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Editors' Introduction

Alexander W. Wiseman

Lehigh University, USA, aww207@lehigh.edu

C. C. Wolhuter

North-West University, South Africa, Charl.Wolhuter@nwu.ac.za

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Editors' Introduction

Abstract

The inaugural issue of *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education* begins a new chapter in the scholarly and professional discussion of comparative and international education research, policy, and practice. Comparative and international education research has become increasingly isolated from educational policymaking as well as school- and classroom-level decisionmaking as the amount and diversity of research in the field has grown. *FIRE* is an international, peer-reviewed publication, which seeks to bridge this gap by promoting interdisciplinary scholarship on the use of internationally comparative data for evidence-based and innovative change in educational systems, schools, and classrooms worldwide. *FIRE* provides an open source and widely accessible platform for disseminating research on education from multiple cultural, organizational and national perspectives. To introduce *FIRE* to the community of researchers, policymakers, and educators this introduction provides an overview of the journal's hallmark characteristics and suggestions for manuscript and special issue topics.

Die erste Ausgabe von *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education* schlägt ein neues Kapitel in der wissenschaftlichen und akademischen Diskussion über vergleichende und internationale Bildungsforschung, -politik und -praxis auf. Mit der Zunahme und Diversifizierung von Forschung hat sich die Internationale und Vergleichende Bildungsforschung zunehmend von Fragen der Bildungspolitik aber auch der Entscheidungsfindung auf der Ebene von Schule und Klassenzimmer isoliert. *FIRE* ist eine internationale, peer-reviewte Publikation, die versucht, diese Lücke zu schließen durch die Förderung interdisziplinärer Forschung über die Verwendung von international vergleichenden Daten für evidenzbasierten und innovativen Veränderungen in Bildungssystemen, Schulen und Klassenzimmern weltweit. *FIRE* bietet eine freie und allgemein zugängliche Plattform zur Verbreitung von Forschung zum Thema Bildung aus verschiedenen kulturellen, organisatorischen und nationalen Perspektiven. Diese Einleitung möchte *FIRE* den Vertreter_innen von Forschung, Politik und Praxis vorstellen und einen Überblick über den Qualitätskennzeichen und Merkmale des Journals anbieten und zugleich einige Vorschläge für Manuskripte und Themen für Sonderhefte unterbreiten.

Keywords

comparative and international education, comparative education, international education, education research, open source publishing

Cover Page Footnote

The editors would like to express their sincere thanks to Heather Simoneau at Lehigh University for her invaluable support and direction in moving *FIRE* forward, and to the members of *FIRE*'s advisory board for their input, questions, and support in both developing this introduction as well as shaping the vision for what this journal can and will become. All errors are the responsibility of the editors alone.

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Alexander W. Wiseman¹

Lehigh University, USA

C. C. Wolhuter

North-West University, South Africa

The inaugural issue of *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education* begins a new chapter in the scholarly and professional discussion of comparative and international education research, policy, and practice. Comparative and international education research has become increasingly isolated from educational policymaking as well as school- and classroom-level decisionmaking as the amount and diversity of research in the field has grown. *FIRE* is an international, peer-reviewed publication, which seeks to bridge this gap by promoting interdisciplinary scholarship on the use of internationally comparative data for evidence-based and innovative change in educational systems, schools, and classrooms worldwide. *FIRE* provides an open source and widely accessible platform for disseminating research on education from multiple cultural, organizational and national perspectives. To introduce *FIRE* to the community of researchers, policymakers, and educators this introduction provides an overview of the journal's hallmark characteristics and suggestions for manuscript and special issue topics. To begin, we discuss the most important question any new publication can answer: who is the comparative and international education research audience? In fact, the question of audience is entwined in debates and discussions that have come to characterize the field of comparative and international education (Wiseman & Anderson, 2013).

Questions of Identity and Audience

Two questions, in particular, are relevant to the development and dissemination of *FIRE*. The first question asks for whom comparative and international education research should be conducted. The second asks by whom comparative and international education should be used. Each of these questions not only concerns issues of identity for those doing and using the research, but also for publications – like *FIRE* – that publish and problematize the research for the wider community of scholars and professionals.

Many who identify themselves as comparativists of education are part of the scholarly community (Epstein, 2008), which resides largely at universities worldwide with occasional forays into consulting work for educational programs, foundations, development organizations, or policy institutes (Wiseman & Matherly, 2009). Some have come into the academic side of the

¹ Comparative and International Education, College of Education, Lehigh University, 111 Research Drive, Bethlehem, PA 18015, USA; Email: fire@lehigh.edu.

field after working in schools, educational systems or development and aid organizations. Others reside wholly or mostly in the development, aid, or policy community and occasionally venture into the academic community. Whichever broad community of comparativists is highlighted, the issue of who does the research, how is it done, and who is the audience remain key questions when considering the outcomes and impact of the volumes of research being produced in the field of comparative and international education.

The question of who has the expertise and authority to conduct, report, interpret, and apply comparative and international education research has been debated in the field for decades (Epstein, 1983). The debate has, however, been more subtly cast since the 1990s as a discussion about the relevancy of theoretical approaches (Epstein & Carroll, 2005; Rust, 1991), development or research agenda (Vavrus & Seghers, 2010; Welch, 2010), and whose voice is valued or valid in either implementing or evaluating educational change (Phillips, 2011; McCormick, 2012). The challenges to the legitimacy of research authority and voice are constantly a part of the scholarly debate, but less often apparent in the comparative and international education research that is published in companion fields' literature. For example, the debate over theoretical framework, which is a focus of many comparativists in the early 21st century, is literally ignored by policymakers and educators and in companion academic fields like the economics of education where often more empirical and quantitatively-oriented work is published (e.g., Hanushek & Woessmann, 2011).

Defining for whom comparative and international education research should be conducted relies upon the various communities to determine who the stakeholders are. However, in publication outlets that identify themselves as either comparative education or comparative and international education, the consumers of the research are often scholars and academics – not field officers, project directors, or education officials and school teachers. For example, in 2011, at a PISA conference hosted by SUNY-Albany, a well-known former World Bank sector manager made a very frank, off-the-cuff statement to the audience immediately prior to her talk. She said to an audience of academics that people at the World Bank are not making policy recommendations based on what is published in academic journals like the *Comparative Education Review*. She added that they are more often influenced by what is published about education in economics journals. The point was that if comparative education researchers want to influence World Bank decision-making and policy they have a better chance of doing so by publishing in the journals that their target audience reads and that make practical recommendations about how the research informs practice. The irony is that many of those who do publish in and read the research and other material published in comparative education outlets are not those who are making policy decisions or influencing practical educational change. Instead, much or most of the published research in comparative and international education reaches the community of scholars and then stops.

In short, comparative and international education researchers are only talking to themselves most of the time. A genuine professional and scholarly concern is that those who do research and publish under the umbrella of comparative and international education are often the least likely to transform research to practice precisely because they are speaking to a community of academics rather than to the professionals and others who implement policy and practice in multilateral organizations, educational systems, schools, and classrooms worldwide. Therefore, those for whom comparative and international education research is usually conducted are scholars in the academic community, even when those in the school or development communities are identified as immediate targets for the research. This leads to a second question, which asks who uses comparative and international education. If the audience

that produces and reads the research in the field is largely an academic – not a policy or practice – audience, then how can the research be applied to real world situations and concerns? Unfortunately, it largely is not (Adamson, 2002).

Becoming Part of the Solution

Questions of identity and audience for comparative and international education research are problems to which *FIRE* intends to provide solutions rather than exacerbating the problems further. *FIRE*'s goal is to be as broad as possible in its audience both in terms of research production as well as application. The official target audiences are the academic, development, policy, and practice communities related to comparative and international education, economic and social policy making, classroom teaching and school management worldwide. It is, therefore, more likely that academic-oriented research will be submitted to *FIRE* for review rather than more policy- or application-oriented interpretations of empirical research in comparative and international education – especially as *FIRE* begins publication. But, the goal is to move beyond the imbalanced preference for more academically-oriented scholarship alone to a more balanced synthesis of scholarship by and for academics, policymakers, and educators. The *FIRE* editorial team and advisory board's goal is to balance the different audiences and uses of the research published in the journal, and to publish material that explicitly integrates scholarship with practical applications to the greatest extent possible.

In developing the format for *FIRE*, much thought and attention was paid to the structure for and platform of the journal. Open source publications are increasingly being introduced by for-profit publishing groups (e.g., *Sahara-J: Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS* published by Taylor & Francis). Although the concept of open source publishing shows evidence of becoming the next dominant wave of disseminating information to a diverse and increasingly technology-capable community, it is not foolproof. Several challenges accompany open source publishing, which the *FIRE* editorial team and advisory board recognize in order to develop and sustain *FIRE* as a viable outlet for evidence-based discussions across multiple communities interested in comparative and international education research and practice.

The first challenge is the rationale for open source publishing as a viable alternative to traditional publication platforms based in for-profit publishing houses. These traditional publishing houses are maintained by their ability to profit from the scholarship and intellectual creativity willingly provided by the community of researchers in the field of comparative and international education. As such, the frequency and quality of publication may be influenced by acquisition editors and marketing departments rather than by the scholarly, development, or professional communities producing and using the knowledge published by these for-profit entities. There are positives to traditional publishing houses as well. Paid external reviews, quality assurance accountability and the encouragement to develop ideas beyond the thought stage to the realization of a publication are only a few of the benefits of for-profit publication, but as publishing houses have moved into open source publishing, too, a fundamental characteristic of open source seems at odds with the for-profit approach. Specifically, what is "open" about a publication controlled by a for-profit publishing house? Avoiding this conundrum of for-profit decision-making is part of the reason that *FIRE* is an independently published open source journal, which is maintained as part of a university-based and university-facilitated (i.e., non-profit and intellectually free) online platform.

A second challenge is to maintain a balanced synthesis of those who produce, publish, and use the research published in *FIRE* through an open source publication, which is not sponsored by a for-profit publishing house. The problem with open source publishing is similar

to the challenge faced by distance or online education programs: credibility. The quality of a journal that publishes research and research-related reports is associated with the rigor and legitimacy of the published research within the broader communities, which it is intended to serve. The assurance of rigor and legitimacy were typically signaled by the reputation of traditional publishers. For example, three of the most widely read and referenced journals in the field of education are published by large, established and highly reputable publishing houses: (*Comparative Education Review* by Chicago University Press, and both *Compare* and *Comparative Education* by Taylor & Francis). However, the benefit of online, open source publication, is that the blind peer review process is no longer as cumbersome or unavailable as it once was, and the availability of reviewer management systems through non-profit open source publishing facilitate the production of highly rigorous, blind peer reviewed material.

A final challenge to open source publication that was carefully considered in the development of *FIRE*, is the sustainability of the publication. Without the structure and incentives provided by a for-profit publishing house driving publication of issues on a pre-determined schedule, and without contractual obligations between journal editors and publishers, the question of whether an open source journal for comparative and international education could flourish was a specific question for the editorial team and the non-profit university institution facilitating *FIRE*'s open source platform. Yet, the blessing and the curse of open source publication is flexibility to adapt to changes as the field, interest, or resources shift. Conceptually speaking, the ability to be flexible is more of an advantage than a disadvantage for *FIRE*, because it allows the publication to be more authentically responsive to, and integrated with the community of researchers, specialists, and professionals that are both the production and consumer audience for the journal.

Given these conceptual as well as more implementation-oriented concerns and resolutions, the editorial team and advisory board are proud to announce the inaugural issue of *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*. Although the character and structure of *FIRE* will continue to develop with each new issue, there are a few hallmark characteristics that make *FIRE* unique compared to other journals in the field of comparative and international education.

Hallmark Characteristics

The hallmark characteristics of *FIRE* begin with a charge to provide a forum in the full sense of the word. As part of the charge to provide a virtual public forum for comparative and international education scholarship and professional practice, *FIRE*'s platform as an open source journal facilitates the availability of research and information published in it as well as the free and widespread dissemination of it. Finally to ensure that *FIRE* remains an open access forum for the field of scholars and professionals, the editorial team and advisory board are committed to encouraging theoretical and methodological pluralism in both the content and structure of *FIRE*.

A True Forum

FIRE is indeed a forum where ideas and their interpretations can be discussed openly and with the full opportunity for debate and disagreement, as well as support and integration across otherwise misaligned or contradictory approaches and disciplinary boundaries. *FIRE*'s virtual forum provides a place where comparative and international education scholars and professionals may assemble for the discussion of questions of both shared and public interest. Beginning in ancient Rome, the forum was ideally an agenda free zone, or at least agenda

neutral. Those with varying approaches and opinions were welcome to engage in an uncensored, public debate around issues of importance to the community at large or more focused communities, in particular. For *FIRE*, this translates to a virtual public forum where those who are doing work on comparative and international research in education can bring their ideas, research, and activity reports to engage the community in discussion about issues of interest to comparative and international education scholars, policymakers, and educators alike.

To develop *FIRE* as a public forum in the field of comparative and international education, several opportunities for publication and voice exist. These opportunities range from the traditional regular research issues where unsolicited papers are received, initially reviewed by the editors, sent for external, blind, peer review, and published in their revised forms after authors make appropriate revisions. However, this is not the only option for providing a true forum for public debate and either scholarly or professional discussion. In addition, the editorial team and advisory board are committed to providing opportunities for (a) special issues that are guest edited, (b) position papers related to key topics identified and written by both scholars and professionals in the field, (c) synthetic essays that bring together multiple publications and perspectives on issues relevant to the field, (d) structured and mediated debates by representatives of contrasting theoretical, methodological, or professional perspectives, and (e) regional perspectives on shared topics and concerns to investigate the role of development and culture in comparative and international education research to practice.

These multiple platforms provide structured-yet-open ways for scholars and professionals to communicate with each other and ways for them to link research to real world and reasonably contextualized applications. An important consideration for a true forum is the issue of voice. Providing an opportunity for only one perspective to be heard is antithetical to providing a voice and an opportunity for open discussion and debate, even if that voice is one that is not as widely recognized or respected by the majority of scholars and professionals in the field. Yet, voice is not only in terms of who produces the research and information in *FIRE*; voice is also a concern regarding who has access to that research and how widely the research and information is disseminated worldwide and across communities. As has been emphasized throughout this introduction, a key concern is balance – both in research and knowledge production, as well as in research availability and dissemination.

Research Availability and Dissemination

The availability of research to communities of researchers, educators and reformers, especially in developing communities is a perennial concern in comparative and international education. Rigorous, high quality scholarship has frequently been unavailable to comparative and international education colleagues and professionals outside of development agency or NGO reports, especially in developing and marginalized communities worldwide. This is especially problematic as international and comparative education data becomes both increasingly available and sometimes necessary for legitimizing educational decision-making, policy-making, and reform (Wiseman & Baker, 2005; Bieber & Martens, 2011). The problem has typically been that information, which was available freely or electronically in open source format, was usually neither blind peer reviewed nor was it independently published apart from development or aid organizations' agendas.

Some comparative and international education publications produced by for-profit publishers have attempted to rectify this issue by making their journals and volumes available at reduced cost to documented low income communities through pre-approved processes. Unfortunately, the burden still lies on the already marginalized communities to request

specially reduced-rate access. *FIRE* addresses this problem by providing free, universal access, regardless of community, location, or background. The greatest limitation of the open access format for research availability and dissemination is the technology required to access it. There is certainly the possibility of a 'digital divide' limiting access to certain communities worldwide with inadequate or only partial technology infrastructures, but all of the libraries that would have had access to print journals provided by permission from for-profit publishers to low income or developing communities will have free and unrestricted access to *FIRE*. Even further, the open access platform allows individual researchers, scholars, educators, and other professionals access on their internet-enabled mobile devices and either personal or community computers. In other words, open access enormously widens the scope of availability and dissemination potential over traditional for-profit publishing.

To make the content of *FIRE* available as widely as possible, the journal tri-annually publishes articles, book reviews, research essays, and bibliographies. Some issues are thematic, in various ways, as outlined above. Each issue has between four and six articles. Except for book reviews and bibliographies, all manuscripts submitted to *FIRE* are blind, peer-reviewed. *FIRE*'s open source format provides both a rigorously reviewed and high quality outlet for comparative and international education scholarship, but also is managed and produced independently from any professional society or development and aid organizations' influence. This combination of accessibility, publication frequency, format variability, and credibility are meant to provide the best quality and most open access opportunities for research-oriented scholarship, professional practice-oriented reporting, and the synthesis of these two perspectives. One more aspect, however, contributes to the multiple voices represented in *FIRE*, which is theoretical and methodological pluralism.

Theoretical and Methodological Pluralism

Theoretical and methodological pluralism is welcomed and encouraged by the journal editor, editorial team, and advisory board. There is no agenda or preferred approach for manuscripts submitted to *FIRE*. The goal is to however, provide a balanced and, whenever possible, mixed method approach to comparative and international education research leading to evidence-based policy and practice. Many of the research and professional journals in or related to comparative and international education take a decidedly qualitative and culturalist approach. This is a valuable perspective that provides rare opportunities to evaluate or investigate unique and culturally contextualized situations or phenomena. However, more quantitative approaches are frequently published in journals in the disciplines. Therefore, bringing qualitative and quantitative research and multiple theoretical approaches together is a decided advantage of *FIRE*, which both respects and supports the more qualitative traditions in comparative and international education research while also valuing and incorporating the rigorous empirical approaches found in comparative and international education's sister disciplines in the social sciences.

Theoretical and methodological pluralism has been threatened at various points in the short history of the field of comparative and international education by ideologically-motivated approaches to what some claim is the field's positivist leaning. While the persistence of a dominant qualitative methodology and accompanying theoretical framework continue to characterize the comparative and international education field as a whole, the positivist critique is a recurring theme within the field. The editorial team and advisory board of *FIRE* represent multiple theoretical and methodological traditions in their own professional work, and are committed to reflecting the diversity within and across the field of comparative and

international education in *FIRE* as well. As has been highlighted earlier, a particular emphasis will be on balancing dominant and minority approaches not only through both theoretical and methodological pluralism in the published work, but also in the editorial and advisory responsibilities of *FIRE* itself.

Invitation to Contribute

As a forum for comparative and international education research and practice, a few topics are immediately recognizable for their potential to promote open discussion and debate around issues of importance to both comparative and international education scholars, development professionals, and educators. Three suggestions, in particular, are briefly described below, and the editorial team welcomes inquiries and proposals to address those topics in *FIRE*. In fact, proposals for special issues, position papers, synthetic essays, structured debates and regional comparisons of educational issues and concerns are welcome at any time. Anyone interested in proposing any of these suggested topics – or others of relevance to *FIRE*'s audience – should contact the editor at fire@lehigh.edu for more information.

Idea: International Data (Ab)Use

Recognition of and emphasis on the ubiquity of international achievement studies brings the cumbersome, contested, and often-controversial process into the realm of locally-controlled and individually-impactful education. The rapid expansion of national participation in international achievement studies has been a hallmark of educational accountability and planning worldwide beginning with the first international studies on math and science achievement in the 1960s. Since then the availability and use of international achievement studies for national education policy has exploded, and the most widely adopted studies (TIMSS and PISA) are now administered on regular cycles and include participating educational systems from every region around the world. How does international achievement study data and processes then either support or undermine educational, economic, social, and political development, and what role does culture play in the process?

Idea: Intersection of Globalization and Educational Innovation

Despite the influence of globalization on educational innovation and social entrepreneurship, there is no universal model for developing an innovation infrastructure or capacity for social entrepreneurship that benefits local-level education because these systems are so closely linked with contextualized economic demands, social norms and value systems. However, international educational innovation and public sector entrepreneurship have reoriented to reflect global educational trends such as a shared emphasis on access to quality schooling. In addition, efforts to privatize educational functions in communities and systems worldwide often rely on entrepreneurial educational initiatives. How does globalization influence the relationship between public sector entrepreneurship, especially in education, and private sector productivity or potential? What is the impact of contextualized economic demands, social norms, or value systems on public sector entrepreneurship and educationally innovative practice?

Idea: Youth, Sports, and Peacebuilding

Many non-governmental organizations are tackling difficult issues of identity, nationalism, religion, and conflict through youth athletics and sports. The combination of peace education and community activity is, in fact, often realized through sports, especially in historical conflict zones such as Northern Ireland and South Africa. Yet, the agenda of these

NGOs and the role that local communities play in developing and sustaining sports-related peacebuilding activities has been underexamined both from a research and professional practice point of view. How are youth athletics and sports associated with community health and wellness? What are the conditions and programs in youth sports that impact youths' political and civic identity or expectations?

Feedback Welcome

Finally, any new project or publication is bound to have limits or missteps, and *FIRE* is no exception. To address these limitations and correct missteps as they happen, the editorial team and advisory board welcome feedback and input from readers, scholars, or those simply interested in the topics published in *FIRE*. In particular, the format of the online journal is important for making it easy for readers to access the research published here, and to make the connection between theory and practice. Anyone with suggestions for ways to improve the accessibility and connection is welcome to contact the editorial team at fire@lehigh.edu. The goals of this journal are broad, but they focus on the importance of flexibility and adaptation to relevant changes in research goals or policy priorities in comparative and international education. The editorial team and advisory board are open to suggestions for how to improve or maintain flexibility. And, last but not least, the journal aims to promote interdisciplinary scholarship on the use of internationally comparative data for evidence-based and innovative change in educational systems, schools, and classrooms worldwide. This is a lofty goal, but one that the editorial team and advisory board think is attainable. Suggestions, recommendations, and critiques are always welcome as we strive to reach this goal. And, with the intention of empirical rigor, engagement, and transparency, we embark on this new adventure.

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