

Informed Policy-Making: The Contribution of Comparative Research in Education¹

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Introduction

The report, *Mind the gap: Educational inequalities across EU regions* (2012), notes that there is considerable variation in the nature, scale and effects of educational inequalities across EU regions (p.11.). The implication of this disparity is that balanced regional development and economic growth is hindered (p.14.), inequality between regions is compounded (p.149.), and the disparity causes a brain drain towards more advantaged regions (p.11.). Prior to this module I would have considered this statement as a factual statement of a trend in education. I would not have considered the considerable complexity in comparing education inter-regionally and internationally. This module has made me aware of strengths and weaknesses of comparative research in education resulting in comparative educational data.

In general, the strengths of comparisons include that they can flout hierarchies and question knowledge (Radhakrishnan, 2009, *passim*) and that they can make research more universal (Zima, 2011, p.16). These strengths are, however, prone to turn into weaknesses: Comparative research in education can suggest policies and practice that can address the imbalances and inequalities in education. However, comparative research in education has weaknesses. These include the “... uncritical transfer of policy and practice” (Crossley, 1999, p.251.), insensitivity to social situatedness

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(Bruner 1996), increasing emphasis on evidence based research (Goodson 1997 in Crossley, 1999, p.254.), politically inspired narrow interpretation of international league tables, undue reliance on “.. applied policy orientated studies” (Crossley 1998), and the dominance of un-contextualised action orientated perspectives dictated by outcome orientated government policy (Higgins and Rwanyange, 2005, p.8.). Crossley (1999) notes that “highly charged” debates among governmental agencies, policy-makers, funders, practioners, academics and other stakeholders call for educational research “... to be more cumulative and authoritative” (p.249.).

This essay will discuss comparative research in education with particular reference to adult learning in a European context. Drawing on module readings and wider literature the essay will suggest the importance of robust comparative research in education to ensure that the European ideal to “... make war unthinkable and reinforce democracy”³ is supported through adult learning. In a time of growing Euro-scepticism, the rise of the far right, austerity following financial collapse, the dogged nature of disadvantage that retains a high proportion of the European population in poverty and unemployment, and the relative economic and social positioning of new EU member states, the lessons arising from comparative research in education are increasingly relevant. Besatie and Broc (1990) quoted in Crossley (1999, p.254.) note that “... the health of policy making in an interdependent world must depend in part on the health of comparative education research in the broadest sense”. This essay, with a critique of the post-modern perspective on tools of international assessment, will discuss the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and the rationale for REGIONAL, a two year 7 partner Grundtvig Lifelong Learning Project. The REGIONAL project focuses on developing key toolkit for policy makers in adult learning, because, as Watson notes there is a growing criticism that “... too much educational research is of little value for policy makers” (2001 p.25.). This essay will discuss a theoretical context that will underpin the 22 month European Commission funded project that seeks to compare how adult learning policy is prepared in six European countries in response to the identified disparity in adult learning provision.

3 Schuman Declaration and the Birth of Europe: Speech of 9 may 1950. <http://www.schuman.info/9May1950.htm>. Schuman Project www.schuman.info, Bruxelles [Accessed 10 May 2014]

Comparative Education/Research in Education

Comparative education asserted itself as an educational discipline in the 1960s and early 1970s (Watson 2001, p.9.) and has become increasingly prominent in the last 20 years. Comparative education examines education within one country, or between countries, using data and insights drawn from the practises and situations in that country or countries. Vernon Mallinson notes that various attempts have been made to define comparative education since Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) and Sir Michael Sadler (1861-1943) presented the concept and concludes that it is clear that “... no satisfactory definition can be obtained until the whole purpose of education as a social force has been closely examined” (1980, p.1.). The purpose of education is an intrinsic question in comparative education as, according to Meade (1980), there can be no society of human beings without some kind of education system and the problems of education cannot be isolated from those of society as a whole (Mallinson 1980, p.7.). Mallinson notes, when we study the purpose of education we are engaging in comparative education (1980, p.10.). Watson (2001, p.28.), referencing Raivola (1985), notes “All research that seeks to offer general explanations must be comparative” and, referencing Le Than Khoi (1986), Watson (2001) suggests that “comparative education is a field of study that covers all disciplines that seek to understand and explain education” (p.28.). Arising comparative education is difficult to define but, directly or indirectly, encompasses all discussion on education.

However, society and the people who compose that society are in a constant process of change. The educational needs and demands of citizens will change over life time and life situation. The average expected level of education has increased significantly over time. Stevens and Weale (2003) state that “[p]rogress of the sort enjoyed in Europe was not observed in the illiterate societies” and quoting from Barro (1997) suggest that one extra year of education (for men) raises the economic growth rate by 1.2% per annum. As society moves from primitive to complex economies so education should change to reflect this dynamic in the context of the “national characteristic” of that society. It is the national characteristic, according to Mallinson, that is the stabilising force in society. Mallinson refers to Jeffreys (1950) suggestion that education is “... an instrument for conserving, transferring, and renewing culture” and that education’s prime function is the “... nurture of personal growth” (1980, p.2.). Mallinson also refers to Joad’s (1945) suggestion that the purpose of education is for the members of society to:

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1. Make a living
2. Play their part as a citizen of democracy
3. Develop their latent powers and faculties of their nature.

However, as Europe has modernised and post-modernised the demands of European society have changed. Increasingly education is being influenced by globalisation, marketisation, information technology and the triumph of free-market economics (Watson 2001, p.9.). As education is increasingly influenced by globalisation comparative education invites "... a systematic examination of other cultures and other systems of education deriving from those cultures" (Mallinson 1980, p.10.) and encourages comparativists to "... ever closer contact with other people and other cultures" (Mallinson 1980, p.11.). However engaging in comparative educational research is an engagement with tensions for which the researcher needs awareness and preparation. Delors (1996, p.15.) identifies such tensions and warns of the "... Tensions of the Twenty First Century" including tensions between the global and the local, the traditional and the modern, the universal and the individual, etc. Yet increasingly these tensions are being ignored especially in relation to developing and less developed countries in the name of cost effectiveness and efficiency. Watson notes that "...quick-fix ideas or principles are borrowed from one society and transferred to another without thinking of the consequences" (2001, p.11.).

According to Noah and Eckstein (1985) comparative education has four purposes:

1. To describe educational systems, processes, or outcomes
2. To assist in the development of educational institutions and practices
3. To highlight the relationships between education and society, and
4. To establish generalized statements about education that are valid in more than one country.

Majgaard and Mingat (2012, p.1.) suggest that "[a] comparative perspective is useful not only to show the range of possibilities in key education policy variables but also to learn from the best performers in the region". Mallinson (1980) referring to Hans (1949) notes that the purpose of comparative education is "... not only to compare existing systems but to envisage reform best suited to new social and economic conditions" (1980, p.1.). Mallinson expands on Hans suggesting that comparative education is also a comparison of educational philosophies evident in educational practice prevailing in that setting. It is important that comparative education is not proscribed by

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analytics especially as the output possibilities of bigdata interpretation become more available (See later discussion of PIAAC below).

Interpreters of comparative education research should also be aware of the influence of history. Sadler noted that “A national system of education is a living thing, the outcomes of forgotten struggles and difficulties of battles long ago” (Sadler 1900, pp.309-310.). All educational systems are either products of the history of that setting or are influenced by its (the education systems’) attempt to ignore that history. Cowen summarises this history with the terms “... “National temperament”, “national sentiments”, “national traditions”, “national aims/ideals”, “national character/characteristics”” (Cowen 2009, p.44.).

Disparity Debate Adult Learning

Education, according to the World Bank,

“... enhances people’s ability to make informed decisions, be better parents, sustain a livelihood, adopt new technologies, cope with shocks, and be responsible citizens, and effective stewards of the natural environment”
(World Bank Group 2011, p.11.).

According to the Center for Global Development (2002) the benefits of education include:

- Improved Health: With education people are better prepared to use health services effectively. For example, educated mothers have healthier children.
- Higher wages and economic growth: In poor countries with each additional year of schooling people earn 10% higher wages. These earnings, in turn, contribute to national economic growth. For example, no country has ever achieved rapid continuous growth without reaching an adult literacy rate of at least 40%.
- Democracy and political stability: Education supports the growth of civil society, democracy, and political stability allowing people to learn about their rights and acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to exercise them.

Although the trends in education and the composite human development index (See Gapminder for composite display of data <http://www.gapminder.org/>) show a steady increase in educational achievement in Europe ‘Rethinking Education’ (European Commission, 2012c) draws attention to significant underperformance in terms of adult learning. The report highlights that 73 million adults

(approximately 25% of the adult population) have only a low level of education and that the still low participation rates in lifelong learning across the EU is well short of the European benchmark⁴. While the EU average is 8.9% of the adult population participating in lifelong learning country figures vary from as low as 1.6% in Romania (RO) to 32.3% in Denmark (DK) as the Table 1 below illustrates.

Table 1.

Percentage of the population aged 25-64 participating in formal or non-formal learning, 2011

AT	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DE	DK	EE	EL	ES	FI	FR	HU	IE	IT	LT	LV
13.4	7.1	1.2	7.5	11.4	7.8	32.3	12	2.4	10.8	23.8	5.5	2.8	6.8	5.7	4	5
LU	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SE	SI	SK	UK	EU	HR	IS	NO	CH	TR	MK
13.4	6.6	16.7	4.5	11.6	1.6	25	15.9	3.9	15.8	8.9	2.3	25.9	18.2	29.9	2.9	3.4

Source: *Education and Training Monitor 2012b*. (See Appendix 1 for country map and abbreviation legend)

For the purposes of this essay adult learning is defined as “... the entire range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities which are undertaken by adults after a break since leaving initial education and training, and which results in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills” (Brooks 2008, p.5.). The Faure Report (Faure, 1972) and the Delors Report (Delors, 1996) suggest a learning culture that is open to all and a learning continuum ranging from formal to non-formal and informal education. Colley (2002) and the European Commission (2001), makes the distinction between “formal learning”, “non-formal learning”, and “informal adult learning”. More precisely, these reports suggest that learning is not only ‘life-long’ but also ‘life-wide’ where individuals maintain continuous learning contact in all settings (at home, at work or in the community, and including unintentional or random learning).

⁴ Among the five benchmarks defined the adult learning the objective of reaching an average of at least 12.5 % of adults participating in lifelong learning by 2010 was set. In 2009, the EU Member States agreed to raise this benchmark to 15 % to be attained by 2020 as part of the strategic framework for cooperation in education and training 2020 (ET 2020).

Tools of Comparative research

Comparative research has evolved from its “...positivistic origins in the ninetieth century” (Crossley, 1999, p.250.) to a narrative, interpretivist and socio-cultural comparative analysis supported by bigdata analysis and multimedia graphic presentation in the twenty first century.

The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is an example of a bigdata analysis tool embedded in the information collection infrastructure of, as of 2014, thirty three countries of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Twenty four countries were surveyed 2008-13, and a further nine were added 2012-16 (See Table 2).

Table 2.

Countries Participating in PIAAC

Round 1 (2008-13)		Round 2 (2012-16)
Australia	Japan	Chile
Austria	Korea (Republic of)	Greece
Belgium	Netherlands	Indonesia
Canada	Norway	Israel
Cyprus	Poland	Lithuania
Czech Republic	Russian Federation	New Zealand
Denmark	Slovak Republic	Singapore
Estonia	Spain	Slovenia
Finland	Sweden	Turkey
France	United Kingdom	
Germany	United States	
Ireland		
Italy		

PIAAC is a study conducted at household level under the direction of the OECD to assess key cognitive and workplace skills deemed necessary for successful participation in 21st century society and the global economy in each of these countries. PIAAC was developed in the context of changes in the demand for skills particularly in knowledge based societies. The skills assessed in PIAAC are literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology rich environments⁵. Technological change together with changes in the structure of employment towards jobs involving the use of information technology and away from manual labour requires a different set of skills than previously.

⁵ See http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/ENG_Brochure%20Education%20and%20Skills%20Online%20SAS_Feb%2014.pdf

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The number of households required for survey in a PIAAC participating country is 5,000, a representative sample of the adult population. In Ireland Central Statistics Office surveyed 10,500 households (approx. 10% of total households in the Republic of Ireland) on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills for the OECD. Using 2011 Census of Population data, Ireland’s PIAAC sample consisted of:

- 700 Census of Small Areas
- 10,500 households
- One Respondent/household (Random selection)

PIAAC Ireland recruited fifty survey Interviewers and four team co-ordinators to survey 10,500 households between 1st August 2011 and 24th March 2012. Using a laptop computer, PIAAC interviews were conducted in respondents’ homes following the PIAAC standardised interviewing procedures as follows:

- Capture names, age and gender of all household members
- Computerised random selection of 1 respondent per household
- Respondent replied to Background Questionnaire questions
- Respondents with Computer Experience were directed to complete a Computer Based Direct Assessment (CBA)
- Respondents without Computer Experience were directed to complete a Paper Based Direct Assessment (PBA)

DATA COLLECTION 2011-12	
☐ Surveyed Households	10,500
☐ PIAAC Requirement	5,000
☐ Completed Interviews	5,983
☐ Response Rate	72%
☐ Computer Assessments	70%
☐ Paper Assessments	30%

Source: Central Statistics Office of the Republic of Ireland

PIAAC’s extensive background questionnaire provides information on the range of other skills and personal traits that are important for success in the 21st century global economy. The questionnaire also collected information on the relationship between the respondents cognitive domains and a number of key indicators including demographic characteristics, educational attainment, employment status, and skills used at work and at home.

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There are seven key findings from the EU report published in Ireland (PIAAC Ireland 2013) that are presented as specifically relevant for EU education and training policies⁶. These are:

- 20% of the EU working age population has low literacy and low numeracy skills;
- Education and skills increase employability: This represents a challenge for the one in five unemployed who have low literacy and numeracy skills;
- The high-skilled are progressing well through adult learning, but people with low proficiency are easily caught in a 'low skills trap' as they are less likely to participate in learning activities;
- There are significant differences between individuals with similar qualifications across the EU member countries: Upper secondary graduates in some member states score similar or better than higher education graduates in others;
- 25% of adults lack the skills to effectively make use of ICTs [Information and communications technologies];
- The skills of a person tend to deteriorate over time if they are not used frequently. The gap in literacy proficiency skills between generations is more than two thirds of a proficiency level (equivalent to five years of education);
- Sustaining skills brings significant positive economic and social outcomes.

The PIAAC data results also offer comparative insights on:

- What adults can do in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments
- How certain socio-demographic characteristics are linked to skills proficiency
- How skills are used in the workplace
- How skills are developed and maintained – lost
- The relationship between skills proficiency and economic/social well-being.

Due to the methodological design chosen, the results are comparable to PISA results and those of the preceding adult skill surveys International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)⁷ and Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS)⁸.

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/piaac_en.pdf

⁷ OECD, 'Literacy in the information age - final report of the Adult Literacy Survey' (2000). <http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/41529765.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.oecd.org/edu/innovation-education/adultliteracy.htm>

Yet, with a greater emphasis on cost minimisation and on a fix-all solutions Watson (2001) suggests that one of the greatest challenges for robust comparative educational research is "...the use of decontextualized data and statistics" (p.12.). Watson (2001) clarifies this as a situation where raw data gives no information about the underlying educational philosophy about a country or educational setting, nor gives detail of the social, economic or cultural context of that setting. Watson recalls the comments of Sandler (1900) and Noah (1984) in relation to these concerns. Watson (2001, p.28.) notes that research data, upon which policies are based, are often too superficial to be really meaningful. Watson also notes that "We ... ignore ... historical perceptions and insights" of educational settings "... at our cost" (2001, p.24.).

There are concerns that bigdata based comparative surveys such as PIAAC do not contextualise learning needs, adequately accommodate indigenous knowledge history and culture, or are informed by the educational philosophy underpinning education in the setting where the information/data is collected. However, initiatives such as PIAAC and others, such as PISA, offer opportunities for comparative researchers to further interrogate and to qualitatively complement the findings of the international statistical comparative surveys. For example Usher (2013) compliments the Statistics Office of Canada (StatsCan) and the Council of Ministers of Canada (CMEC) for going "... the extra mile to not only oversample for every province ... and for aboriginal populations". Usher (2013) goes on to say "... this allows us to take some truly interesting looks at several vulnerable sub-segments of the population".

Policy & Practice Going Forward

Since Jullien in 1817 (Fraser 1964) and comparativists thereafter, the potential of compiling large, cross-national surveys of education is discussed regularly. Mayer and Benavot (2013) note that the advent of international comparative studies of performance such as the Educational Testing Service (ETS) surveys, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies of student achievement, and the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of 15-year-old pupils' scholastic achievement in mathematics, science, and reading have attracted more frequent analysis and critique commentary (Crossley 2014). Such bigdata studies have now extended to adult competencies, PIAAC, and are "... increasingly favoured by decision makers and research funders alike" (Crossley 2014, p.18.). This narrative fits neatly within the concept of new managerialism that is highly favoured by political and administrative elites that, it can be suggested, know the cost of everything but the value of nothing.

The advantage of quantitatively accumulating International comparative studies is qualified by commentators who write about their reservations of exporting a "... 'fix-it' educational technique to another country" (Cowen, R. 2009, p.315.) and uncritical comparative interrogation disregarding issues such as hegemony of the North (Barrett et al. 2011), Weltanschauungen or lived experiences and existential phenomenology (Kim 2014, p.49.), and the 'historical–philosophical–cultural and liberal humanist motif in comparative education' (coined by Kazamias, 2009, quoted in Phillips, 2014). Such reservations give rise to the terms such as Policy Borrowing and Lending in Education (See Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow. 2012). It is evident that educational policies and enthusiastically adopted educational practices based on bigdata are often too superficial to be really meaningful according to Watson (2001, p.28.). It seems that the negative side-effects of comparative approaches such as simplistic universalisms and reinforcement of hierarchies take effect. Furthermore, because of their apparent cost effectiveness, these studies can starve and marginalise other forms of research and scholarship as noted by Crossley (2014). Narratives arising from bigdata studies borrow

"...legitimacy from the predominance of economic discourse in contemporary society, from a quest to measure and evaluate performance in all walks of life... (Crossley 2014 p.20.).

Watson (2001, p.11.) suggests that "one of the main purposes of comparative education has always been that of reform ... learning for other situations ... looking comparatively, using comparative data and ideas to inform policy decisions". In comparative reform there is a double challenge of reform 'from' and reform 'to'. If the situation 'from' which reform originates is not completely reported the full implications of the reform will not be understood. Equally, if the situation 'to' which reform is applied by transference is not adequately critiqued then reform will be a misfit. Referencing Jameson (1988) Watson (2001, p.25.) refers to "... the disappearance of a sense of history" in comparative educational research and Cossley (1998), referenced in Watson (2011, p 28.), argues for greater emphasis on qualitative and ethnographic research that will rebalance the dominance of quantitative bigdata.

It is likely that traditional areas of comparative study will continue for the foreseeable future given that formal structures of education are set to remain and that the demands for education performance are still predominantly dictated by international and national structures of economic control. The advent of bigdata studies makes the transnational transference of outcomes faster and

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more likely. The almost universal adoption of league tables is evidence of this. However, the weakening of the nation state, marketization of education shadow education systems, trans-national educational provision corporations, the rise of private schools, etc. also offer opportunities for new comparative research. Watson (2001, p.25.) warns of limiting the vision of comparative research to people living in "... a perpetual present and in a perpetual change" and Crossley warns of "... what some see as a search for 'certainty' in times when this is hard to find" (2014 p.20.). The dominance of the present and illusion of the now can be a devastating weakness in comparative research. King (1979) suggest that education should be focused on uncertainty rather than certainty.

Comparative researchers have greater access to qualitative and ethnographic data from a widening range of sources which can be used effectively to qualify dominant international quantitative comparisons. The compilation of appropriately informed data on educational inequality is an important tool in addressing inequality and in the empowerment of local and regional responses to educational need. Comparative spatial studies, such as the Small States Studies, that present disparities in educational opportunities and outputs can also reflect wider inequalities impacting on marginalised populations. Comparative research needs systematic collection of data, especially qualitative and ethnographic data, at sub-regional and local level and the application of outcomes from this research to international studies.

The REGIONAL Project

The REGIONAL project originates from the need to identify and exploit factors to improve the effectiveness and impact of planned and managed adult learning throughout Europe with the overall objective of reducing the major geographic disparities that persist in educational opportunities and outcomes across and within EU regions. Rethinking Education (European Commission 2012c) draws attention to significant underperformance and identifies areas where joint actions are required in the adult learning sector. The Communication highlights that 73 million adults have only a low level of education and that there are still low participation rates in lifelong learning across the EU. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (Keogh 2009) argues that differences in adult participation in lifelong learning can be found in gaps between legislation, policy and implementation and in weak relationships between formal policy-making and practise". While there is an extensive body of literature discussing the importance of adult learning for the society as a whole and for the individuals that constitute this society, there exists very little research to date that discuss the

reasons behind “... the regional disparities in terms of adult participation in lifelong learning in the EU” (European Commission, 2012a).

The objective of REGIONAL is the development of a policy making toolkit comprising research methodology and guidelines, the country profiles and a set of case studies presenting a comparative analysis of regional policies, their formulation, implementation and funding in six countries across EU as a resource for policy makers and stakeholders actively engaged in the formulation and implementation of adult learning policies in Europe.

Conclusion

Crossley refers to the need for a “... comprehensive reconceptualization” (1999 p.249.) of the comparative and international studies field in light of the dramatic changes in factors such as greater internationalisation/globalisation, development in information and communications technology, demand for greater coherency in the research-policy-practice continuum, greater emphasis on cross disciplinary, growing tension between economic and cultural dimensions of social reform, and challenges to the dominant models of development. This essay discussed comparative education in a time of change and progressed to focus on one particular tool of international assessment, the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The essay discussed the weaknesses and the opportunities potentially available to comparative education in a time of change. Finally, the essay presented the REGIONAL project that seeks to develop a policy-making toolkit that can better address disparities in adult learning policies across European regions.

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Appendix 1:

List of abbreviations

Country abbreviations



EU	European Union	RO	Romania
BE	Belgium	SI	Slovenia
BG	Bulgaria	SK	Slovakia
CZ	Czech Republic	FI	Finland
DK	Denmark	SE	Sweden
DE	Germany	UK	United Kingdom
EE	Estonia	AC	Acceding Countries
EL	Greece	HR	Croatia
ES	Spain	CC	Candidate Countries
FR	France	IS	Iceland
IE	Ireland	MK*	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
IT	Italy	TR	Turkey
CY	Cyprus	EEA	European Economic Area
LV	Latvia	LI	Liechtenstein
LT	Lithuania	NO	Norway
LU	Luxembourg	Other	
HU	Hungary	CH	Switzerland
MT	Malta		
NL	Netherlands		
AT	Austria		
PL	Poland		
PT	Portugal		