The Problem of Context in Comparative Education Research

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IL PROBLEMA DEL CONTESTO NELLA RICERCA EDUCATIVA COMPARATA

Abstract

This paper argues that comparative education researchers – and education researchers generally – should pay more attention to how they conceptualize the Context(s) of schools and education systems. The construction of «the research context» is caught up in the mobilization of norms, power relations, regulative principles, technologies and strategies. Ascriptions of Context can operate as externally imposed categories that enclose, disable, and deny access to resources, opportunities, agency, and subject positions. In like measure, inscriptions of Context can sometimes enable, increase access and generally privilege particular cultural groups or particular social settings. This paper offers methodological strategies for analytically approaching the problem of Context in educational research. We propose that challenge is to understand how Context is part of an interweaving process with an object/objects within an assemblage that is ever changing. The «entangled analysis» approach (Sobe, forthcoming) advanced here attends to the constructed and constructing quality of Context. And it necessarily brings the researcher into the problematic, as she too is continually within the power/knowledge relations that make Contexts meaningful and consequential. We are argue that «contextualizing» a study should not be merely a preparatory activity but should carry across the entirety of a research project. Rather than beginning with standardized Contextual categories researchers should seek to understand the confluence of practices and objects that are coming together as well as constantly flowing and changing.

Keywords: Comparative education, Research methodology, Educational context, Globalization, Scale.

In educational research the comparative project is currently caught between two radically different alternatives. On the one hand, there is a certain tendency to universalize schools, teaching and learning and assume that research findings from other places can unproblematically be brought to bear on educational problems in any site. At the outer extremes of this logic one might propose that research on class size conducted in Belgium could rightly be introduced into the formation of education policy in Oklahoma. In this schema, the science of comparison reduces to a science of ceteribus paribus, i.e. the science of figuring out how to control contextual factors. At another extreme, however, are post-positivist claims about absolute inadequacy/impossibility of comparison due to the situational specificity of any educational interaction. From this second perspective the science of comparison is often cast as a modernist artifact that principally serves to discipline and govern individuals and societies, relying upon particular Enlightenment notions of rationality that are taken for universal and are used to create a continuum of values and norms. Though this is a reductive characterization, one could say that comparison represents either the salvational path to best-practices determinations or a dangerous neo-colonial imposition that imposes an external ordering logic. Yet, in both of these research approaches attention rarely shifts away from the research object(s) (e.g. policy and reforms, teaching strategies, bullying in the classroom, student drop-out rates, school assessment) and the context is taken to be either unimportant or a matter of description that situates/stabilizes the research object. However, in this paper we will argue that paying more attention to how researchers conceptualize the Context(s) of schools and education systems is absolutely critical for advancing the field of comparative education – and indeed is something that educational researchers in general should be more concerned about.

It seems intuitive, common sense to say that the daily practices of schooling around the globe take place within the context of some Context. And in fact, recently the field of comparative education has seen growing claims that today's globalized world demands that researchers increasingly pay attention to the significance of «Context» (e.g., Crossley, 2009; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2009). Questions about the salience of educational contexts cut deeply across one of the major debates in the field of comparative education, between, on the one hand, the neoinstitutionalist sociologists (e.g., Meyer *et al.*, 1997) with their arguments about «world cultural models» and concerns about world-level institutional legitimacy profoundly influencing national education systems, and, on the other hand, scholars like Juergen Schriewer (2000) who note the uniqueness of national path-dependencies as playing an essential role in the configuration of education systems. Yet, the material and discursive configuration of what is indexed by the concept of «Context»

cannot be taken-for-granted as foregone or uncontestable. In a 2006 state-of-the-field review Bob Cowen noted «we are nowhere near having sorted out, intellectually, the problem of context», and added «the way we think about context is probably wrong» (Cowen, 2006, p. 567). This paper delves into and sets out to address this issue.

We explore how the construction of the research Context is, like the construction of the research object, caught up in the mobilization of norms, power relations, regulative principles, technologies and strategies. Ascriptions of Context can operate as externally imposed categories that enclose, disable, and deny access to resources, opportunities, agency, and subject positions. In like measure, inscriptions of Context can sometimes enable, increase access to resources and opportunities, and generally privilege particular cultural groups or particular social settings. Attending to the constructed and constructing quality of Context necessarily brings the researcher into the problematic, as she too is continually within the power/knowledge relations that make Contexts meaningful and consequential. However, we maintain that none of these problems augur the death of the comparative project. In this paper we offer a theoretical strategy for analytically approaching the problem of Context. We strive to offer an approach that confronts head-on some of these complexities accompanying the comparative enterprise; and, similarly, we strive not to shy away from the complications that accompany the deep implication of the researcher in investing her study's setting and objects with meaning and concrete reality. Our aim is not to finesse these obstacles but rather to take advantage of them in terms of methodology and analysis.

1. Problematizing «the local context»

To begin to unpack the significance and consequence of the specification of Context we first turn to some of the ways that, in an era of Globalization, placemaking practices around notions of «the local» are frequently given salvational valence and treated as a source of authenticity, resistance and «the real». The American anthropologist Anna Tsing has discussed this in terms of the common practice of distinguishing between «global forces» and «local places». Over a decade ago she recommended that researchers stop making this distinction (Tsing, 2000) and drew attention to the tendency in academic scholarship to assume that the «global» was as-if an external intruder, an invisible (or even visible) force that caused things to happen. Joined to this is the common assumption that only the «local» is spatialized, that only the «local» has a material, geographic actuality. From this distinction spring

two very different ways of thinking about context – on the axis of «global context» versus «local context» – which can perhaps be best illustrated with the Russian doll metaphor.

In the same way that since the early 20th century social studies as a school subject has proposed that educators think of the child's world as consisting of a series of ever-expanding concentric circles (proceeding, for example, from home to school to neighborhood to town/city to region to country to globe), social theory has also tended to rely heavily on the notion that social and cultural configurations are nested within a series of larger and larger configurations. A visual representation of this can be found in the Russian wooden matryoshka dolls where one doll nests inside another. In turn, a smaller wooden doll can then be uncovered within – all the way down to the innermost solid, hard core. Similar specifications of levels of geographic scale are omnipresent in the field of comparative education, with, in recent years, the most prominent visualization/theorization being the 3-D «cube» that Bray and Thomas (1995 and 2007) have proposed as a master analytic for conceptualizing comparative education research. One of the axes is «locational» and lays out seven levels: world regions, countries, states/provinces, districts, schools, classrooms and individuals. We posit that in recent years, fully in keeping with the Bray and Thomas cube conceptualization, comparative education scholars seem increasingly to be conceptualizing these levels as hierarchically (vertically) linked, with a purported «global level» as the largest/«highest» encompassing category.

There are two important consequences of this mode of thinking about global Contexts. One is that this lends itself to the assumption that things must proceed through one «layer» to get to the next, i.e. that things pass through the national to get to the state/provincial level and through the state/provincial level to get to the city/municipal level etc. The inadequacy of this has become increasingly evident as globalization processes and phenomena mean that practices which cultural geographers refer to as «scale-jumping» take place with growing frequency – for example, as indigenous rights activists articulate their demands in New York, Geneva or Brussels rather than in their home countries' capitals, or as municipalities and even individual schools increasingly forge «lateral» connections that bypass national and regional networks and political configurations (see, e.g. Reed-Danahay, 2003). The second consequence is that the «enveloping» nature of this conceptualization positions the global as the ultimate level of reality, which is, in Urs Stäheli's words, a «totalizing gesture that uncritically inherits concepts of totality» (2003, p. 2). One appropriate and necessary response to this has been to interrogate the Global in specific places. A good example of this work is Peter Jones' ethnographic study of the European Commission and

its role in governing EU education policy (Jones, 2010). It is along these same lines that Saskia Sassen (forthcoming) has proposed that we can usefully think of «the global as a series of locals». Yet, these useful interventions notwithstanding, the ready slippage of the global into a totalization means that things global tend to be conceptualized, as Tsing suggested, as forces that construct and create (and, of course, also restrict and constrain).

With the «local Context» as the «lowest» or final level, things local are considered the ultimate reference point for the material and the real. As noted above, this can be imbued with salvational valence as the local Context is seen as providing a reliable and authentic base from which resistance and liberational politics can be articulated. At the same time, however, this can also serve a denigrating and denying function where the «primitiveness» of a place or «local conditions» can be used to justify one educational approach over another. As Sobe (forthcoming) has recently noted, this links to the longstanding intellectual tradition of jointly coding physical and social spaces as deeply and fundamentally interlinked. We have ample evidence of how physical space joined to a notion of historical process has historically enabled Europeans from at least the 17th century onwards to view themselves as «time travelers» whose voyages around the world enable them to observe different stages of civilizational progress. The self-privileging, tautological and linear evolutionary trajectory that this inscribes is so familiar that it hardly bears mention, except that the pattern of positioning minority, marginalized (e.g. «third world») groups in spaces that could be characterized by an absence of norms of civility and a need for «development» continues up through the present day.

Important here are the ways that the «texture» of space is understood and modeled in relation to government. Conceptualized as isotropic (everywhere the same), space lends itself to repetitive action, reproducible products, standardization and uniformity (Poovey, 1995). Quite commonly, however, «local space» qua «a local Context» is taken to possess a quintessential uniqueness that means that no two «local Contexts» will be the same. Implicated here is the conceptualization of space as possessing thickness and depth, notably – per Foucault (1971) and Rose (1999) – in the division taken to separate human experiences from underlying laws and principles.

> When space is conceptualized not as a smooth plane but as non-regular, with varying, uneven depths, principles of differentiation ensue. For example, some areas emerge as sites suited for liberal, democratic participatory politics; others emerge as more appropriately governed through force, authority and the inculcation of habit. (Sobe & Fischer, 2009, p. 361)

These are exactly the important consequences that potentially flow from taking a spatializing, place-based approach to thinking about a given local

Context. To be certain, a counterpart to the proposition that things global have an extremely important spatial dimension is the notion that things local can feature the dense crisscrossing of multiple forces. However, as useful as these strategies are for helping to collapse the presupposition of an essential ontological difference between global Contexts and local Contexts, they still approach Context as a research element that is stable and prefigured as an analytic category. Additionally, they don't, in our view, provide enough room to account for the role and activity of the researcher in the construct and construction of Context.

2. Splicing and factoring context

One of the best illustrations of the way that Context can be prefigured as a category of analysis lies in its subdivision into various dimensions – as we see in the common usage of terms like «political context», «economic context», «social context», and perhaps even a «cultural context».

Even though we have now moved away from thinking in scalar terms, the splicing of Context into salient components is every bit as good an example of the ways that governance happens through Context and not despite it. To discuss Context in these terms is to create knowledge about characteristics over which rule can be exercised (Rose, 1999).

A well-known heuristic metaphor from the field of comparative education illustrates this dynamic quite accurately. In seeking to explain the seeming global convergence of educational practices (among other social institutions), a set of scholars associated with Stanford University sociologists John Meyer and Francisco Ramirez have pointed to the important role played by institutionalized worldwide models which define and legitimate local agendas. To illustrate this, Meyer *et al.* (1997) imagine a hypothetical example of an unknown society being discovered on a previously unknown island, noting that «it is clear that many changes would occur»,

> A government would soon form, looking something like a modern state with many of the usual ministries and agencies. Official recognition by other states and admission to the United Nations would ensue. The society would be analyzed as an economy, with standard types of data, organizations, and policies for domestic and international transactions. (*ivi*, p. 145)

In the neo-institutionalist argument processes of legitimization are a key concern; however, for our purposes here we would like to focus on the ways that they imagine that this new island society would be observed and stud-

ied. They note that economists would then come «equipped with powerful models with which to interpret the island economy», all of which could «be applied, with considerable authority, without even visiting the place».

> A few standardized data tables would be sufficient to empower policy proposals. Similarly, any sociologist comes equipped with the capability to propose measures, analyses, diagnoses, and policy prescriptions for the correction of gender inequalities on the island. On a broad range of economic and social indicators, the island would be categorized and compared with other nation-states, in the same way that every newly independent geopolitical entity has been processed in the past several decades. (*ivi*, p. 150)

Even though in much of the comparative education literature the neoinstitutionalist scholarship is characterized as a macro-level analysis that stands in contrast to more micro «contextualist» approaches, the newly-discovered-island heuristic does in fact speak quite persuasively about the ways that the island's historical, political, economic, and social Context would enter a surprisingly standardizing machine of academic knowledge production.

It is exactly in this manner that the splicing out of – to pick one example – «political context» calls forth a tremendous complex of standardized analytic schemas, conceptual categories, political science theories, and so forth. And, as Meyer et al. correctly note, how this «island's» political context is observed, classified and interpreted is of tremendous consequence because it directly feeds into policy imperatives and what become considered to be more and less proper kinds of initiatives and activities. To splice out Context into different dimensions is to construct domains of action and surfaces of intervention. Along these lines, it bears mentioning that to invoke «contextual factors» as causal explanation has similar consequences to what we discussed earlier in reference to taking a spatializing, place-based approach to thinking about a given local Context. Standardized categories are introduced; and, the gesture can deny/disable even as ameliorating policies are specified. That is, policies that are authorized in terms of particular «contextual factors» all too easily employ a system of reasoning that inscribes a hierarchy of values. Those values make visible the objects of reform (as the «products of their context») at which policies are directed, intending to save or transform (objects and/or their contexts). However, the system of reasoning that goes into this policy-making is also engaged in a process of abjection (Kowalczyk & Popkewitz, 2005), drawing attention to the borders of «the norm» («the healthy economy», the «stable democracy», the «inclusive and multicultural school»), and thus necessarily also determines which contexts make up the nether regions – ways of living, ways of thinking, ways of being – that produce the at-risk and the abnormal.

A recent piece in the field of comparative education titled «Rethinking context in comparative education», which makes a strong case for «context-based research» and points to the advantages to be gotten from collaboration between «Northern» and «Southern» research teams (Crossley, 2009), never in fact actually interrogates the concept of Context. Notions like «social context» and «cultural context» are used and quoted in Crossley's piece, but it is quite striking to us that while «contextualize, contextualize, contextualize» hovers as a urgent mandate (not just in this one piece, but in certain swaths of the field broadly), very little has yet been done to examine what logics are mobilized in/through Context. In these two initial sections of this paper we hope to have established that the project of comparing requires not only a problematization of the categories of scale, but the further problematization of the «category» of Context in general. This is to say that the historical – and thus contingent – quality of the categories used to compare, to situate and to separate object from Context is precisely what requires attention. Of course, this is a complex undertaking. It is an undertaking that British philosopher Ian Hacking nicely captures in his discussion of locating «ideas in their matrices» (1999, p. 10) with his emphasis on the paradoxical qualities of being both constructed and able to construct.

3. Re-conceptualizing context as weaving and assemblage

In the remaining portion of this article we lay out a vision for how researchers in comparative education can usefully engage with and consider the Contexts of that which they study. In laying out some thoughts on research methodology in comparative education we will discuss ways that researchers can study «assemblages» and we will discuss the idea of Context as a form of weaving. As will become clear, there is a reflexive quality to the approach proposed that will account for the way(s) in which the researcher – and the enterprise of social science more broadly – is implicated within the analysis. Earlier we have made mention of Context as constructed and constructing and we would add that the researcher is part of that dual process of construction. Rather than take this constructedness as signaling a solipsistically subjective mode of research, we suggest that it furnishes a productive line of inquiry/methodology.

In order to make strange the «natural» notions that circulate around the term Context, we take a cue from anthropologist Dilley (1999) and find it useful, albeit with a sense irony, to return to the etymology of the word. This allows us to put aside the sediments of «background» and «place» and

«dimension» that have accrued over time, and to recalibrate the relationship between Context and object in order to explore other possible uses. The Latin verb texere means «to weave» and «with». Consequently, contexere implies «to weave together» or «to interweave», which moves away from the idea of Context as something separate that surrounds and conditions the object. Rather, the etymology of the word offers the possibility of understanding context as part of a conjoining process. The research Context, then, can be conceived as intertwining inextricably with the research object and vice versa, with that process of intertwining understood as ongoing.

To study Context as a process of interweaving changes the work of the researcher considerably. It calls upon her to eschew the traditional approach to Context, which can be characterized, to borrow a term from Latour (2004), as treating Context as «a matter of fact». Instead, Context should be taken as «a matter of concern». Latour argues that when working with matters of fact one assumes she is dealing with «risk free objects» that have «clear boundaries», while working with matters of concern turns one's project into a risky business, brought on in part by the object's lack of clear boundaries and its «tangled» quality (Latour, 2004, pp. 22-23). The establishing of a research object and its Context – that is, the describing of the «matters of fact» of a study – is commonly understood to be a preparatory task, something that precedes the real work to be done. We suggest, however, that what are often taken as preparatory tasks actually need to become a primary focus of research methodology and one that carries across the study.

The challenge is to understand how Context is part of an interweaving process with an object/objects within an assemblage that is always changing. We will add further complexity when considering the further entanglement of the researcher and her discourse community in relation to the object(s) and assemblages being studied. To start with, however we will consider the assemblage as a way of taking account of the complexity of Context.

4. Assemblages as ongoing interweaving

In order to go beyond the commonly used conceptualizations of a Context, it is first necessary to begin to think of Context in a plural sense. The Context, as a «matter of fact» is invoked as a unity that is always already there, waiting to be observed and described via stable categories. We wish to draw attention to the practice of identifying Contexts or Contextual categories – spatial, temporal, institutional, discursive, theoretical – that intersect, overlap and change over time. These categories are not stable objects to be described, but are the

artifacts of epistemological structures, or ways of knowing the world, that are available to us at given moments. Epistemological structures are certainly necessary and useful; they are also not outside of power relations. Indeed, epistemological structures produce effects of power (Foucault 1982/1984) – that is, they produce rules and standards that govern social practices, creating at once spaces for action, while making other spaces unimportant, marginalized or invisible. And so, in terms of Context, the epistemological structure(s) that set the standards for and govern the scientific community that is the field of comparative education thus shapes what comes to be visible, «obvious» and natural for the researcher in terms of her «preparatory work», which, as noted above, traditionally includes establishing the Context. Over the approximately two centuries that the field of comparative education has developed, the tools and ideas available have, of course, changed substantially. But what is significant here is the need to recognize that epistemological possibilities and limits are part of the construction of Context.

We do not believe there is a way of getting «outside» of our epistemological structures, but there is value in seeking to have what Bachelard (1949) called «epistemological vigilance». One step towards this is to go beyond the unified Context, conceived of as a matter of fact, and to think in terms of Contexts that are historical and particular. Thus, we find it useful to conceptualize Context(s) as a confluence of practices and objects that come together, flowing and changing. One challenge in this approach is to study something that is in movement. With other contemporary scholars, particularly a set of scholars working in the field of anthropology (Markus & Saka, 2006; Ong & Collier, 2005; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), we think that recourse to the concept of the «assemblage» proves useful.

Ong (2005) tackles the challenge of doing an «ethnography of mutating spaces» by suggesting that we change what we think of as «spaces»; instead, we might study «assemblages as sites where the dynamic play of strategies resolve challenges by constantly situating and resituating populations in particular scales of regulation» (*ivi*, p. 118). The assemblage here is understood as a kind of non-place/non-structured structure that gives conceptual form to something that is always in flow. In Sassen's (2008) description, assemblage has been theorized as «a contingent ensemble of practices and things that can be differentiated (that is, they are not collections of similar practices and things) and that can be aligned along the axes of territoriality and deterritorialization» (*ivi*, p. 76). The concept of the assemblage has been seen to capture the «heterogenous within the ephemeral» while preserving,

> some concept of the structural so embedded in the enterprise of social science research. Indeed, the term itself in its material referent invests easily in

the image of structure, but is nonetheless elusive. The time-space in which assemblage is imagined is inherently unstable and infused with movement and change. Assemblage thus seems structural, an object with the materiality and stability of the classic metaphors of structure, but the intent in its aesthetic uses is precisely to undermine such ideas of structure. (Markus & Saka, 2006, p. 102)

The researcher who takes context(s) to be a matter of concern, then, is not interested in the traditional «object of study» that is contained within a Context, but is interested in the relationality of objects and Contexts: how they come to be intelligible and conjoined, and to what effect(s). In other words, the researcher is interested in the crisscrossing between objects and Contexts, and also in the epistemological structures that make it possible to see the objects as objects (and problems to be studied) and Contexts as an assemblage of multiple, at times paradoxical, things and practices that come together in particular places at particular times. As we have alluded to earlier, these are not separate inquiries, but part of an interweaving where objects are also produced/formed through assemblages.

As Latour describes it, matters of fact are tied up with clarity and certainty, allowing for predictions, while matters of concern revolve around the unclear, the risky, the unexpected and the emerging. In shifting from the Context to the assemblage, the researcher is able to attend to «emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral in social life and social interactions that are nonetheless ordered and coordinated» (Sobe, forthcoming). Within the social sciences for some time now, in particular amongst those who draw upon post-structuralist theories, attention has been given to the way in which objects (and human kinds) are constructed, produced via a joining together of «discourses, institutions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions» (Foucault, 1980). As a concrete example, this means that something like the descriptor woman refugee is produced out of: «[…] a complex of institutions, advocates, newspaper articles, lawyers, court decisions, immigration proceedings … material infrastructure, barriers, passports, uniforms, counters at airports, detention centers, courthouses, holiday camps for refugee children» (Hacking, 1999, p. 10). This is not to say that there is no Context in which women refugees find themselves and operate from – but rather that Context is everything / is inseparable from the object of the woman refugee in the first place.

Drawing attention to the relation of forces, knowledges, objects and narratives that come together to give conceptual form to our world, brings better understanding of the way in which these conceptual forms govern and administer societies and individuals. To «Contextualize» a research study it

is necessary to examine the assemblage within which the research object is constructed. Concomitantly, it is necessary to remember that assemblages and the objects they construct or make possible/visible are tools to describe a living, historical system, and therefore they are not fixed, transcendent or timeless. They are, instead, always emerging and therefore they are historical without being pre-determined. As we have noted, there is burgeoning literature especially in the field of anthropology that examines how assemblages are constructing. Less frequently attended to (and equally important in our view) is the question of how an assemblage is also constructed. This is to say that just as the research Context constructs and is conjoined with the research objects and all that makes them meaningful and significant, it is necessary to note that Context is constructed through available epistemological structures. And is, in no insignificant part, constructed by the researcher.

5. Context assemblages and entangled analyses

In this final section of the paper we link together the idea of Context as a process of interweaving and the notion of examining assemblages as a method for examining Context together with the concept of conducting an entangled analysis. This is a concept that we are drawing from the histoire croisée tradition of conducting intercrossed or entangled history as advanced by Werner and Zimmermann (2006). In contrast to comparative history and transfer studies Werner and Zimmermann have developed a historical methodology that seeks to account for intersections and intercrossings between «entities and objects of research [that] are not merely considered in relation to one another but also through one another, in terms of relationships, interactions, and circulation» (*ivi*, p. 38). They pay attention to the effects of intercrossing – that is, not just the crossing over of something from one site to another or from one temporal space to another, but how things crisscross or interweave. In other words, they are interested in both transformation and production, noting that «the entities, persons, practices, or objects that are intertwined with, or affected by, the crossing process, do not necessarily remain intact and identical form» but are transformed and possibly produce «new and original elements» (*ibid.*). Sobe (forthcoming) has argued that an entangled approach can be extremely fruitful for historians of education and we would maintain that there are also elements that the field of comparative education can profit from. An entangled analytic approach foregrounds assemblages of the sort discussed in the previous section, giving particular attention to the tangling together of disparate actors, devices, discourses and

practices, with the recognition that this tangling is partly accomplished by said actors, devices, discourses and practices and partly accomplished by the researcher herself.

If we return to the distinction Latour (2004) made between «matters of fact» and «matters of concern», we can draw out a further contrast in the ways that processes of production are rendered invisible or visible. In many ways «matters of fact» depend upon the invisibility of their conceivers or producers, while «matters of concern» make their producers visible, and thereby implicated and even subject to controversy. While a researcher may be busy tracing the power effects of a particular apparatus or matrix in a particular place and time, there is still a common tendency to see the researcher as somehow not «involved» in the constructing. However, Zimmerman and Werner propose that there be a constant «to-and-fro movement between researcher and object» (2006, p. 39), which we read as a call to recognize the inevitable involvement of the researcher and to introduce a degree of reflexivity, making that involvement an explicit part of the study. It is precisely this to-and-fro movement that we see a greater need for in the field of comparative education – and is particularly needed as comparative education scholars think about educational Contexts. Making Context a matter of concern means that we pay attention to how both the researcher and the researched construct the contexts in which they work/live.

In their elaboration on the self-reflexive process of accounting for the intercrossing that occurs between the object and the observer, Werner and Zimmerman note that this process is particularly significant «where the researcher is required to work with a language, concepts, and categories that are not of his or her sphere of socialization» (2006, p. 41). While ideas about «positionality» and the concept of «situating» the researcher are widely diffused within the social sciences (especially in qualitative research paradigms), they tend to take on formulaic quality where (frequently) the researcher's class, gender and race are presented at the outset of the study, almost in a confessional mode. As with traditional approaches to Context, the researcher's personal «involvement» in a given topic is typically treated as a matter of fact, and one of the preparatory tasks to be dealt with prior to embarking on the actual study. Rarely do we find the engagement of the researcher treated as ongoing throughout the research process. In contrast, the kind of entangled research methodology we are proposing «implicates» the researcher within the entangled assemblage as context/object. One might think of what in physics is called the «observer's effect», where the tools used to measure and study an object or phenomenon alter in some way the object itself. As physicist Brian Greene asserts, while discussing the measurement of an electron's position, «the act of measurement is deeply enmeshed in creating the

very reality it is measuring» and «contrary to what you'd expect, the electron simply does not have a definite position before the measurement is taken» (2004, 94). Though it is common for the social sciences to borrow from the physical sciences, our objective here is merely to furnish a useful analogy that can help us re-think the researcher's role. The researcher needs much more than «situating». Her history and position as well as the epistemological tools that she depends on to conduct her study not only shape her observations and findings but are entangled with the objects and assemblages under study.

In the first section of this paper we discussed a number of the limitations connected with traditional ways of conceiving of global and local contexts in relation to scale. By no means, however, do we suggest that comparative education scholars abandon notions of scale. Instead, we consider this a fine example of an entanglement between observer and object. It is a common practice to place or situate a research object within a particular, prescribed space that is arranged hierarchically. Rather than a «placing», Werner and Zimmerman emphasize movement and intercrossings, so that attention shifts to,

> the various spaces within which are rooted the interactions making up the process analyzed. In other words, the relevant scales are those that are constructed or brought into play in the very situations under study … Intercrossing is thus obviously an aspect of both the realm of the object of study and the realm of the procedures of research related to the researcher's choices. (2006, p. 44)

In this way, an entangled analysis attempts to engage in empirical and reflexive practice. Werner and Zimmermann describe this as «pragmatic induction» (*ivi*, p. 46) where research begins with «the object of study and the situations in which it is embedded, according to one or more points of view […] subject to continual readjustments in the course of empirical investigation» (*ivi*, p. 47). As we have argued, context and object are part of a conjoining process that forms an unstable, changing and heterogenous assemblage, which is made visible partly by the processes and entities under investigation and partly by the researcher herself.

The researcher doing entangled analysis thus engages with Context as a matter of concern, rather than merely naming or identifying it as a matter of fact. This kind of engagement is not limited to the «setting up» of the research question and orientation of study, but is a matter of concern that spans the entire study itself, taking the tracing of contextual intercrossings as part of the object of study. One way to do this is to historicize the categories that are identified and used in order to temporarily arrest an unstable, changing and moving assemblage. The researcher is to be reflexive in order to account for how her concepts and analytical categories comprise an accrued

«thick fabric of interweavings» (Werner & Zimmerman, 2006, p. 49) and her relation to those interweavings. Werner and Zimmerman illustrate this reflexive approach by describing how an entangled analysis of disciplines might be account for such interweavings:

> Depending on whether one treats the interpenetrations between German and American historiographies after 1945 from a «German,» «American,» or «French» point of view, one obtains perspectives, and thus interpretations, that are quite different. The emigration and exile of German historians to the United States, the re-importation into Germany after 1950 of originally «German» theories having been in the meantime acclimated and «Americanized», coupled with reception theories such as at the Chicago School, caused considerable interweaving that requires re-evaluation of the viewpoints from which the various interpretations have been developed. Commonly used terms, such as «German sociology,» became fluid, difficult to use without caution. (*ibid.*)

We envision that entangled analyses within the field of comparative education would similarly seek to recognize the deeply interwoven qualities of the concepts and analytical categories normally used and the researcher's ongoing relationship to those concepts and categories, making that reflexivity part of the research project itself.

6. Conclusion: constructing contexts through operations

Despite our insistence above that objects and Contexts are conjoined and entangled within specific assemblages and our emphasis on the ways that the researcher is deeply involved in these entanglements, we do recognize the importance of asserting a distinction between an activity, entity, actor and its «environment» (to use the term in a general manner). As we noted at the outset of this article, it is intuitive, a commonplace assumption, that schooling operates within the Context of some Context. To bring additional clarity to the compatibility of these proposals we will close with a brief discussion of the systems theory work of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann.

Luhmann (1996) proposed that social systems are self-organizing and axiomatically self-referential. One feature of this is that he understood social systems to define their own boundaries and to position everything beyond themselves as their environment. For Luhmann various social systems (e.g. the economy, education) engage with one another, but that engagement is

worked into ever-ongoing processes of boundary definition. This means that, in a critical way, systems produce the Contexts in which they operate (i.e. the functional differentiation between a system and its environment). A revealing example of this, Sobe (2012) has argued, is the tendency of school systems to discuss the adoption of accountability practices as pressures coming in «from outside» that interfere, in varying degree, with the «actual» functional business of educating. Yet, accountability practices are also a revealing illustration of the ways that iterative, ongoing operations reshape systems: increasingly, accountability practices are more than a means of communicating with other social systems but are one of the ways that a school performs as an organization. As Michael Power, one of the pioneering writers on the social significance of the growth of audit practices, put it,

> far from being passive, audit actively constructs the contexts in which it operates. The most influential dimension of the audit explosion is the process by which environments are made auditable, structured to the need to be monitored ex-post. (1994, p. 7)

In education we see this in the increasing tendency to design reforms, curricula and institutions from the front end so that they can be evaluated and hooked into accountability practices (on this point, see also Taubman, 2009). Understood from this systems perspective, the significance of Context is not that it is «static background» but that it is productive and enabling (as it is potentially disabling). That this occurs through multiple forms of interaction and ongoing operations is the key point to bear in mind. We can find a second illustration of Context being produced through system-specific operations in the ways that intercultural education debates have been unfolding in Italy over the past decade. It is important to ask what the Context is for intercultural education initiatives in Italy. For one, we find reports from the Italian National Observatory's workgroup for «Intercultural education and the formation of convivenza» (2007) citing the practice of democratic dialogue, mutual recognition and respect for diversity within schools in reference to a «globally circulating» intercultural education community. Yet, the Italian education system, as a social system, engages in boundary work on multiple axes to produce the Context for the implementation of intercultural education. Take, for example, the ubiquitous presence of the crucifix in public schools, historically accompanied by the Italian flag and a portrait of a current Italian political leader. Rather than reading the crucifix as a particular religious symbol, it is taken to be part of the historical Context of the education system. It takes on an almost patriotic and secular quality (Luzzatto, 2011). This production of Context thus creates particular limits and transgressions to the practice of democratic dialogue (see Kowalczyk,

forthcoming), for instance, making possible arguments such as the one from editorialist Claudio Magris, that the displaying of the crucifix is compatible with the notion of laicity and that it «is part of our civilization» and «offends no one» (2004, p. 13). This point is certainly contestable and discussions around the issue of displaying the crucifix in Italian classrooms will continue to unfold in the coming years. Nonetheless, we consider this a good example of how the operations of an education system produce its Context; and, how this production of Context can have a significant impact on the object (in this case, the practice of intercultural education).

Distinguishing between an object and a Context serves particular political, cultural and social purposes. In the case of accountability systems, as just discussed, this move can serve as a flag-of-convenience that generates warrant, necessity, excuse and even «inevitability» for the introduction of new policies. Or, in the case of crucifixes and intercultural education in Italy, it can serve to block and prevent the introduction of new policies. Forging a distinction between an object and a Context can also aid in creating knowledge about characteristics over which rule can be exercised, as we discussed earlier in this article. Taking account of all of these possibilities is key to analyzing the assemblages which we propose that comparative education scholars make a central piece of their research work.

In this article we have argued that taking the Context of an education research study into account should not be merely a preparatory activity but should carry across the entirety of a research project. Rather than beginning with standardized Contextual categories researchers should seek to understand the confluence of practices and objects that are coming together as well as constantly flowing and changing. This analysis requires that the researcher be vigilant about the epistemological structures that are available for her use; equally important is awareness of the epistemological structures that are available to the participants in what she is studying, i.e. the ways that various actors and various operations construct the Contexts in which they work. Inasmuch as this analysis is a disentangling, a simplification and identification of discrete elements, it is also an act of tangling – not an effort to reduce complexity but an effort to reveal the denseness, the heterogenous multiplicity and the precarious contingency of the Contexts and objects that constitute education.

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Riassunto

Questo articolo sostiene che i ricercatori di educazione comparata – i ricercatori educativi in genere- dovrebbero definire con maggiore cura il(i) concetto(i) di Contesto(i) in cui si collocano le scuole e i sistemi che studiano. La costruzione del «contesto di ricerca» è ingabbiata da un insieme di norme, relazioni di potere, principi regolativi, tecnologie e strategie. Le attribuzioni di Contesto possono operare talvolta come categorie esterne che comportano l'accesso a determinate risorse, opportunità, agency e forme di soggettività, o piuttosto lo disabilitano o negano. Analogamente, iscrivere qualcosa ad un Contesto può talvolta con-

sentire/facilitare accesso, privilegiando particolari gruppi culturali o setting sociali. Questo contributo intende offrire strategie metodologiche utili ad un approccio analitico al problema del Contesto nella ricerca educativa. Riteniamo che la sfida consista nel comprendere il Contesto come parte di un processo di continui intrecci con lo(gli) oggetto(i) della ricerca, all'interno di un assemblaggio sempre in mutazione. L'approccio dell'«entangled analysis» (Sobe, forthcoming) ipotizzato qui, si riferisce alle qualità di «essere costruito» e al tempo stesso di «costruire» che il Contesto detiene. Questo necessariamente pone diversi problemi al ricercatore, che deve continuamente confrontarsi con le relazioni di potere/conoscenza che rendono i Contesti significativi e importanti. Sosteniamo quindi che la «contestualizzazione» di una ricerca non sia soltanto un'attività preparatoria, ma piuttosto qualcosa che deve accompagnarne l'intero processo. Invece che muovere dall'identificazione di categorie standardizzate di contesto, i ricercatori dovrebbero cercare di seguire e comprendere il flusso di oggetti e pratiche di ricerca che continuamente si combinano e si modificano.

Parole chiave: Contesto educativo, Educazione comparata, Globalizzazione, Metodologia di ricerca, Scale.