

Thematic Article**The Education Systems of Europe
– an object of Comparative Educational
Research?**

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Abstract

For a long time Wolfgang Mitter was the co-editor of the handbook *Die Bildungssysteme Europas/The Education Systems of Europe*. Besides his formal co-editorship Wolfgang Mitter took actively part in the discussions about the conception of the book. One of the remaining methodological issues in these discussions has been: Is it possible and does it make sense to develop comparisons *stricto sensu* by analysing a series of education systems (area studies) of different countries? Can it create scientifically founded knowledge, which is more than a description? The paper refers to the discussions among the editors about this topic.

Keywords: Comparative education, European education, educational systems, research methodology

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I. The problem

Without any doubt, the question raised in the title of this paper would have been answered by Wolfgang Mitter in an affirmative way: The education systems of Europe are evidently a subject of Comparative Education. As a matter of fact, for long years, Wolfgang Mitter was co-editor of our handbook *Die Bildungssysteme Europas/The Education Systems of Europe*.²⁷ But besides his formal co-editorship it is evident that Wolfgang Mitter took actively part in the discussions about the conception of this book (cf. Mitter 2002; Mitter 2007). One of the remaining methodological issues in these discussions has been: Is it possible and makes it sense to develop comparisons *stricto sensu* by analysing a series of education systems (area studies) of different countries? Can it create scientifically founded knowledge, which is more than a description? The following exposition refers to the discussions among the editors about this topic (cf. for the following also Horner/Dobert, 2007 and Horner, 2010).

What could be the sustainable cognitive interest of such comparisons of the education systems, just among European countries? If we want to answer to this question it will be necessary to explain at first a certain number of key concepts.

II. Education as a paradox

Education seems to be a paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, education is universal: as a matter of fact, since the period of Enlightenment in the end of the 18th century, it has been declared universal good of the whole humanity, a good that must be available for everybody. Moreover, historical educational research inspired by the ideas of world system theory, told us that since this historical period public education took even universal traits in its main structures (it became compulsory state education, given by professional teachers in classrooms... cf. Adick, 1992). However, on the other hand, the fact that education was organised or at least controlled by the state was in the same time the beginning of an opposite characteristic of education: education given by educational institutions organized or controlled by the state became a mean of nation building, a mean of creating national identity. By this double evolution, education has two opposite meanings: education as enlightenment, education as the light of reason shining for everybody, is opposed to education as a more or less nationalist concept, a national

²⁷ Cf. the following editions:

- Döbert, Hans; Hörner, Wolfgang; von Kopp, Botho; Mitter, Wolfgang (2002/2004, eds.). *Die Schulsysteme Europas*. Schneider-Verlag Hohengehren, Baltmannsweiler.

- Hörner, Wolfgang; von Kopp, Botho; Mitter, Wolfgang (2007, eds.). *The Education Systems of Europe*. Springer, Dordrecht. (First edition.)

- Döbert, Hans; Hörner, Wolfgang; von Kopp, Botho; Reuter, Lutz R. (2010, eds.). *Die Bildungssysteme Europas*. Schneider-Verlag Hohengehren, Baltmannsweiler. (Third edition.)

- Döbert, Hans; Hörner, Wolfgang; von Kopp, Botho; Reuter, Lutz R. (2015, eds.). *The Education Systems of Europe*. Springer, Dordrecht. (Second edition.)

(After 2007, Lutz R. Reuter took the place of Wolfgang Mitter as co-editor).

feature of educating which excludes all the other national features – education is a feature of a particular nation state.

The dialectical tension between the universal and the particular is one of the important motives which make the interest of comparing European education systems. One of the central issues of the numerous area studies presented in the handbook is precisely to display the different relationships between universal values and the research for national identity in the different European countries.

III. The functions of comparison

If we try to approach from this background the question what could be the cognitive interest of comparing *stricto sensu* European education systems, it would be useful to ask what could be the possible functions of comparison (in education or in social sciences in general). The answer to this question has to go back to our distinction of four functions of systematic comparison situated on the axes of coordinates between the poles ‘theoretical versus practical interest’ and ‘research of the universal versus research of the particular’, distinction which I developed more explicitly in my contribution to the Festschrift for Wolfgang Mitter (cf. Horner, 1997, p. 70ss.). I will try to summarize the essentials.

The four functions are the *idiographic*, the *meliorist*, the *evolutionist*, and the *experimental* function. The purpose of the *idiographic* function (in the intersection of theoretical cognitive interest and the research of the particular) is to work out the particularities, the unique traits of educational phenomena in a system. Comparative research is interested in things that render an educational system different from all the others. This search for particularities has its complementary side in the search for common features. The distinction between what is particular and what is common is the elementary logical action in comparative research. At the centre of this research activity there is an interest in individual phenomena.

The *meliorist* function does share the same interest in the individual traits of educational phenomena. However, they are selected in accordance with their supposed usefulness in order to ‘ameliorate’ other systems. As it is not possible to ‘import’ whole education systems, this research of individual characteristics is typical for the meliorist function. The guiding question of the meliorist function in comparative education would be: what special features of an educational system can be used for enhancing another system? However, it is true that some methodologists of comparative education since the time of Michael Sadler at the very beginning of the twentieth century are reluctant to use this function. They deny that it is logically possible to transfer elements which represent a unique configuration of phenomena to another system that does not have this configuration. Nevertheless this pragmatic function of comparative education never lost its significance. On the one hand, the logical problem may be resolved by pointing out the structural similarity between the systems; on the other hand, legitimated by the modern term of ‘best practice’, the meliorist function of educational comparisons has regained its

importance to shape and to justify educational policy making (in particular during the debates after the PISA studies). This political function of comparative education is legitimate if there is methodological control ensuring that the imported elements of 'best practice' may have really the same function as in their original context, i.e. that there exist structural analogies in sufficient number.

The *evolutionist* function is searching for common trends in the development of educational systems. These common trends are considered mostly in a practical political perspective: in educational policy it may be important not to miss the trend of the evolution in order to be on the 'right path'. One of the most impressive examples for the practical use of the evolutionist function is the so-called Bologna process, with its aim to create a common European (or rather worldwide) space of higher education by adopting a common structure of university studies. The evolutionist function has in itself an inherent danger: namely that in a hidden normative understanding the most developed system (developed in a certain direction) might serve as a model while the others have to follow it. For the rest there is a special type of evolutionist thinking, the world-system theory and its application to the evolution of schooling (the universalization of schooling, which may be seen either in a more theoretical or in a more political way) (cf. Adick, 1992).

The *experimental* function of comparative education, in the venerable tradition of Emile Durkheim, considers the comparison of systems as equivalent to an experiment in (natural) sciences. As in social sciences the creation of experimental situations by isolating variables is hardly possible, social systems constitute the equivalent of experimental groups bearing different variables.

We shall come back to this model later.

IV. Europe as an object of investigation

But what are the reasons with regard to content to put just of all things European education systems in the focal point of the investigation? We already mentioned that the dialectical tension between the universal and the particular constitute a peculiarity of European education which sets it apart from other geographical contexts.

And even more: it is not only the general interest in the tension between the universal and the particular on an abstract level. The interest may be focused on the political level of European integration. The investigation about European education systems offers the opportunity beyond the official interdictions of all harmonisations of structures and content of education prescribed by EU legislation to discover the growing common European features besides the remaining national peculiarities. By this we may moot at least indirectly an indicator for the state of European integration. To summarize the problem: What is the state of the famous objective 'unity in diversity'?

The keyword 'European integration' refers also to a special European aspect, the political transformation of post-communist Central and Eastern European societies. Since the 1990s these countries developed a great political and social dynamic that led for a certain number of these states to EU membership, for others at least to a rapprochement to the EU. Such a political development seems to be a unique feature of Europe. The dynamic of transformation and integration being evidently in close interaction with the education systems of these countries, the opportunity of comparative examination constitutes an important interest of the Intra-European comparison.

Beyond all vast visions of European policy making, the pragmatic interest of comparative analysis of European education systems is the simple necessity for all people involved in educational issues to inform themselves rapidly and reliably about the characteristics of the education systems of other countries. Such an opportunity particularly important in the PISA era is given by the handbook. Often people regret that international large scale assessments like PISA give only little information about the institutional frame of the education systems concerned. Whereas in the conception of the handbook, analysis of education systems means essentially exploration of the system's environment. The notion of system used in our handbook is to be understood in a wide sense given by systems theory. This means that it encompasses not only the structural features of education but also the links of the education system to its environment.

V. The methodology of investigation and presentation

This concept of system and in particular the requirement to display the dialectical relationship of integration and diversity, of the national and the universal, necessitates a particular structure of the investigation. Our approach requires that the area studies must have the same structure oriented more by functional issues than by formal criteria. By this it will be possible to read the same chapter of several country reports in parallel.

Based on the concept of system presented above it is the education system and not only the school system which constitutes our subject of investigation. By this we accommodate the fact that the clear-cut delimitations between the different levels of education beyond compulsory education are going to lose their significance. Instead of separate institutions we find today more and more simple programs of studies (even modules) which gain their own weight and which are often offered without reference to school forms or formal levels of education. By the inclusion of vocational and higher education in the investigation we wanted to stress the multiple relations of the different sub-systems of the education system among themselves and with their societal environment. Last not least we had to bear in mind that a strict separation between institutions of general education and those of vocational education is irrelevant in many countries.

VI. The structure of the area studies

In order to make these comparisons possible, the different area studies follow a common schedule. This common schedule was given to the authors in the form of guidelines (how to write the article, what to describe, how to link the information) and constitutes the methodological heart of the whole concept. The quality of the area studies and the possibility to make explicit comparisons is dependent on the degree to which the authors have respected these guidelines. The schedule follows the principle of the problem approach in comparative education (see e.g. Holmes, 1965).

The latest version of this common schedule has five main chapters giving a common structure to all country studies. After the explications given above it is evident that the logic of this structure is following rather functional issues than a formal classification.

1. History and Social Parameters of the Education System
2. Fundamentals, Organization and Governance of the Education System
3. Overview of the Structure of the Education System
4. Developments in the Current School System
5. New Developments

The historical questions try to draw the lines of the development of the school systems by embedding this development in the particular historical and cultural context which form the specific 'philosophy' of a given education system. Selection criteria of the basic points in history should be the relevance of these phenomena for the future function of the education system.

Finally in the first chapter the description of the social and cultural parameters of the education system and its development are of great importance. The explanation of the socio-cultural context has as its first objective the educational aims and the general function given to schools. However, these functions receive their significance only in the light of the socio-economic context in which a school works, the social structure of the student population, or the polarity of integration and segregation by the school etc. In this connection information about the recent ethnic composition (number of migrants...) of the school population is gathered. Important parts of the analytical description of the social parameters are indications about the relationship between urban and rural population concerning schooling conditions. Topics of special relevance in this chapter are the social position of the main actors of the school system, that is, the teachers, but also the role of the correspondent partners of the school, the families and their relationship to the school.

The second chapter is an analytical description of the essential aspects of the legal frame of schooling, school organisation and governance including the description of the guiding principles of educational policy, central questions of the socio-political function of the school (integration versus segregation). The legal fundamentals include the regulation of the schooling process by different actors on the different levels of the school, the

responsibility for curricula and standards, questions of financing and the division of tasks between public and private responsibility. Finally a particular question is a problem which rose in many countries after the PISA-studies: the problem of standardizing educational outcomes and the question of quality management and supporting systems, which should assure that these standards are really attained by all students. Therefore the problems listed in this chapter are not restricted to the 'classical' questions of comparative education (how are schools elsewhere? Why they are how they are?). The problems in the second chapter are also inspired by the results of the PISA-studies and the supposed factors of success in schooling linked with school organization.

It is only after these relatively detailed descriptions of the different patterns of governance and organisation of educational institutions that the third chapter examines systematically the structures of the different school systems, beginning by early childhood education. The core of the description is compulsory, secondary and post-secondary education. Higher Education is less pointed out. The description follows the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) of the UNESCO, which offers an authentic frame for the classification of the levels of education in the different countries.

The central part of each country analysis is a description of the functioning of the current school system at all its levels from pre-primary to post-secondary and tertiary education. Even the more descriptive part of the country study is structured according to the problem approach. Such problems may be the question of comprehensive against segregating structures of secondary schools, the structure of compulsory education as a whole (common school or two different levels), the problem of post-compulsory secondary education and its curriculum, the problem of the relationship between general and vocational education, and the problem of simple or double qualification in upper-secondary education (see also Mitter, 1994). Even in this rather descriptive core of the area studies the authors were asked to transcend a pure descriptive approach and come to an analytical presentation of issues by picking out problems found in the different levels of education. By structuring the analyses in this manner, it is possible to follow these problems in several countries or to read the same chapter 'across' a number of countries.

This centring on issues instead of structures is the main character of the fourth chapter which should discuss systematically actual problem areas in their context. We supposed that such problem areas could be: questions of transition between school levels (selective/non selective transition), questions of examinations and tests. Measures of quality assessment and improvement are picked out as a central theme beginning with traditional class inspections and going upto *large-scale-assessments*. Particular problems in some countries may be violence in schools, dropouts, the integration of children with migration background etc.

Naturally, the scheme given to the authors had to be adapted to the actual situations of the different countries. Thus, e.g. the separation of primary and lower-secondary

education is not relevant in all countries. The school systems in the Nordic countries or those in some Eastern European countries have a unique school type for the whole period of compulsory education. On the other hand, separate schools for special education do not exist everywhere. Finally, every country analysis ends with a synthesis of the current problems and discussions of the school system, and an outlook on the perspectives of its development.

VII. The functional scheme and the handbook

The elaboration of the problem areas which are the main characteristic of the handbook brings us back to the question raised at the beginning: can a reference book, composed primarily of area studies be an object of comparative research *stricto sensu*? If we go back to our scheme describing the four functions of comparison, we may realise that the handbook may serve all four functions, even if some of them are closer to the book's heart whereas others are of minor importance. The handbook's very centre of interest is without any doubt the *idiographic* function. The country analyses' first purpose is to offer reliable knowledge about the particular traits of European education systems. These idiographies may be of interest to both European and non-European readers. European readers may be interested in the situation of other European countries, not only in their immediate vicinity, but also those further away. We may remember that the slogan of the European Union 'Unity in Diversity' has, in terms of educational matters, its roots in the nineteenth century, when one of the forefathers of comparative education, the educationist Friedrich Thiersch, wrote as a result of his fact-finding visits to other European countries that the recognition of the profound unity of European Education is only possible by the differentiated knowledge of their particular traits (quoted after Horner, 1997, p. 79). On the other hand, the wide inclusive notion of Europe (including e.g. the Caucasian countries) guiding the composition of the handbook (cf. Mitter, 2002; 2007) can be useful for certain groupings of the countries: such groups may be the Western European 'core members' of the European Union, the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe, the Nordic states, or the south-eastern European countries etc.

Our 'problem approach', which formed the structuring principle of the country studies, already transcends the simple idiographic function and opens up the investigation for other interests. We may ask, for instance, if it is possible to find out a common model for the groups of countries mentioned above. Finally, it may be interesting to examine to which extent there is such a thing as a European model of education: Is it possible to define European standards in the field of education? Are there educational structures or curriculum elements which are not compatible with a European model? And: are there significant differences between the education systems of EU member states and those of other European countries (like the new member candidates)? Is it necessary that the candidates make at first their education system 'compatible' with existing European norms?

Readers outside of Europe may in a similar way ask what distinguishes European education from their own. Is there really a European model different from that of Asia or America? The outlook of Wolfgang Mitter (2002; 2007) traces some elements of answers to these questions. However, neither this methodological introduction nor the outlook of Wolfgang Mitter may serve as substitutes for explicit comparisons. Rather, they are guidelines and suggestions on how to pursue such questions. The essential comparative work has to be made by the readers themselves. The country studies can only give the necessary data.

At a first glance, the great number of countries embraced may exclude the *meliorist* function, as the great diversity may rather lead to confusion. However, if we take the example of the PISA studies, European countries appear both at the top and at the bottom of the ranking. Therefore, the question in what they differ is an obvious one to ask. In particular, the discussions in Germany, where the shock of the PISA results was particularly deep, showed that the question resulting from these differences was not less obvious: what may the underachievers learn from the best performing ones in order to improve their results? What may be the key to their success at the system level? It is true that it is only the system level which is outlined in the handbook, even if the notion of 'system' as it is used here includes elements of its internal functioning.

The *evolutionist* function is less evident, but may be deduced from a couple of country studies, in particular in the outlook of Wolfgang Mitter (2002; 2007), where this view of the problems dominates. One can ask to which extent European education develops toward a world model of universal schooling or to which extent it preserves specific European traits. In this sense, the handbook may serve as a data collection to scrutinize the theory of universal schooling within the world system theory. We have already noticed that the Bologna process of higher education may be an example of such an 'evolutionary' process: nearly all European countries are adapting their structure of tertiary education to the two-level model, consisting of a BA and a MA, which is, strictly speaking, a worldwide model. Is there perhaps a hidden 'Bologna process' underway in the field of school education?

The remarks made for the different functions and the explanation of the 'problem approach' show that even the application of the *experimental* function of the comparison is possible, provided the reader has a relevant question. As an example, let us consider the transformation countries in Central and Eastern Europe (cf. Horner, 2003). Is it possible to distil a common model of the transformation of educational systems within a theory of social transformation? The juxtaposition of the transformation countries according to the 'most similar systems approach' in comparative social research (Przeworski/Teune, 1970, p. 32ff.) may allow us to isolate common factors, which are first elements of a classification model of transforming post-socialist education systems.

In sum, we can emphasize that the handbook has been designed in order to assemble a broad range of structured problem-oriented data that permits a multifunctional use in comparative research. It is the task of the reader to discover and to use these possibilities.

Therefore we may answer to the title question in an affirmative way, too.

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