

Can the Pandemic Build a Bridge Spanning the Theory-Practice Divide in Comparative and International Education?

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Abstract

Humanity has come to look up to education to take on any challenge encountered on its way. Consequently, a massive education expansion project commenced some seventy years ago. By 2020, however, this project had still been far from complete and far from being perfect. Deficiencies and shortcomings are salient on all three fronts of access to education, equality of education, and quality education. The ravages caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have also aggravated deficiencies in education worldwide and made it urgent to address shortcomings in education. The task's urgency to rebuild education to its rightful place in the post-pandemic world means there is no room for experimentation. Nations should be learning from one another regarding their experience with education. The thesis of this study is that the scholarly field of comparative and international education is ideally suited to guide this exercise, but in order to live up to its potential, one major challenge that has beset the field for most of its history, namely the theoretical-practical divide, needs to be overcome. If the pandemic can succeed in effecting such a change, it will be to the benefit of both the field and education. In using comparative and international education to guide the post-pandemic education project, education in the BRICS countries has a pivotal role. If the articles in this volume can assist in developing a vision for a post-pandemic global education project, it will be, also as a starting point to get comparativists to enter the realm of education praxis, worth the endeavour.

Keywords: Access to Education; BRICS Education; Comparative and International Education; Covid-19 Pandemic; Practice; Equality in Education; Quality in Education; Theory of Education

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Introduction

The unexpected outbreak of the novel coronavirus during the first months of 2020 caused havoc worldwide, affecting all sectors of society. On the pandemic and education, one can make the following observations— society has regarded education as the most potent force to change society for the better. Yet education has been hit by the pandemic, at least according to some commentators, probably more severe than any other sector of society (cf. Ensign & Jacob, 2021). Besides, even before the pandemic, the global education project had some significant deficiencies. The question now is whether education can rescue society in the aftermath of the ravages caused by the pandemic.

The rationale of this study is that the scholarly field of comparative and international education can potentially play a pivotal role in guiding a restructuring of education globally to play its part in rebuilding a post-pandemic world and society. However, in order to live up to its potential, one major challenge that has beset the field for most of its history, the theoretical-practical divide, needs to be overcome, and if the pandemic can succeed in inducing such a change in the field (that is, building a bridge between theory and practice), it will be to the benefit of both the field and education. The secondary thesis is that in this entire project of comparative and international education guiding education in building a new world (that is, a situation where theory and practice are connected), the education of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa) countries should be a prime demonstration model.

The study commences with a survey of the place of education in the contemporary world: how education came to be looked up to as the most potent force at the disposal of society, deficiencies in the global education project even before the pandemic, how the pandemic has weakened education even more, and the place of the BRICS countries in the global education project. The second section turns to the field that should (by the nature of its object of study)

provide guidance to the global education expansion and reform project, namely comparative and international education: what comparative and international education studies and the purposes thereof. The theory-practice divide, a major deficiency besetting the field and preventing it from living up to its potential, is then discussed. The outbreak of the pandemic, its effect on education, and the need to restructure education are discussed subsequently. Then all these ideas are brought together with the hope that the pandemic will expedite building a bridge spanning the theory-practice chasm for the benefit of both the field and education practice.

Education as a Potent but Broken Force in the World

For much of human history, education was underdeveloped (even undeveloped) and unappreciated and existed on the margins of society and the public discourse. Even in Western Europe and North America, in 1800, only 5% of the population enjoyed any form of primary education (De Bolton, 2022).

It was only after the Second World War (1939-1945), since the middle of the twentieth century, that a new view of appreciation of education took hold. This newly found belief as to the power of education to improve society and change society was related to a number of factors. These include the fact that by 1955, the global adult literacy rate had reached 50% (Trewartha, 1969), meaning that for the first time in history, the majority of adult people in the world could read and write and thus be reached with the written word. The second was the establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1945 as an arm of the United Nations. The atrocities of the Second World War were the direct reason behind the establishment of this organisation. The idea was that as war starts in the minds of people, the best strategy to combat and prevent wars in the minds of people is through education. UNESCO represented not only humanity's newly found refuge and belief in education but also a means

to promote the expansion of education in the world. Then there was the rise of the human capital theory of the 1979 Nobel laureate for Economics, Theodor Schultz (and its derivative – the modernisation theory. The modernisation theory put forth that education was the main instrument to develop the nations of the developing world (a term used in vogue in the 1960s) (cf. Marques, 2021). The accumulated outcome of all of these ideas was that education came to be seen as essential to and harnessed for any kind of envisaged or desired social change. This covered an infinite inventory, ranging from eradicating unemployment to stamping out drug abuse, entrenching a culture of democracy or human rights, promoting social

mobility, and stimulating economic growth (cf. Lutz & Klingholz, 2017). This has continued right up to the present point in time, where, in the achievement of the sustainable development goals, humanity's vision for itself and the world in 2030, a very special place is accorded to education as a means of attaining these goals (cf. Wolhuter, 2022a).

The belief in the power of education to build a better world gave rise to a worldwide education expansion project, starting to gain traction in the 1960s and is still surging ahead today with growing momentum (cf. Wolhuter, 2021b). At the level of higher education alone, global enrolments have surged, as presented in Table 1.

| Level Year | Secondary | Higher |
|------------|-----------|--------|
| 1950 | 38 | 6.3 |
| 1960 | 68.9 | 11.0 |
| 1980 | 264.3 | 51.0 |
| 2000 | 543.5 | 99.9 |
| 2020 | 613.1 | 235.2 |

Sources of Data: UNESCO, 1971, 1995, 2022

David P. Baker, a comparative and international education professor at the University of Pennsylvania, writes about a new global culture brought about by the institution, spread, and well-nigh universalisation of schooling (Baker, 2014).

However impressive as the statistics sound, the global education expansion project has also had its share of shortcomings and deficiencies. These deficiencies or shortcomings are salient on all three fronts— access to education, equality of education, and quality education. At the point just before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, 258 million children of school-going age across the world (or 17% of the cohort) were still not attending school (UNESCO, 2020b). Not only in terms of enrolments but also in terms of equality (spreading the project equally to all or giving every person equal educational opportunities), education in the world by 2020 still left much to be desired, while at the output end, schooled and graduate unemployment had become a growing problem in large parts of the

world. In 2011, the World Bank (2011) reported that more than 30% of Malian youths aged 15 to 19 years who had completed six years of schooling could not read a simple sentence; the same was true of more than 50% of young Kenyans. The unemployment rate of university graduates in Egypt reached 36.1% in 2019, 25.1% in the case of men, and 53.2% in the case of women (Zawya, 2020).

The Disruption Brought about by the Covid-19 Pandemic

Then, on top of an already strained and incomplete global education expansion project, the world was caught unprepared by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020. On the day of writing, 8 May 2022, the pandemic has already claimed 6.2 million lives, while 517.1 million people have contracted the disease at some point (Worldometers, 2022). As was stated earlier, education has been severely affected by the pandemic, perhaps more severely than any other societal sector. The immediate reaction of

governments all over the world was to close schools and other institutions of education. The pandemic outbreak brought about multiple announcements of the suspension of school, college, and university attendance in all parts of the world. Statistically, this has affected about 91% of the global student population (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020c). Even a year after the outbreak, in March 2021, the education institutions of 26 countries were still in full suspension (UNESCO, 2021).

The strategy then was to move to online supported learning while learners were at home. This strategy relied much on parents to aid teachers in the teaching and students in the learning process. The assumption that all learners had parents fit and prepared for this assignment and would have enough discipline to successfully implement this strategy, as well as the assumption that all learners had the facilities at home for this exercise, does not correspond to reality. It is obvious that in this situation, the already disadvantaged learners (from poor households) were harmed the most. An extensive survey carried out in primary and secondary schools in South Africa a few months into the pandemic-induced national lockdown found that 29% of all learners had lost all contact with their teachers (Slatter, 2020). Moreover, 79% of schools dependent on school fees (from parents) could not manage to collect such fees, and 51% did not send any homework to their learners (Slatter, 2020). According to UNESCO (2021), more than 100 million additional learners will fall below the minimum reading proficiency level due to the health catastrophe.

The author is of the opinion that in view of the trust placed in education to help the world to recover from the ravages of the pandemic and in order to restore education first to its pre-pandemic state and then address the serious challenges it had even then, no room is left for experimentation or inventing the wheel anew. Instead, education planners, policymakers, and practitioners need to learn from one another's experiences, successes, and failures. Here, the pivotal place of the BRICS countries and the role of the scholarly field of comparative and

international education come into play. The following two sections will focus on each of these in turn.

The Value of the BRICS Countries

Wolhuter and Chigisheva (2020a) argue that because of their combined strength in terms of geography (surface area, natural resources), demography, and economy, and also because of the diversity and social and political dynamics contained in each of the BRICS countries, these countries are bound to assume a leading position in the new, multipolar world and, in particular, a vanguard position in leading the Global South against Northern hegemony. Furthermore, these countries not only offer opportunities to learn a lot from one another but the entire assortment of other countries in the Global South, as well as the nations of the Global North, can benefit much from learning from the experience of the BRICS countries. This also pertains to the education sector. In another study, Wolhuter and Chigisheva (2020b) argue that the size, features, and dynamics of the education projects in the BRICS countries render this grouping a showcase for the rest of the world to study and learn from. China, for example, has had the biggest primary and secondary education system in the world for quite some time. In the 2009-2010 year, it overtook the United States of America as the world's largest most extensive higher education system. Then, in 2017, it also became the country turning out the largest number of doctoral degrees (71 000 in that year, compared to 48 000 in the United States of America).

By all projections, India has already surpassed China as the most populous nation on the globe (Ellis-Petersen, 2023), meaning that it can be expected that sometime in the foreseeable future, India will have the largest education system in the world; albeit its Higher Education system with 1,043 universities, 42,343 colleges and 38.5 million enrolments is considered the largest in the world (Department of Higher Education, 2020). Considering China as the second largest, it indicates the importance of BRICS education on the global map. In terms of critical issues concerning supplying quality

education to all in the world of today, the BRICS countries constitute a valuable showcase. These issues include the issue of the language of learning and teaching and the position of English (as the international lingua franca) in the education system, the challenge of developing world-class universities as the apex of any national education system, the issue of the decentralisation of the education authority and the development of school autonomy, the issue of decolonisation and fending off Northern Hegemony in education systems, the issue of aligning the world of work with the world of education, and the question of giving due space to cultural diversity in the education system while, at the same time, using education to build social cohesion and national unity.

When learning or borrowing from other education systems, one important rule is to factor in contextual similarities and differences between the exporting and the importing nation (Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019). When comparative and international education are clarified, this critical convention will be returned later. With the contextual contours of the BRICS countries resembling that of the Global South countries much better than what is the correspondence between the contextual contours of the Global North and the Global South, the BRICS countries are much better candidates for cross-border education by the Global South than anything the Global North can offer them. The field of scholarship that is, by virtue of its expertise and object of study, best suited to guide such cross-national learning regarding the design and improvement of education systems is comparative and international education.

Comparative and International Education: The Ideal Scholarly Field to Give Guidance on Benefitting from the Education Experience of Foreign Countries

Comparative education, which has been typified as an infinite field (Wolhuter & Wiseman, 2019), defies any attempt to define it in one line or sentence. Comparative education entails a three-in-one perspective or study of education. These three perspectives are the education

system perspective, the contextual perspective, and the comparative perspective (cf. Wolhuter, 2022b). Comparative education, in the first place, studies the education *system*. The most salient level of analysis in the field is that of the national education system, but education systems appear at many geographic levels, from global to local, in terms of the oft-used Bray and Thomas (1995) cube, at eight levels. These are world regions/continents; countries (national level); states/provinces; districts; schools; classrooms; and individuals. While comparative education can also study education institutions, classrooms, teachers, and students, to qualify as comparative education research, such studies are placed and studied within the context of, firstly, the education system and, secondly, the societal context. This leads to the second perspective, namely the contextual perspective.

Comparative education focuses not solely on the education system *per se*. The education system is studied within its societal context and is regarded as being shaped by or as being the outcome of societal forces (geographic, demographic, social, economic, cultural, political, and religious). The contextual perspective does not entail the study of contextual forces shaping the education system only. The converse is also studied – how education systems affect other societal sectors (such as the economic or the political). Finally, comparative education does not contend with studying one education system in its societal context in isolation. Various education systems are compared in their interrelations with their societal contexts, hence the comparative perspective. The explained conceptualisation of the place of context in relation to the education system has given rise to one of the basic theorems in the field, namely, that attempts to transplant one education idea, policy, or practice from one education system (where it has a proven record of success) to another should be thoroughly factor in both contextual similarities and differences between the importing and the exporting country; otherwise, such exercises of transplantation with the intention to improve the education system of the importing country

are doomed to end in failure (cf. Schweisfurth & Elliot, 2019).

By the second half of the twentieth century, when the field got firmly entrenched in university courses and in terms of university infrastructure (research institutes and chairs of comparative education), there was a regular stream of publications with inventories of the field's use, purposes, or significance. The first of these, such as Tretheway (1976) and Jones (1981), typically included theoretical as well as practical purposes. The first referred to the description and understanding of education systems; the latter to a range of issues, including the fostering of intercultural and international understanding, the philanthropic ideal, the improvement of practice (that is, teaching in classrooms), and above all, improving education systems by borrowing or learning from or taking over best policies, ideas, and practices (see Wolhuter, 2021b). Since its publication in 1984, Columbian University comparativist Harold Noah's article titled *The Use and Abuse of Comparative Education* (Noah, 1984) has become a central point of reference in discussions of the purposes or roles of comparative education. Noah lists seven uses of comparative education that span both the theoretical (description of and understanding of the origin and influences of education practices in the world of today, education being a touchstone to understanding a national culture) and the practical (e.g., help in decision making, that is, borrowing or learning from the benefit of other education systems).

Over its history, scholars at different times laid emphasis on the goals of Comparative Education at different places. Historians of Comparative Education customary depict the historical evolution of the field in terms of seven phases (cf. Wolhuter, 2021a). During the most primitive stage of travellers' tales, theoretical goals of intellectual curiosity obviously were at the order of the day. In the next phase (as from the nineteenth century) of government officials carrying out comprehensive studies of what was regarded as exemplary foreign education systems, with the intention to borrow best

practices to improve the domestic education project, obviously, practical goals were at the foreground. The same practical motive was present in the next, third phase, that is the phase of international cooperation, which gained traction in the early twentieth century when the motive to improve the domestic education project was superseded by a more altruistic, universally ameliorative motive: comparative education in the service of humanity to improve the fate of humanity and to enhance the quality of life of all humans. In the fourth phase, the "factors and forces" phase, which reached its zenith in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the centre aims moved back to the theoretical, when scholars attempted to understand each national education system from the unique configuration of the contextual shaping factors that had given rise to that education system. In the social science phase since the 1960s, amidst the belief in education as the total solution to any problem in society, the goals swung back towards the practical. Then, since the 1970s, during the last two phases in the field's historical development (that of heterodoxy and heterogeneity), a strange contradiction manifested itself in the field. On the one hand, the signature feature of the field during these two phases was a proliferation of the number and variety of paradigms extant in the field. Journal analyses reveal the (inordinate) amount of attention scholars devote to theoretical and methodological issues (Wolhuter, 2008). On the other hand, scholars, for example, Noah (1986), in his much-cited paper mentioned earlier, constantly proffer the utility of the field.

Whether those in the field should engage themselves with practical issues has been controversial at some critical junctures in the field's history in the recent past. There is a well-known case during the formative years of the Comparative Education Society in Europe. This society was formed in 1961, the second professional society of this kind to be established after the Comparative Education Society was formed in the United States of America in 1956. At the first conference of the Comparative Education Society in Europe after its formation

in 1963 in The Hague, Netherlands, the society almost broke up between those delegates who were university-based and felt the focus of the field and the society should be theoretical, basing their field in the humanities, and those who were engaged in practical work, international aid, and who were of the view that the objectives should be practical (Kallen, 1963). Then, in 1969, the United States based Comparative Education Society changed its name to Comparative and International Education Society, indicating the embracement of international education, which, as the term was used at that stage, roughly corresponded to the practically inclined wing of the Comparative Education Society in Europe. The inclusion of "International Education" in the name of the society was also carried out by the Canadian Professional Society, while the Australian (later Australian and New Zealand) and the British societies too, in subsequent years, changed their names to incorporate international education as well. Thus, there appears to be widespread agreement in the field that it encompasses both theoretical and practical objectives.

Of the practical purposes, that of policy borrowing (or any of the other names it is called) is very salient. Comparativist Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2021) of the University of Columbia writes that the belief that something valuable can be learnt from one education system to improve another is inextricably linked to the development of the field. She calls policy borrowing "a key area of research" in the field (Steiner-Khamsi, 2021, p. 327). The serial publication in the field fulfilling the assignment of offering meta-analyses of the field, that is, of synthesising research in the field, the *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education*, has as one of its five thematic sessions "research to practice". This section contains 24 articles (out of a total of 170) published since the inception of the journal in 2013. Each and every one of these details the scope and promise for scholars in the field to play a role in the improvement of practice over a wide range of topics, including the promotion of the implementation of learner-centred pedagogies, teacher education, education for

refugee children, and the study and control of the surveillance of international students. Yet not a single paper reports a case where comparative and international education scholars succeeded in making a demonstrable difference in practice. The author of this article (CC Wolhuter) has been in the field for a lifetime, having taught comparative and international education at three universities in South Africa and having had a spell as a visiting professor at a top university on each of the continents and done education consultancy work in Madagascar and Zambia. Yet he cannot name one instance of comparative and international education scholars making a registered, concrete impact on education practice anywhere.

To return to the *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education*, in the first thematic session of the *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education*, on trends and directions in comparative and international education, a strong theme is the theory-practice divide, an issue that is the theme of several papers (cf. Wolhuter, 2023). A common view expressed in these papers is that scholars of comparative and international education should, in their publication output, package knowledge generated in a form more accessible and digestible to practitioners. In one honest, soul-searching paper, an author involved in large-scale surveys relates her experience as to how the data yielded by such surveys are of limited use in the improvement of (cf. Wolhuter, 2023). In another paper, comparativists focusing their research on higher education are counselled to engage more with practitioners (cf. Wolhuter, 2023). One author puts forward the argument that comparativists should give more attention to their teaching of comparative and international education, reflecting on their practice. Another author relates the issue to language barriers, particularly in the case of non-Anglophone countries (the article focuses on Kyrgyzstan) (cf. Wolhuter, 2023) argument of the author is that the literature in the field is published in English and, therefore, inaccessible to many in the extra-Anglophone world (cf. Wolhuter, 2023).

Conclusion

At present in history, humanity has placed its confidence in education to meet well-nigh every challenge coming its way. Despite pouring innumerable resources into it and pursuing it with the greatest enthusiasm, the global education expansion project still shows massive deficiencies after seventy years. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these deficiencies and, at the same time, brought about an urgency to rebuild education to be more streamlined to serve as a vessel to take humanity into the future. The urgency of these tasks means that there is no space or luxury for experimentation, but humanity should work with the resources at its disposal. These resources are the stock of nations' existing, collective experience with education. These have to be tapped by comparative education investigation. The field of scholarship ideally suited, by virtue of its expertise and scope of study, to guide this project is that of comparative and international education. Despite widespread belief among scholars within the field as to the practical use of the field, thus far, the field making a practical impact in the world of education has remained a pipe dream.

The question now is whether the urgency, if not crisis, precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic can have the shock therapy effect of getting scholars of comparative and international education together for the benefit of all parties. That is, the field of scholarship, but above all, society and education in praxis. It has been explained that in such an exercise of comparative international research guiding the reconstruction of education in the post-pandemic world, drawing on the education of the BRICS countries would be pivotal, given the considerable weight (geographic, demographic, and also increasing political and economic) of the BRICS countries in the world and as the vanguard of the Global South, in particular, and the value of the BRICS countries as an object lesson regarding a range of critical issues in global education at the present point in time. If the studies in this Special Issue can assist in developing a vision for a post-pandemic global education project, it will be,

also as a starting point to get comparativists to enter the realm of education praxis, worth the endeavour.

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Ethical Approval and Conflict of Interest

The manuscript was prepared following the protocols of the Helsinki Declaration or similar ethical statements. As the research did not involve human participants, at the time of writing, my university did not require consideration by an ethical committee. Therefore, I declare no conflict of interest. Furthermore, I received no funding for the research.