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Michael Schemmann



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International Comparative Adult Education Research

Inhalt / Contents

Michael SCHEMMANN

International Comparative Adult Education Research.

An Introduction to the Topic. 7

I. Artikel / Articles

Marcella MILANA

Global and Comparative Adult Education Research:

A Response to John Field, Klaus Künzel and Michael Schemmann. 13

Bernd KÄPPLINGER

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants – Building on Existing Knowledge. 29

Richard DESJARDINS

A Perspective on the Use of Large Scale Efforts

in Comparative Adult Education Research. 43

Antoni VERGER

Globalization and its Main Challenges in Comparative (Adult) Education. 59

Migration for Reframing Adult Education

Mobile Times. 71

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II. Vermischtes / Miscellaneous

Carolin KNAUBER

Basic Education for Adults as a Responsibility of the Welfare State:

A Comparison of Policies in Austria, Denmark and England. 93

Timm C. FELD

Volunteer Activities in Continuing Education Facilities

– Significance, Challenges and Organizational Consequences. 113

III. Rezensionen / Reviews

Agentur für Erwachsenen- und Weiterbildung (Hg.):

Policy Making in Adult Education.

A Comparative Approach across 21 European Regions.

(Michael Schemmann). 127

Cordula Löffler & Jens Korfkamp (Hg.):

Handbuch zur Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung Erwachsener.

(Dennis Klinkhammer). 129

Verzeichnis der Mitarbeiter und Mitarbeiterinnen des Bandes /

List of Contributors. 133

Bernd Käßplinger

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants – Building on Existing Knowledge

1. *Introduction*

For decades now, research in adult education has been suffering from a number of ills (cf. Plecas & Sork 1986). Cumulative knowledge or references to previous scholars are usually not among the strengths of our undisciplined discipline, which seems to enjoy declaring paradigmatic shifts. Field, Künzel and Schemmann recently raised the following question:

“CAE [Comparative Adult Education] is faced with a core epistemological challenge. The answer to the question: ‘Why bother to research CAE?’ is no longer obvious. How can we move on to make a case for CAE that goes beyond learner participation and individual competences?” (Field, Künzel & Schemmann 2016, p. 130).

I would like to answer this question by referring to a list made by Roby J. Kidd in 1975. A Canadian by birth, he became the first Canadian to earn a doctorate in adult education and subsequently taught the first graduate course in adult education in Canada at the University of British Columbia. He was also president of the 2nd ‘Adult Education World Conference’ held at Montreal by the ‘United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’ (UNESCO). His list “why compare” reads as follows (Kidd 1975, p. 10, cited also by Reischmann 2000, p. 42):

1. to become better informed about the educational system of other countries
2. to become better informed about the ways in which people in other cultures have carried out certain social functions by means of education
3. to become better informed about the historical roots of certain activities and thus to develop criteria for assessing contemporary developments and testing possible outcomes
4. to better understand the educational forms and systems operating in one’s own country
5. to satisfy an interest in how human beings live and learn
6. to better understand oneself
7. to reveal how one’s own cultural biases and personal attributes affect one’s judgment about possible ways of carrying on learning transactions.

This list is still very modern and provides an answer to the question raised by Field, K  nzel and Schemmann, why one should bother researching CAE. It has a broader perspective than the paper by Field, K  nzel and Schemmann (2016), which is highly preoccupied with *governance* in relation to international comparative adult education research (emphasis added):

- “His emphasis on the practical value of rigorous study anticipates the later concern with comparison *as a tool of governance*.” (p. 112)
- “Educational research in its varying forms and traditions eventually became part of a complex process of intellectual, social and institutional evolution which apart from its long-term internal effects made its data available *for public governance and policy foundation*.” (p. 113)
- “A number of writers argue that the production of comparative data for benchmarking purposes *corresponds to new models of public governance*.” (p. 125)
- “The collection and publication of information about adult learning as part of a *wider process of using data for governance*.” (p. 127)
- “Research in comparative adult education has undergone a transition in purpose, from being a means of supporting the establishment of the field of study towards a *secondary role in the process of governance*.” (p. 129)

I was rather surprised at how strongly these three authors focus on governance in relation to comparative adult education. It is certainly an interesting approach to relate comparative adult education so closely to governance. And the use of the term governance, which was imported from social science, has become quite fashionable in educational science. However, when, today, the question is raised as to the use of comparative research, it is absolutely necessary and much more adequate to apply a broader perspective on comparative adult education research that goes beyond such narrow approaches. I will do that by referring to and discussing the seven points made by Kidd, which I, however, will reduce to only five.

2. *To know more about ‘others’ and to nourish mutual understanding through informed comparison*

Considering the arguments advanced by Field, K  nzel and Schemmann, it seems necessary to stress that, today, there seems to be an even greater need for comparative adult education than there was these last few decades. We are experiencing a wave of benchmarking approaches on supranational levels, but also xenophobia and movements towards isolationism by governments and their voters in many countries. Field, K  nzel and Schemmann repeat the slightly outdated Beck argument that “national regimes have not lost all relevance; but rather that in ‘second modernity’ they are diminishing in significance in the face of supra-

national forces” (2016, p. 218). However, several empirical analyses have demonstrated that developments in continuing vocational training point towards more divergence rather than towards convergence between countries (cf. K  pplinger 2011; Markowitsch, K  pplinger & Hefler 2013). I guess the paper had already been written before the Brexit or the Trump election and certainly before other nationalistic events to be expected for 2017 and in future. Are national regimes and trends of nationalism really on the decrease or are we not at present experiencing the exact opposite or at least the simultaneity of both trends? The rise of nationalism and attempts to reinforce the nation state make it even more important to stimulate profound international exchange, to compare and thus to provide a sound basis on which to learn more about other countries and their people. Comparison is a daily operation, but it can easily lead to prejudices and wrong interpretations, as long as we are lacking systematic and well-founded knowledge about the ‘other’ beyond the limits of single experiences, social media, or public media hype.

On the other hand, movements between and beyond borders have become a daily experience for many people in our globalized economies. Thus, Kidd’s goals are still relevant and perhaps even more so now:

- to become better informed about the educational system of other countries
- to become better informed about the ways in which people in other cultures have carried out certain social functions by means of education

The high levels of migration between nation states make it much more important to know more about education systems of other countries in order to be able to compare qualifications and assess competencies. Comparative adult education research ought to increase research focusing on the comparison with educational systems in Arab countries or African countries and it should make this knowledge more easily accessible. This would be very helpful in understanding and connecting to past learning trajectories of migrants and refugees. Furthermore, it would also help provide an answer to the question of what could be offered to expatriates in order for them to better understand their new environment and to be able to learn in it (cf. Robak 2012). Intercultural learning and comparative research could thus mutually support one another. This, in turn, means that we ought to encourage intercultural and diverse researcher groups that collaborate on an equal basis (cf. Reischmann 2000, p. 46).

3. *To understand history and its relevance for today and for the future*

Comparison is a method not only applied when looking at different countries and cultures, but also when analyzing the past and the present. It is important to study the past and to understand the logic behind developments that have their

origin in centuries long past. In their paper, Field, Künzel and Schemmann (2016) contributed to this approach by referring to the 200th anniversary of a comparative questionnaire by Jullien de Paris, who, however, was not concerned with adult education. The 'Annales School' with its *nouvel histoire*, which included scholars such as Braudel (1977), also focused on long-term developments, the term 'longue durée' was coined by Braudel. The 19th century saw a large amount of travelling and borrowing by very different stakeholders (cf. Schreiber-Barsch 2010, pp. 5-6), often connected to private actions outside the scope of governance, however, it can also be observed that social movements tried to influence governance and to empower certain social groups, quite often via the means of popular education (cf. Steele 2007). The comparative approaches of that time often took a form (e.g. travel reports) which we today might look at with a certain degree of rigor and vanity, not deigning to call it 'research'. In an historic manner, there is a certain danger in transferring our present understanding of 'research' to the past and thus, to sort in or sort out what suits our present understanding or our present interests best. Jullien de Paris seems presently to be a suitable predecessor to our current interest in large-scale surveys, but this interest may also be limited to a certain period in time and may well have already reached its peak. Academic scholars were involved, like the German Wilhelm Rein (cf. Vogel 1999), who tend to be wrongly forgotten today, although they had been active at an international level and first articles had been published in journals like the one edited by the 'Comenius Society' at the end of the 1890s which quite often dealt with education abroad, or with national developments that referred to foreign practices, and which discussed what would be useful to borrow (cf. Vogel 1994; Seitter 2000). Comparative operations had started in different ways in many countries well before the 1890s, with the focus on borrowing, lending, and competition as major interests in a historical period also characterized by globalization and colonization. It is also important to be aware and critical of colonial and post-colonial trajectories. Jullien de Paris became a prominent figure in comparative education mainly after the 2nd World War and subsequent to the planification approaches. It is certainly arguable whether positivism and planification are still adequate approaches today. On the other hand, it is interesting to critically observe the trends and interests which lead to scholars becoming prominent or experiencing a renaissance.

4. *Borrowing and its limitations*

Many comparative researchers today are rather skeptical of borrowing and doubt whether transfer can be made to work (cf. Waldow 2016). They point out that we are hardly ever dealing with a one-to-one transfer, and that normally major changes are made when transferring something from one socio-political context to another. This perspective with its critical awareness is important. It partly supports the observation that large-scale data is often produced and used not by

a number of genuine comparative researchers but rather by economists associated with the 'Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development' (OECD) with little awareness of the pitfalls of comparative research. To compare profoundly means much more than producing questionnaires, constructs, and league tables with benchmarking approaches or statistically sophisticated, but theoretically weakly supported regression analysis. Perhaps, in this context, the heritage of Jullien de Paris with its positivistic euphoria is rather a burden, like this quote indicates as well:

"Education, like all other arts and sciences, is composed of facts and observations. It thus seems necessary to produce for this science, as has been done for the other branches of knowledge, collections of facts and observations arranged in analytical tables, so that these facts and observations can be compared and certain principles and definite rules deduced from them, so that education may become an almost positive science." (Palmer 1993, p. 171)

An analysis based on the original questionnaire by Jullien de Paris would have encountered quite substantial problems when deducing the envisaged definite rules and falling short to his claims.

Contrarily, a critical position towards naïve comparisons is not something new. It has been described as early as the 1900s, in a rather metaphorical manner:

"We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant." (Sadler, cited in: Hayhoe & Mundy 2008, p. 6)

This critique was put forward by the prominent Sadler, who argued against simple study visits and a naïve process of borrowing and lending. This criticism is of course still valid and the 'educational tourism' practiced by administrations, practitioners, the media, but also by several researchers subsequent to PISA is a good example of such never ending attempts to discover educational miracles abroad ('best practice') and to bring them home. Despite the academic disaffection towards such approaches, borrowing and lending has happened in the past and certainly will continue to do so. For example, the Danish folkehøjskole and the British university extension constitute early institutionalizations of popular adult education and as such were discussed comparatively (cf. Steele 2008). Especially during the second half of the 19th century, visitors from different European countries came to look at these institutions and to discuss them. The German 'Volkshochschule' is in many respects a unique merger of ideas pertaining to the Danish 'folkehøjskoles' and the British university extension, the institutionalization of which was accompanied by national struggles over interpretations (cf. Vogel 1994; Seitter 2000; Steele 2007). There is a body of knowledge and evidence which makes clear that the interest in studying foreign educational practices is often rather rooted in domestic realities and less in a genuine interest in

practices abroad. In his seminal work, Zymek (1975) analyzed scholarly journals in the field of education. He found a clear majority of contributions that justify internal development by practices found abroad or that use foreign activities as a means to support internal positions. Vogel (1994), too, in his analyses of scholarly references to Grundtvig and the Danish 'folkeh  jskole', stressed the variety and heterogeneity of interests apparent in the German discussion, same as did Seitter (2000). References to the 'folkeh  jskole' as described by Vogel have changed a lot over time and have always been closely connected to home affairs, national discourses and power struggles. The concept of the 'reference society' ('Referenzgesellschaft') is well known to comparative research and used quite often (cf. Waldow 2016). Some countries or some interest groups tend to follow and to analyze the developments in some societies more than in others. For example, Scandinavian societies are often chosen as reference point because of their good educational results, but also because of their social approaches which seem to be attractive to modest socialist or social democratic positions. The Anglo-Saxon world, on the other hand, is often of interest to liberal or neo-liberal forces, whereas the United States seems to be interested solely in the United Kingdom as a reference society (Schriewer et al. 1998). South Korean scholars studied German unification as a possible blueprint for a future Korean reunification. For decades, Germany has been promoting its dual system concerning exportation to other countries such as India. Contrarily, the very good PISA- or PIAAC-performances by many Asian societies are mostly rejected¹ by the Western world and explicitly not accepted as reference point. This is justified by referring to the very high pressure on learners and to its social costs, such as the high suicide rates. Waldow (2016), on the other hand, recently pointed out that, interestingly enough, there are not only positive reference societies, but also negative ones, evident in positions stating that these countries should not be studied. Considerations to borrow from these countries or to even carry out transfers are rejected because of vested interests and prejudice. The production of positive and negative reference societies is used by both sides in order to strengthen strategic arguments for and against transfer.

Overall, certain patterns emerge when looking at the selection of countries which are more or less likely to be studied or to be compared with others. Comparative analysis is often no naive activity. It is not only promoted by interests developing out of contact with foreign practices, rather comparisons are frequently promoted by existing internal vested interests, seeking argumentative support and empirical proof from external practices constructed as blueprints for national plans and intentions. For comparative research, this holds the substantial danger that schol-

¹ The so-called 'Tiger Mother' Amy Chua and her book on the very eager Chinese approach to education was rather criticized and not supported in the United States or in Western Europe, although the book is not just an appraisal of Chinese education.

ars may be tempted to read and interpret foreign practices from a perspective predefined and thus limited by what they expect to find or want to justify through these external practices. Scandalizing and exaggeration seem to secure public attention for research results. Yet this may lead to such unbalanced analyses or interpretations that even scholars from the countries analyzed may well wonder what has been made of their realities.

Scholars are not generally immune to certain social constructivist ideas which influence their perception of foreign practices (cf. Reischmann 2000, p. 46). Critical ethnologists have been aware of that at least since after the publication of Malinowski's diaries. Professional comparative adult education research should at least sometimes try to disclose the interests behind borrowing something from abroad and reveal why hidden behind this act, there is often an argument originating from domestic realities or home affairs. Such an approach could also involve a governance-critical perspective and the deconstruction of the different interests that lead to the promotion of certain forms of governance instead of others.

5. *To understand oneself better*

Kidd (1975, p. 10) mentioned these additional arguments for CAE:

- to better understand the educational forms and systems operating in one's own country
- to better understand oneself
- to reveal how one's own cultural biases and personal attributes affect one's judgment about possible ways of carrying on learning transactions.

These arguments may look strange to beginners in CAE; because CAE could be understood as a tool to simply learn more about others. On the other hand, it is old wisdom that dealing with 'the other' also reveals a lot about us. Thus, for example, they say Goethe once said that we only truly know our own language once we have learned a second one. This is something many 'international writers' lack, when they only know the 'Anglophone international' (Fejes & Nylander 2014) and do not understand the indigenous and often non-translatable meaning of specific terms. Generally, CAE and international research need to be critically reflected in order to reveal any unequal or hidden mechanisms of knowledge production within 'invisible colleges' (Larsson 2010).

The vast majority of great thinkers were also great travelers. They reported more or less systematically about their learning experiences abroad and later often discussed them in relation to domestic realities. For example, the German Raumer, who played an important role in the foundation of public libraries in Berlin and throughout Germany, connected his efforts literally to a steam boat

cruise in the United States, where he travelled in the early 19th century. There he seems to have discovered that ordinary Americans were more educated than Germans, a discovery he related to the establishment of public libraries. It might be interesting to prove this learning experience through historical analysis to see whether it is 'true' or whether it was merely a strategic argument used by Raumer. The methodological operation of comparing has a lot to do with our own world views, our experiences, and our culturally bound perceptions. Bad comparative researchers do not reflect their own position. Good comparative researchers, on the other hand, are aware that they will only ever touch some small part of reality, as in the East-Asian tale of the elephant and the blind men (cf. Tarc 2013; K  pplinger et al. 2015). What we perceive is shaped by our pre-concepts, our resources, and our varying access to reality. Once we reflect on that professionally, we can perhaps learn more about ourselves and our own context than about the 'other'. Engaging in comparative research can make you more modest and help you understand the dynamics and logics at work in your home country and in our own minds. Our perspectives will broaden once we start comparing in a reflective and critical way. The method of travelling to and visiting other places is no longer a prominent one today compared to large-scale surveys. In order to really understand contexts, however, it may still be indispensable and undervalued, although methodological reflection and discussion are, of course, also needed in combination with this method in order to avoid falling into the trap of perceiving Potemkin's villages as being representative of all the rest. It is an easy mistake to idealize practices abroad.

6. *L'art pour l'art*

There is a certain flaw in the question 'why bother to research CAE?' raised by Field, K  nzel and Schemmann (2016). Is there really a need to justify it and to defend ourselves? Is there not rather a need for non-comparative researchers to justify their nationally or regionally limited scope? Researchers working in CAE will surely sometimes experience a certain reluctance towards other colleagues who are more regionally or nationally oriented (cf. Reischmann 2000, p. 48). It has often been criticized that international co-operation is time consuming and that the results might not justify this commitment. Demands have been raised that researchers ought to decide whether they prefer to assist policy-makers of the European Union or whether they want to engage in national theoretical debates (Wittpoth 2000, S. 6). It seems highly questionable whether this is a sound and reasonable alternative. A Nordic colleague once told me that an (older) German colleague had said to him sadly: 'When I'm speaking in German I'm intelligent, but in English I'm stupid.' Personal learning trajectories of scholars may be a major factor in either the acceptance of or the reluctance towards international comparative research. The frequently observed opposition against CAE may well be a strategic move by those not engaged in this field, who perhaps are

insecure or simply not capable of going beyond their own national communication skills and contexts. This is understandable, but does it result in a need to justify oneself when doing research in CAE? In addition, there actually is a certain advantage and supportive thrust in the new governance regimes of universities that are in favor of internationally active researchers.

Kidd (1975) also listed the following argument in favor of CAE: 'to satisfy an interest in how human beings live and learn'. Even more important than any strategic argument, it is a genuine human interest to travel and to get to know the 'other'. Do we really need to justify that? I think the reasons given above provide good justifications; however, comparative researchers should be confident enough to do their work without feeling the need to defend themselves. Comparative research is evidently much more necessary than some often rather short-lived and hardly sustainable research agendas designed by governments, regardless of the money invested there, which rather seems to shape the research interests of many (nationally or regionally) active scholars.

7. *Conclusion*

There are many good reasons to research in CAE. I cannot identify an increased need to justify CAE today, since it obviously even seems to be growing in importance. The points made by Kidd a long time ago are still helpful. It is necessary to go beyond a mere focus on governance. It is a sweeping and historically inaccurate claim to say:

"Those who are promoting CAE have also changed, from social movements and adult education movements in the early years through university departments in the period of institutionalization to international government bodies in the present." (Field, K  nzel & Schemmann 2016, p. 129)

Even during the early phases many scholars were already involved, as is made clear once we do not analyze the early developments with our present-day understanding of science and research. And social movements or non-public interest groups are still important today. The 'Sadler reports' form part of a broader development in the comparison of countries at the turn of the 20th century (cf. Vogel 1994; Seitter 2000). The phase of the 1960s onwards was heavily influenced by the UNESCO agenda as well as by the Cold War, and not only by university departments. An interesting side issue in this context is why the UNESCO has lost and the OECD has gained ground in comparative adult education research (cf. K  pplinger 2015). And today it is certainly not only international government bodies who support CAE, rather, there are also scholars who work independently or even in opposition to government bodies (cf. Egetenmeyer 2014; Reischmann 2000). Such research includes, for example, comparative approaches focusing on the comparison of diverse practices in the

planning of teaching programs in different countries (cf. K  pplinger & Sork 2014), on understanding the dynamics of international academic disciplines and societies (cf. Fejes & Nylander 2014, K  pplinger 2014, 2015) or on revealing the limits of national skills strategies in enterprise-based training (Markowitsch, K  pplinger & Hefler 2014). Such research trajectories were ignored in the paper by Field, K  nzel and Schemmann.

All in all, we are ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’, as the popular proverb would like to remind us. It is an interesting move to refer to Jullien de Paris, despite the fact that he did not actually do any research in adult education. Many other scholars certainly deserve to be mentioned and perhaps they deserve even more attention than those who were actually concerned with adult education. I have mentioned but a few names here (e.g. Raumer, Rein, Kidd), pertaining rather to the German context. Many, many more people from Anglophone and non-Anglophone backgrounds would have to be added. Careful attention should be given to widening the scope of CAE beyond its focus on mainly the Western world (Tarc 2013; K  pplinger et al. 2014; Hayhoe & Mundy 2008). The method of study visits or case studies needs to be given as much attention as large-scale surveys, although the latter seem to have become sometimes more fashionable. They could mutually support one another when done soundly and it should be the researchers’ responsibility to go beyond governance interests. It is important to disclose vested interests using CAE as a means to put forward internal agendas by referring to contexts from abroad for merely argumentative reasons. This implies critical self-reflection with respect to our perceptions and agendas as researchers. CAE provides many opportunities to understand ourselves better and perhaps to further develop as individuals. Perhaps it would even allow us to recall past motivations like peace education or intercultural understanding, which seem to be considered unsuitable by some of today’s research and researchers, who perceive and construct themselves as objective and value-free. The latter is an illusion, I would say. Perhaps an analysis of the past would show us that science, society, politics, and movements were often deeply interwoven configurations within processes of modernization (cf. Salling Olesen 2014)? Is this so different today?

From my point of view, the “moorlands of lifelong learning” (Field, K  nzel & Schemmann 2016, p. 129) have never been a neatly defined field of adult education, but rather there has always been a diversity of different fields or rhizomes existing simultaneously at regional, national or international level. We have to be just as careful when comparing different countries as we have to be when comparing the past with the present. Field, Schemmann and K  nzel (2016) have provided a stimulating paper, although I disagree in many respects with their brave brief analysis and sometimes too far-reaching claims (e.g. erosion of nation states, change of the promotion of CAE from social movement to international

government bodies, Jullien de Paris as an important ancestor even for adult education researchers). Referring to other still relevant and stimulating antecedents, such as Kidd, who provided us with a sound framework, helps a lot to widen our horizon. We should make (more) use of relevant past giants in order to expand our vision beyond theirs and we should avoid forgetting past knowledge, because this could result in the reinvention of things already known (cf. Reischmann 2000, p. 39). And perhaps we will then also discover how limited our own perspectives are if they remain bound to present day influences.

By the way, Kidd (1975, p. 5), too, mentioned Jullien de Paris in his seminal paper: “Among western scholars, Jullien is an excellent choice, although with better information we might have preferred an Indian, a Chinese or a Persian of several centuries before.” A still relevant thought to widen our ethnocentric perspectives especially in CAE and an incentive to search for lost giants and knowledge in other cultures and other historical periods. It is likely that, in a few decades, comparative adult education research will be defined much more by Iranian, Indian or Chinese scholars and that they will search for and teach us about their past giants as yet unknown to us.

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