The ‘Russian doll’ approach: developing nested case-studies to support international comparative research in education

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Abstract

International comparison is complicated by the use of different terms, classification methods, policy frameworks and system structures, not to mention different languages and terminology. Multi-case studies can assist understanding of the influence wielded by cultural, social, economic, historical and political forces upon educational decisions, policy construction and changes over time. But case studies alone are not enough. In this paper, we argue for an ecological or scaled approach that travels through macro, meso and micro levels to build nested case-studies to allow for more comprehensive analysis of the external and internal factors that shape policy making and education systems. Such an approach allows for deeper understanding of the relationship between globalising trends and policy developments.

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In a small shop in a snowy village in Russia, Nikolai the doll maker was carving his last matryoshka. From one piece of soft wood he shaped six nesting dolls, each one fitting inside the other. They all opened in the middle and were hollow inside, except for the littlest. She was the size of a bumblebee and she was made of the heart of the sweet-smelling wood.

(Corinne Demas Bliss 1999)

It is possible to examine one’s own system critically from the inside, but it is more difficult without a comparative perspective. But the existence of alternatives obliges us to justify rather than to assume, so that if we do adhere to something, there is a chance of knowing why we do it. (Grant 2000, 315)

Introduction

Education systems, policies and individual school practices are the products of specific cultural settlements, belief systems, historico-political allegiances and national aspirations. The comparison of these systems – and that which constitutes them – can work to highlight trends, both unique and universal, as well as their differential effects. Such research can provide policymakers with insights as to how a particular initiative may travel in their own jurisdiction; thereby avoiding mistakes made elsewhere. However, international comparison is complicated by the use of different terms, classification methods, policy frameworks and system structures, as
well as different languages and terminology. Further, while multi-case studies can assist understanding of the influence wielded by cultural, social, economic, historical and political forces on education policy decision-making and system design, geographically “bounded” case studies are not enough. In this paper, we argue that a scaled approach that travels through macro, meso and micro levels to build nested case-studies allows more comprehensive analysis of both external/global and internal/local factors that shape policy making and education systems.

The genesis for such a framework lies in seminal works in comparative education that have called for embedded analytical approaches that can offer richer datasets capable of producing contextualised, accurate and more authentic research findings (Broadfoot 2000; Crossley 2000). For example, the need for ‘ecological validity’ was first discussed by Crossley and Vulliamy (1984) who, since environments strongly influence the development and structure of education, argued the necessity of placing analysis in a broader historico-cultural, political and socio-economic context. Other leaders in the field have since emphasised that context should be probed beyond mere description to incorporate social and cultural processes (Crossley and Broadfoot 1992; Broadfoot 2000). This was more recently reinforced by Vulliamy (2004) who, in response to the increasing dominance of positivism, argued for greater synergy between the comparative and sociological traditions to ensure that comparative educational research is firmly grounded within relevant social contexts.

In addition to the effacement of local context through large-scale quantitative research exercises, many comparative researchers are concerned about the disappearance of a sense of history (Jameson 1988; Watson 1999; Novoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003; McLaughlin 2004). This respect for the ‘history of the present’ (Foucault 1994) is associated with post-modern thinking, which refutes any form of grand meta-narrative to ‘explain the present’ (Watson 1999, 235) or to ‘tutor our judgments’ (Stenhouse 1979, 6). McLaughlin (2004) therefore argues that history and comparison should be reconciled, so the researchers can ‘trace the conceptualisation of ideas and
the formation of knowledge over time and space to produce an individual, historically contingent social, cultural and educational discourse’ (Novoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003, 435).

Despite these important observations, two opposing epistemologies, which Epstein (2008, 377) describes as ‘the universalism of positivism and the particularism of relativism’, have emerged over the past three decades in comparative education research. This dualism epitomises the infamous paradigm wars, where the generalizability of results obtainable from large-scale quantitative data analyses are weighed against the deep understanding that can be developed through fine grained qualitative methods. These concerns are not new, although they have taken on greater urgency with the advent of globalisation, the influence of supra-national organisations like the OECD and World Bank, and the increased use of large-scale quantitative comparisons that seek to establish international benchmarks; see, for example, the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Yet, it was apparent even in the 1970s that the use of positivist approaches alone risks the ‘misapplication of findings and the (often unrealised and misunderstood) policy-oriented potential’ (Grant 1977, 76). This view was later reinforced by Stenhouse (1979, 5), who argued that:

Comparative education is less concerned with predictions and possibilities than with that which is accepted as actuality occurring in time and space. Its happenings are located within the coordinates of living rather than within the coordinates of theory. It is descriptive rather than experimental. It deals in insight rather than law as a basis for understanding.

Thomas (2010) concurs with this view by stating the practicality of “phronesis” or wisdom derived from personal experience and deep understanding as opposed to using deductive reasoning for the purpose of generalizing findings. He too refutes the representativeness of a unique case to other typical situations (2011b), because even though there are commonalities between multiple spaces, to say that a case acts as an archetype of ‘common’ contexts is
illogical. This is particularly applicable to international comparison in a globalised world where
research must engage with and track the mutation of policy and practice across borders and over
time.

A strong case for the reconceptualization of the field to better contend with the contemporary
challenges presented by technology and globalization was made in a special issue of
Comparative Education where, for example, King (2000, 268) pointed to the ‘interplay between
context, policy-making and opportunities for fulfilment,’ to argue for a more deep-seated
appreciation of the intricacy of education decision-making. Comparative research, King argued,
should involve comprehensive analysis of the complete ‘ecology’ at work within a given context
through attention to educational inheritance and provision, dynamic shifts in schooling and the
impact of technological and socio-political upheavals. In the same special issue, Broadfoot
(2000) proposed that researchers go beyond the superficial description of context, so that the
field may revive the analysis of social and cultural influences and improve the applicability of
research findings. These calls echo throughout the research literature which, on the whole,
reflects enduring concern with three central elements of comparative educational research: (i) the
need for contextualisation; (ii) the effect of globalisation; and (iii) the potential for conceptual or
practical application. In the following section, we describe these elements to ground our
framework for international comparative research in education.

I. Contextualisation
The narrow interpretation that current educational affairs have come into being with no
connection to historical events, political priorities, socio-cultural development and stakeholder
influence renders some international comparisons weak, inconclusive and lacking the necessary
detail that is required for useful policy reference. If not seen in the light of contextual factors, the
whole workings of an education system might be misunderstood, as educational aims can only be
realized by improving the whole ‘network of influences and micro-politics which governs its
realization’ (Broadfoot 2002, 6). Hofman, Hofman and Gray (2008) seek to overcome this dilemma in their comparison of key dimensions of schooling in European school systems by putting in place an additional stage called ‘framework building,’ which involves the recruitment of ‘experts’ who are well-informed of salient features in their respective countries. Multilevel analyses are used to construct a dynamic ‘country-matrix’ to inform cross-case (or cross-country) analyses; a measure which significantly improves the depth, validity and outcomes of the research.

Contextualisation can be better achieved by understanding the essential analytical framework within case study, which is referred to as the argument or topic a case is ‘of’ (Thomas 2011a, 512). In question, what is one trying to find out about a case? It is crucial to scrutinize in distinctiveness the difference of the subject and the object to gain a sense of clarity of what is the goal of an investigation, while not losing the connection between those two elements. Thomas further clarifies that the object is the thing to be explained while the analysis of subject could give rise to explanation. To give an example, if an education system is chosen as the subject, then the structures and performance of it will be the object to be explained. The typology recommended by Thomas (2011a) sets apart both elements in order to view clearly the ‘theoretical or illustrative approaches, methodological decisions, and decisions about process’ (518).

Such an approach is best enabled via a mixed method or multidisciplinary methodological approach that draws on various social science disciplines: sociology, politics, economics, geography, cultural studies, anthropology and history (Altbach and Kelly 1986). Given that intensive research can be difficult to conduct on a large-scale, Broadfoot (2000) recommends a range of approaches from ‘complex statistical analyses based on huge quantitative data-bases at one extreme, through to intensive ethnographic studies on the other’ (369). Attention to local and/or national context alone however is not enough as international forces bear an increasingly
powerful influence upon individual jurisdictions. For this reason, experienced comparativists recommend attention to globalising discourses and trends.

II. Globalisation

As recommended by Parkyn (1977), the analysis of local context and international relations are equally significant. Most studies prior to the 1970s focused solely on within-system variables or across-system variables without investigating their interaction across time and space. Dale and Robertson (2009) however critique the former approach as ‘methodological nationalism’, arguing that no nation state is immune to the effects of post-modernity in a technologically rich, globalised world where trends and events in one corner of the world can impact upon another. In all spheres, both corporate and government, practices of policy borrowing and assimilation have occurred both directly and indirectly from Anglophone societies to other parts of the world. Yet, the results are not necessarily advantageous. For example, Nguyen, Elliott, Terlouw and Pilot (2009) found that mounting pressure to modernize and remodel education systems in line with ‘international standards’ set predominantly by systems in the West has led to the adoption of approaches that have proved unsuitable in the East.

Globalisation does not therefore result in homogenization but has distinct differential implications on nation states (Crossley 2002). Migrating policies or trends can be taken up in different ways resulting in mediation, adaptation and even resistance (Vulliamy 2004). This ‘dialectic of the global and local’ (Arnoke and Torres 1999, 1) demands broader multilevel units of analysis that are capable of incorporating global, intra-national and micro-level comparisons (Crossley and Jarvis 2000). For example, to determine the relationship between policy trends and teacher values in professional practice in England and Denmark, McNess (2004) employs an expanded case study approach set in a socio-cultural framework to ‘link the macro concerns of international and national policy with a micro analysis of individual teacher experience’ (318). Multi-level analysis is conducted using the concept of an ‘iterative filter’ (McNess 2004) to
obtain insights and reflections from a range of key informants at both national and local levels. Information is analysed with an eye to both global and national contexts in order to shed light on classroom practice. The result is a study that maximises the applicability of the research findings; the final element of comparative research to which we will now turn.

III. Application

International comparison poses an opportunity for mutual policy reference by understanding the different past developments, responses to global forces and effectiveness in resolving educational issues in each jurisdiction. Jurisdictions may have similar or divergent trends and each can provide insights when the research design is both epistemologically and methodologically sound. For example, when looking at similar trends relating to academic differentiation, school achievement and school violence in the USA and Korea, Akiba and Seunghee (2007) recommend that policymakers reassess the impact of academic tracking. This they argue results in negative labels on students in lower tracks, leading to student disaffection and an increase in the incidence of violent behaviour. Conversely, Kwon’s (2003) analysis of divergent trends in preschool education in Korea and England shows how the development of early childhood education in each country has been affected by different historical and philosophical foundations, as well as by significantly different government policies and implementation processes. Macro analysis of the historical and philosophical background to each context, followed by micro-analysis of the perceptions of preschool educators, supplemented by observation of daily practice and a review of the curriculum, served to highlight significant inconsistencies between official policy, the perceptions of preschool educators and pedagogical practice within and between each jurisdiction.

Comparison has also been co-opted to set-up measurable benchmarks for educational institutions worldwide. For example, the European Report on Quality of School Education (European Commission 2000) identifies ‘the need to set quantifiable targets, indicators and
benchmarks as a means of comparing best practice and as instruments for monitoring and reviewing the progress achieved’ (6). International education assessments such as PISA and TIMMS are examples of benchmarking where educational jurisdictions strive to ascend the ladder of academic world rankings. Novoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) argue that this regulatory status to achievement standards is constructed as the chief yardstick for the control of both quality and efficiency. In so doing, the construction of and adherence to comparative benchmarks has become a de-facto element of education policy making.

This growing trend has been met by a flood of criticism with one being that large-scale comparative macro-analysis is methodologically flawed (Boyle 2009). Other than the questionable sampling methods, there is no micro-analysis of contextual details to test or otherwise ground quantitative findings (Karsten, Visscher and De Jong 2001). This is highly problematic for at least two reasons. First, a lack of understanding of context increases the possibility of misinterpreting practices of other countries, and second, the policies observed may be too closely tied to their specific contexts to be of use elsewhere (Grant 2000). For example, Müller and Norrie (2010) maintain that the Spanish education reforms favour a ‘social service’ oriented model as opposed to the ‘managerial’ model of professionalism in England; noting the influence of Spain’s historical resistance to neo-liberalism as a key driver in the development of their national priorities and the Spanish education system. Market-based policy solutions to deal with educational problems are unlikely to be popular in the Spanish context. Therefore, while comparative methods present great opportunities for informed policy-making, this is only possible when policy makers look beyond results and rankings to the core contextual elements of educational successes and failures (King 2000).

To assist in effective ‘conceptual’ borrowing, comparative education plays a role in examining educational practices in their root context to determine how feasible it is for foreign ideas from similar systems to be assimilated and the adaptation required for successful
translation (Grant 2000). For example, Graham’s (2007) analysis of the relationship between curriculum and equity in student achievement points to the influence of modes of political governance. She argues that the active welfare policies, quality universal childcare and education, and strong government regulation of public goods in ‘other-regarding’ societies, such as Finland, contribute to their consistent achievement of high quality and high equity in the OECD’s Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). High quality and low equity, on the other hand, is more commonly experienced by ‘self-regarding’ societies adopting neoliberal reforms that promote individualism, competition through market-based reforms, prescriptive curriculum and high-stakes assessment (Luke, Graham, Sanderson, Voncina and Weir 2006). As a result of these different socio-political environments, the adoption of school choice policies has led to markedly different results in each jurisdiction (Graham & Jahnukainen 2011). Finnish parents are not compelled to choose when local schools do not differ significantly in quality and there is little cultural appetite for the competitive materialism that exists elsewhere. However, without analysis that extends to the geopolitical or macro level, and without recourse to multidisciplinary methods, such details will remain obscured from educational researchers and policy-makers.

(Re)Conceptualising Comparison

As most educational jurisdictions are different in terms of administration, political governance, bureaucratic language, policy, teaching practice, national goals and historical development, comparison cannot be made on an ‘apples to apples’ basis (Graham and Jahnukainen 2011). Comparative research in education therefore requires the combination of a complex set of methodologies that are capable of sketching both broad and fine detail. While an increasing number of comparative studies have drawn on solid theories to cope with the growing complexity of the globalised world, the central elements informing strong comparative research
design have not been made fully explicit in the research literature. The exemplars discussed in the first half of this paper suggest that a multi-level approach with comparable units of analysis is needed to anchor research within distinct international contexts in order to develop nested case studies that are capable of identifying, mapping and understanding the complexities of and influences upon education systems internationally.

In the following section, we draw on the concept of the ‘Matryoshka’ or Russian ‘nesting’ doll to outline a nested case-study approach currently supporting an international comparison of special education across four jurisdictions: New South Wales, Scotland, Finland and Malaysia. The rationale of adopting a nested approach is to look at the relevant elements within a case which are useful for comparison to comprehend certain inquiry. The ‘nested elements’ (Thomas 2011a, 517) place emphasis on the holism of the wider context by forging the components within a subject. Following Crossley and Vulliamy’s (1984) assertion that international comparison should be conducted on a ‘case for the case’ basis and building on Dale’s (2005) more recent concept of pluri-scalar analysis, the framework begins from a macro or ‘outside in’ perspective to trace each jurisdiction’s historical place in the world. As well as situating each system in context, a macro view enables understanding of which national and supra-national trends bear influence upon the structure and shape of the education systems particular to each region. The meso level builds structural matter into each case-study through the addition of both form and detail. Research on the ground with key stakeholders constitutes the third ‘micro’ level of analysis by providing both an ‘inside out’ and ‘real time’ perspective. Together these three layers of analysis produce comprehensive ‘nested’ case-studies to enable more robust cross-case analysis and the identification of dominant themes, similarities, differences and patterns.
Comparatively special

Education either as a ‘strategic commodity’ or as a ‘public good’ is the basis of two political agendas being played out in various countries; many of which seek to encourage parent choice and institutional competition, site-based autonomy, managerialism, performative steering and prescriptive curricula (Ball 1990). At the same time, however, a competing policy trend in the form of the ‘inclusion movement’ advocates for the provision of high-quality education for all students through meaningful differentiated curriculum, effective teaching, and necessary support services, regardless of race, socio-economic background, physical and intellectual capability (Ferguson 1995). The methodological framework outlined here has been developed to assist in better understanding how policymakers in Australia, Europe and Asia have reacted to these globalised educational movements; what discourses bear most influence on policy decision-making in this area; and what impact these decisions have on student support system design over time. This multi-level model (see Table 1 below) scaffolds both ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ analyses: the ‘vertical’ examines the whole context in-depth via a multi-level structure with the lower level of analysis nested as a subset within the higher level of analysis. This is followed by a ‘horizontal’ analysis that seeks similar and distinct trends across the four education jurisdictions.

In this analytical framework, the three stages represent different units of analysis. Each level corresponds to a specific inquiry which is complemented by an empirical method for data collection. The macro level (or the outermost ‘mother doll’) attends to the structure ‘from without’ through a comprehensive review of the international education research literature. Then, as shown in Phase I of the above table, literature particular to each jurisdiction will be analysed to understand how contextual elements such as the historical, cultural, social and political factors have shaped these four distinct education systems.
Table 1: A conceptual framework to build “nested” case studies for vertical and horizontal comparison across and between international contexts

**THE “RUSSIAN DOLL” APPROACH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE 1</th>
<th>CASE 2</th>
<th>CASE 3</th>
<th>CASE 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>Finland</td>
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**PHASE I: “CASE FOR THE CASE” ANALYSIS** (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1984)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Research Methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage (a) Macro-analysis:</strong> Structure from without</td>
<td>Build “nested” case-studies through comprehensive review of the literature and historical analysis of social, cultural and political forces that have shaped the philosophy and organisation of the education system over time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What does education mean here and who/what is it for? How has educational provision shifted over time and what has this meant in terms of parallel organisational structures (special/general/inclusive)?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage (b) Meso-analysis:</strong> Structure from within</td>
<td>Development of a “case for the case” policy library and timeline to determine what discursive traces are evident in past policy documents, and how these do/do not reflect the macro forces identified in Phase 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do changes in policy discourse reveal shifts in procedure and practice; which discourse/s are prevalent at what time; and, in what direction do these appear to be heading? Is there evidence of growing concern over particular student groups? If so, how are these groups defined? Which students are targeted for support, has this changed in recent years and, if so, why?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage (c) Micro-analysis: Mining the evolution of student support, rationale &amp; practice</strong></td>
<td>Analysis of semi-structured interviews with policy makers from each jurisdiction. Juxtaposition of interview discourses with “text” based policy discourses to determine what themes “bleed out” over time and which remain constant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are these policy-text discourses reflected in the “live” discourses used by policy makers from various departments within the education system and does their prevalence differ? How do policy makers themselves define student support and target groups? Where is the bulk of student support directed and to whom?</td>
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**PHASE II: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS**

<table>
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<th>CASE 1</th>
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Identification of appropriate “objects of comparison” and points of “convergence” indicating supra-national influence and globalising discourses (Dale, 2005).
The *meso level* (the dolls within the mother doll) turns to education policies and, in the case of this project, changes in special education enrolment trends will be chronologically mapped against shifts in policy formation and the discourses “fixed” within them. The final *micro level* – the innermost Russian doll – concentrates on interviews with current policymakers from each of the four sites. The information gathered from one level will be used to inform the other, thereby constructing robust case studies that are firmly grounded in their respective contexts. In this study, this reciprocal interaction is further enhanced through the juxtaposition of ‘live’ policy discourses to those ‘fixed-in-text’ to determine any shifts in language and focus over time. Finally, given that Dale (2005) recommends the incorporation of a pluri-scalar dimension, as shown in Phase II of the study (see Table 1) the socio-cultural elements within each unit of study will be matched with supra-national conditions to determine the interactional effect of global agendas and national development. This final analytical phase aims to determine if and when global movements have seeped into the workings of an educational system and how these may have affected the educational discourses used by different actors within different systems at different times.

**Conclusion**

Through comparative methodologies, we can more clearly see how each education system has developed its own distinctive character (Cowen 2000), how local nuances such as language, culture, population, political stance and institutions influence education systems, and how real-life educational decisions are made. Such methods also provide an explanatory lens through which we can understand why certain measures undertaken by systems in other jurisdictions can be difficult to implement in our own, and why the same challenges have a different significance in a different context (King 2000). Comparison can therefore shed light on the relationship between educational systems and the societies in which they have developed. The proposed
ecological or ‘Russian doll’ approach which consists of multi-layer or ‘nested’ case studies answers the call of comparativists to foreground the context and to include an international perspective in the research design to aid considered and evidence-based education policy-making (Mitter 1997). Its three-tier pluri-scalar structure (Dale 2005) equally attends to ‘dialectic of the global and local’ (Arnove and Torres 1999, 1), avoiding the methodological extremes that has troubled the field for so long. In other words, ‘the things outside schools’ (Sadler 1964, 310) are examined in the same space as the effects of culture, context and new forms of discourse following globalization (Crossley 2000, 2002). Cultural factors that make up the distinctive composite of an educational jurisdiction are explored in detail, opening up opportunities of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research (Broadfoot 2000). This type of research design will produce rich comparative data, which will deter uncritical borrowing of educational policy and practice (Grant 2000). Policies developed elsewhere can then be more appropriately viewed as contextual blueprints, rather than convenient moulds.

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