different disciplinary backgrounds and different degrees and types of experience provide different perspectives and introduce different methodological approaches. Indeed, the involvement in comparative educational investigation of those who would not describe themselves as comparativists is to be welcomed for the additional insights their participation brings, especially when teams of researchers are engaged in collaborative inquiry. This is potentially the greatest inherent strength of large-scale studies of the kind undertaken by IEA or the OECD.

If we conclude that comparative education is not a discipline in the strict sense of the word, it nevertheless has sufficient discipline-like qualities to be described as a ‘quasi-discipline’ and as such plays an important role in every field of inquiry in the many subjects that make up the study of education, from investigations that are firmly rooted in disciplines (psychology, sociology, social psychology, philosophy, history …) to studies of a cross-disciplinary nature in such areas as assessment, special needs, early childhood learning, home-school relations, accountability, etc.

The common aim to develop ways of making comparison is what links the heterogeneous body of scholars and researchers engaged in comparative education. And comparison, of course, is a fundamental aspect of intellectual inquiry. We use comparison in order to make judgements and reach decisions (whether subjective or objective) as to whether something is, for example, bigger or smaller, prettier or uglier, pleasant or unpleasant; and to make moral, ethical, logical and other kinds of philosophical judgements about whether one set of conditions or one course of action is better,
preferable, more desirable, etc., than another. In this regard comparison is
indispensable to our thought processes. It should therefore be quite natural
that we should use comparison as a basis for decision-making in a field like
education where we must frequently make all kinds of judgements as to
what course of action to take in particular circumstances and at particular
times. Bryan Magee reminds us of Plato’s view ‘that good judgment consists
equally in seeing the differences between things that are similar and the
similarities between things that are different’. We might, indeed, expect
that all concerned with education should be involved in comparisons of
one kind or another as they reach decisions about such matters as what to
teach and how to teach, or how to manage, reform or evaluate an education
system, or how to assess and examine performance.

What is more, the ‘comparative method’ is a cornerstone of classical
sociological investigation. Durkheim describes it as follows:

We have only one way of demonstrating that one phenomenon is the cause
of another. This is to compare the cases where they are both simultaneously
present or absent, so as to discover whether the variations they display in
these different combinations of circumstances provide evidence that one
depends upon the other. When the phenomena can be artificially produced
at will by the observer, the method is that of experimentation proper. When,
on the other hand, the production of facts is something beyond our power to
command, and we can only bring them together as they have been spontane-
ously produced, the method used is one of indirect experimentation, or the
comparative method.

We have in comparative education the advantage of being able to examine
situations which cannot be set up experimentally at home. ‘Indirect experi-
mentation’ in Durkheim’s sense is an expression which might profitably be
used more frequently to describe what comparativists do as they explore the
advantages and disadvantages of models observed in one context which could
provide lessons for policy in another. An example of such ‘indirect experi-
mentation’ would be the attention given to the ‘reading recovery’ methods
developed in New Zealand and enthusiastically investigated and adopted by
education authorities in the USA, Australia, the UK, and elsewhere.

But many problems arise when we attempt to conceptualize how compar-
isons might be made and the purposes to which they might be put. In what
follows we shall consider the purposes of comparative inquiry, analyse what
comparatists do, and ponder the uses and abuses of comparative evidence.
In Chapter 2 we shall discuss how the field has developed since its earliest
days.
The uses and purposes of comparative inquiry

Beyond the basic and essential level of data collection and analysis, we can identify a range of other purposes of comparative inquiry in education. There would probably be broad agreement that 'learning from the experience of others' would rank very highly. This might indeed be the single most important purpose we can identify to justify – in essentially practical terms – what comparativists do. The ‘learning’ involved might result in an effort to improve provision ‘at home’, but equally it might help us to understand more fully what it is that has helped to form the system of education of which we are a part. This is of course what Michael Sadler emphasized in a much-quoted speech delivered in Guildford in 1900 that has become one of the key texts in comparative education:

The practical value of studying […] the working of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and to understand our own.

This is a deceptively obvious statement concealing the basic truth (rehearsed above) that it is through the act of comparing that we define our position on most issues that require the exercising of judgement. Sadler’s point was developed by Joseph Lauwerys:

Comparative education is not normative: it does not prescribe rules for the good conduct of schools and teaching. […] It tries instead to understand what is done and why.

As Bereday put it, ‘to understand others and to understand ourselves is to have in hand the two ingredients of comparison.’

Halls points out that ‘many, if not most, comparative studies in education, like those in similar fields such as comparative law or criminology, are undertaken for meliorist purposes. And, indeed, notions of ‘reforming’, ‘improving’, ‘doing better’ are usually prominent in the many attempts that have been made at defending comparative endeavour.

Another commentator reports ‘general agreement’ on the following purposes of comparative education:

(a) to promote knowledge; (b) to assist reform and development; (c) to improve knowledge about one’s own educational system; and (d) to promote international goodwill.
This is reminiscent of a checklist of aims which Brian Holmes felt in the 1970s was ‘widely accepted’. 

comparative education should lead to a greater understanding of the processes of education; (2) it should promote interest in and information about particular national systems of education and be able to explain why they are as they are; (3) it should facilitate the practical reform and planned development of school systems; (4) it should promote desirable international attitudes among those who study it.

Farrell mentions firstly intrinsic interest, and secondly ‘[providing] ideas and approaches which may have relevance and usefulness in one’s own country’. Schneider cites better understanding of the countries compared, including the ‘home’ country, and recognition of their strengths and weaknesses; the extraction of paradigms, models, and methods for the solution of practical problems and the implementation of educational reform; and the breaking-down of prejudice and the establishment of international thinking in education.

One succinct definition of the subject brings out the basic purposes of description and evaluation made possible through such contrast: ‘The study of two or more national systems of education, as existing now and as historical developments, in order that differing approaches to similar problems may be described and evaluated.’ It is this attraction of difference that is so compelling in comparative studies and that has informed the work of comparativists from the early beginnings of their various endeavours.

Halls identifies three main aims of comparative education:

1. To provide an educational morphology, i.e. a global description and classification of the various forms of education (as undertaken by UNESCO and the OECD, etc.).
2. To determine the relationships and interactions between the different aspects or factors in education, and between education and society.
3. To distinguish the fundamental conditions of educational change and persistence and relate these to more ultimate philosophical laws.

He believes that the establishment of truth in such studies cannot be reached by logical processes (despite the methodological tools of the social scientist) but by an analogical process, i.e. through ‘a process of arguing from similarity in known respects to similarity in other respects.’

In the light of the above, we might attempt a composite list of defences of comparative studies along the following lines:
The comparative study of education:
- shows what is possible by examining alternatives to provision ‘at home’
- offers yardsticks by which to judge the performance of education systems
- describes what might be the consequences of certain courses of action, by looking at experience in various countries (i.e. in attempting to predict outcomes it can serve both to support and to warn against potential policy decisions)
- provides a body of descriptive and explanatory data which allows us to see various practices and procedures in a very wide context that helps to throw light upon them
- contributes to the development of an increasingly sophisticated theoretical framework in which to describe and analyse educational phenomena
- serves to provide authoritative objective data which can be used to put the less objective data of others (politicians and administrators, principally) who use comparisons for a variety of political and other reasons, to the test
- has an important supportive and instructional role to play in the development of any plans for educational reform, when there must be concern to examine experience elsewhere
- helps to foster cooperation and mutual understanding among nations by discussing cultural differences and similarities and offering explanations for them
- is of intrinsic intellectual interest as a scholarly activity, in much the same way as the comparative study of religion, or literature, or government, is.29

There is in these various attempts to define the purposes of the comparative investigation of education a particular focus on processes of learning and understanding and the benefits in terms of improvement that those processes might bring. The most obvious consequence of learning from and understanding what is happening ‘elsewhere’ in education is that we might be persuaded of the advantages to be gained from copying or emulating successful practice as it is manifest in other countries – what has become generally known as ‘borrowing’.

If one of the principal aims of comparative inquiry in education is to identify good practice elsewhere, it follows that such good practice might be seen as potentially adoptable in (and adaptable to) the ‘home’ context. We might ‘learn from’ the foreign example and attempt reform that could benefit from its perceived advantages. Analysis of the transfer of ideas from one setting to another is a highly complex matter to which comparativists have devoted considerable attention. We shall examine policy transfer in detail in Chapter 3. But first we must consider ways in which comparative inquiry can be misused.
Harold Noah cites instances of misreporting of foreign practice – ‘exaggerated and distorted reports’ – and reminds us of the essential conditions for the taking-up of ideas gleaned from elsewhere:

The authentic use of comparative study resides not in wholesale appropriation and propagation of foreign practices but in careful analysis of the conditions under which certain foreign practices deliver desirable results, followed by consideration of ways to adapt those practices to conditions found at home.30

This is a salutary pointer to the dangers inherent in a simplistic faith in ‘borrowing’. The foreign example needs first to be understood within its proper context; only then can its adoption ‘at home’ be considered.

Noah mentions also misreporting (exaggeration, distortion) of information which, when unchecked, can result in a misplaced enthusiasm for foreign educational ideas and practices which might originally have been properly investigated and reported upon. The educational experiments (new teaching styles, reformed curricula, changed forms of assessment, etc.) which can follow such misreporting and misplaced enthusiasm might be very damaging.

One example of misreporting would be the way in which Prais and Wagner’s important paper of 1985 on schooling standards in England and Germany has been used. Their interesting conclusion that ‘attainments in mathematics by those in the lower half of the ability range in England appear to lag by the equivalent of about two years’ schooling behind the corresponding section of pupils in Germany’31 has been frequently misreported as a finding that all British pupils lag behind their German counterparts by two years of schooling. In 1990, a full-page insertion in The Times Educational Supplement showed three children sitting at desks, the middle boy being a head taller than the boy and girl on each side of him. The caption read ‘If a British third-former [i.e. a pupil aged 13–14 years] went to Germany, he’d be in a different class’. And the accompanying text asserted (more generally still) that ‘international tests show that, in mathematics, British teenagers lag behind German teenagers by the equivalent of two academic years’.32

The misinterpretation of results is another instance of abuse of comparative education cited by Noah. With more and more complex data available through studies such as those produced at regular intervals by IEA and the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys, it is not uncommon for journalists and others to focus on an apparently
significant ‘result’ and to use it in ways not supported by the evidence, which often takes expert knowledge to understand in its complexity.

Noah also mentions the dangers of ethnocentricity, of seeing things only through the observer’s own perspective. To be aware of an inclination towards an ethnocentric view of the world is one of the earliest lessons that investigators and commentators must learn. But, again, it is too often the case that ‘problems’ are seen through a perspective informed by a perception of education from within a very particular set of circumstances. Noah argues that there is ‘a spurious color of definiteness’ to assumptions of generalizability to other contexts from the experiences of western industrialized nations.

What comparativists do

An important set of problems relates to what comparativists do. We might reasonably assume that they are for the most part concerned to compare; but in reality much work done within comparative education is not overtly comparative in Neville Postlethwaite’s sense of ‘examining two or more educational entities by putting them side by side and looking for similarities or differences between or among them’.

Single country studies constitute a substantial element of ‘comparative’ inquiry, as an examination of papers in any particular issue of journals like *Comparative Education* or *Compare* or the *Comparative Education Review* will reveal.

Such studies, undertaken by scholars outside of the country they are investigating, are defended, however, in terms of their being implicitly comparative, since the authors are observing phenomena ‘elsewhere’ through ‘foreign’ eyes. And collection of the detailed information – interpreted for an audience outside of the country being investigated – that results from single country studies, is seen as an essential part of the contribution that comparative education can make to our understanding of educational issues generally. Thus Noah argues that in comparative education ‘a fundamental task […] is to collect, classify and array data about the educational efforts of the nations of the world’, and Lauwerys saw the starting point as ‘the collection and classification of information, both descriptive and quantitative, about schools and teaching’. Such data collection and single country analysis has always been an important aspect of the work of comparativists, and it has been given added weight through the complex investigations and reporting now engaged in on a regular basis by such international bodies.
as UNESCO and the OECD. The single country study, often undertaken by scholars with profound knowledge of the language, history and culture of the societies they are investigating, is indispensable in providing the essential data and interpretations on which secure comparisons can be based.

In citing the ‘single country study’, however, we should not create the impression that comparative inquiry involves only ‘countries’ in the sense of comparisons of individual nation-states. Intra-country comparative studies are a legitimate and fruitful area of inquiry; the nation-state provides the framework of common ground, while the sub-units of the state in question provide the basis for a study of similarities and contrasts. The UK would be a good example of a complex nation-state which lends itself to potentially informative comparisons between the various parts which together make up the nation. Within England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland further sub-regional units might be identified for comparison. In England, for example, we might compare the differing roles and challenges of local education authorities as between urban conglomerations and rural counties, or the education of members of ethnic minority groups in the industrial north and the rural south, or education and employment in the prosperous southern and the less wealthy northern regions.

As well as intra-country studies, comparativists are concerned with cross-regional investigation of educational issues. Processes of educational transition in the former eastern bloc might be compared with those in evidence in African states; language issues with cross-border implications can be investigated and compared in various parts of Europe and in all other continents; political and other kinds of grouping (as in the European Union) provide a rich source for inter-regional comparison.

In a widely quoted article in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Bray and Thomas proposed a ‘framework for comparative education analyses’ in the form of a cube which attempted to classify the various types of study undertaken by comparativists. Bray describes it as follows:

Along one side were aspects of education and of society, and along another side were non-locational demographic groups. The front of the cube then presented seven geographical/locational levels. At the top were provinces, districts, schools, classrooms and individuals. We observed that comparisons could be made at each of these levels, and that the insights gained from such comparisons would differ at each level. We noted that in some respects patterns at each level were influenced by patterns at other levels. We made a
case for multilevel analysis of educational phenomena; and where resources did not permit such multilevel analysis, we suggested that researchers should at least be aware of the level at which they were operating and of the limitations imposed by focusing only on that level.37

The Bray and Thomas framework (Figure 2)38 is useful in establishing clearly the multiple approaches possible in comparative studies which challenge tendencies to focus on the nation-state as the unit of analysis. An essential point in Bray and Thomas’s article is that research often neglects the relationship between the ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ levels as depicted in the cube. Comparativists do indeed sometimes focus too much on the macro level of analysis and pay less attention to the micro level. While it is not always inappropriate to focus on the nation-state, other units of analysis are often more revealing and of greater value in our understanding of what is happening ‘on the ground’ in education.

But whatever the basis for comparison – between nations, within particular countries, across regions – there will be a number of questions that the comparativist will have to deal with at the outset of any inquiry. We shall consider problems of methods and methodology in detail in Chapter 6. Here we should note that in devising any scheme for the comparison of

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**Figure 2** Framework for comparative education analyses (Bray and Thomas)
educational phenomena attention should be paid to various equivalences on the basis of which comparisons can be sensibly undertaken. These equivalences typically relate to concepts, contexts, and functions. It is an important part of the comparativist’s task to be certain that there is a proper basis for comparison, so that there is no ‘so what?’ factor in any response. The challenge here is to identify variables which will allow Noah’s conditions for a comparative study:

A comparative study is essentially an attempt as far as possible to replace the names of systems (countries) by the names of concepts (variables).\(^{39}\)

Many of those working in comparative education will see themselves as belonging to various methodological traditions. Halls identifies several approaches: historico-philosophical; ‘national character’; ‘culturalist’; ‘eclectic and pragmatic’; ‘problem-solving’; quantitative; economic; and social science.\(^{40}\) As we shall see, some of these determining methodological positions have been particularly associated with individuals whose work has made an impact on the way thinking has developed in the subject. There will be a wide variety of methods used, with their advocates and detractors. And this has led at times to a certain insecurity which is not so obvious in other comparative subject areas more closely associated with an established ‘parent discipline.’ There is a danger, indeed, that interdisciplinarity which is not controlled or determined by a parent discipline of some kind will languish in a sort of scientific and intellectual limbo.

Comparative anatomy was probably the earliest such subject area involving serious scientific analysis and comparison. Comparative religion has a long history of description and classification which has thrown considerable light on the nature and origins of religious belief. Comparative law aims ‘to [discover] generalizations applicable to law generally, […] with a view to law reform, or with a view to the unification of law and the achievement of a universal law shared by all civilized humanity’.\(^{41}\) Comparative literature attempts to identify similarities in literary endeavour across nations and cultures. Each of these other comparative fields of inquiry is characterized by a determined effort on the part of its practitioners to engage in the complex task of making comparisons, of using comparative methods in their research as opposed to limiting themselves to the single country study. Comparative education, of course – unlike some of these comparative fields – belongs to a category of comparison with the potential of identifying implications for policy in an important area of the social life of every nation.
Henk van Daele sees no agreement as to a definition of comparative education: ‘Une définition précise, universellement acceptée, manque toujours’ (‘A precise, universally accepted definition is still lacking’). But in the light of the analysis so far, we propose the following working definition of what we might understand by ‘comparative education’:

The study of any aspects of educational phenomena in two or more different national or regional settings in which attempts are made to draw conclusions from a systematic comparison of the phenomena in question.

And we can conclude this introductory survey with Max Eckstein, who encapsulates in a couple of sentences the main purpose and justification of the study of comparative education:

Varied and eclectic in subject matter, methods, concepts, and theories [comparative education] continues to perform two important functions. It is a source of both practical and theoretical knowledge for educational administrators, planners, and politicians, providing them with an array of case studies and alternatives, indications of possible outcomes (both intended and unintended) of specific programs or policies, and a context for understanding school practices and problems. At the same time, as a component in the education of teachers and others involved in professional education, comparative education serves to combat provincialism and ethnocentricity, to motivate study of the history and development of school systems, and to increase awareness of the interplay between schools and their social and cultural environments.

In Chapter 2 we move to a consideration of the historical development of comparative education as a field of academic inquiry.

Notes

2. Hughes, Schools at Home and Abroad, p. 52.
3. Epstein, ‘Comparative and international education’, p. 918.
4. Ibid.
17. Ofsted: *Reading Recovery in New Zealand*.
26. Collins et al., *Key Words in Education*, p. 44.
36. Series like the OECD’s *Education at a Glance*, for example, or UNESCO’s *World Education Report*. The EURYDICE network also provides such data.
38. Bray and Murray Thomas: ‘Levels of comparison in educational studies’.
42. Van Daele, *L’Éducation Comparée*, p. 15.