

Comparative Education for Africa: Perspective from Students' Perceptions of and Motivations for Studying Comparative Education

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Abstract

In view of the North-American-Western European hegemony in education and contemporary curriculum theory, which prescribes an input by students as clients, the authors from two African countries, South Africa and Tanzania, surveyed their students about what they expected to gain from a Comparative Education course, and contrasted that with the expectations of students of a European country, Ireland. The comparison revealed startling divergences. Whereas the Irish students' main expectation was that their Comparative Education course would prepare them for a teaching job abroad, the South African students looked to their Comparative Education course to enlighten the domestic education reform project and to improve their teaching strategies, while the Tanzanian students had a purely intellectual view of the subject— wanting Comparative Education to contribute to their intellectual moulding and development. The authors relate these differences to contextual differences between Ireland, South Africa and Tanzania, and conclude that contextual factors should be taken into account, when developing Comparative Education courses for universities in Africa.

Introduction

Since James E. Russel, in the spring of 1900, at Columbia University, taught the first ever Comparative Education course in the world (Steiner-Khamsi, 2000), Comparative Education has spread to become a staple of university education courses all over the world (Wolhuter *et al.*, 2008). While Comparative Education had had a visible presence in the northern hemisphere universities by the mid-twentieth century (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2008), in the South, including Africa, it is of fairly recent origin, dating back to as

recently as the 1960s (*cf.* Anangisyse, 2008; Muganda & Alphonse, 2006; Wolhuter *et al.*, 2007). A basic theorem of Comparative Education is that societal contexts shape education. This could also be applied to the field itself. Cowen (1990:333) states, "... the academic place of Comparative Education and its relevance are deeply embedded in local structures, contexts and cultures, and this societal contextualisation leads to different comparative educations in different parts of the world". In view of this, as well as the northern hemispheric hegemony in education (Altbach, 1982; Arnove, 1982) over Africa in particular (Wolhuter, 2004), there is a need for Comparative Education courses to be functional and maximally relevant to the African context. One basic building block for such a Comparative Education should be students' expectations of Comparative Education. The aim of this research was to determine what Comparative Education students in two African countries, Tanzania and South Africa, expected from their Comparative Education courses, in order to make explicit the role of the Africa context in shaping these expectations and to contrast them with the expectations of students in the Republic of Ireland.

Contextual Background: Comparative Education at Universities in Tanzania, South Africa, and Ireland and the United Kingdom

Tanzania:

Comparative Education, as a field of study in Tanzania, dates back to the 1960s. Its beginnings have close links with the establishment of the Department of Education at the University College of Dar es Salaam in 1964, then a constituent college of the University of East Africa (Anangisyse, 2008:304), when the course *Contemporary Problems of Education in East Africa* was being taught. Since then, there have been different courses of a comparative nature and character. Chronologically, the first was *Contemporary Education in East Africa*, taught in the early 1970s. This course dealt with educational developments in the then three East African countries—Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. During the same period there was also a course *Comparative Education*, introduced alongside *Contemporary Problems of Education in East Africa*. Eventually, *Philosophy of Education - Comparative Practice* was introduced at this institution. This course addressed the elements of philosophy and education in the light of case studies drawn from several selected countries—the United States, the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), China and Cuba. The *Development and Trends in Teacher Education* also featured as a course in teacher education and it took on a Comparative Education character. With the establishment of the Faculty of Education in the 1988/89 academic year at the University of Dar es Salaam, another course entitled *Education in Developing Countries* was created.

Since then *Comparative Education* has been maintained at the University of Dar es Salaam. Recently, a new course, *International and Comparative Education*, developed from the amalgamation of the *Education in Developing Countries* and *Contemporary Education in East-Africa* courses, was introduced in the 2000s. This is an elective undergraduate course for student teachers. The course also attracts international students who come to the University of Dar es Salaam on exchange programmes. So far, the course has had students from the United States, Finland and Japan. The following excerpt best summarises the course's focus:

The course looks at the relationship between education and national development from a comparative perspective. The relationship between education and development will be examined using various theories of development—modernization, human capital, modes of production, Marxist and neo-Marxist (University of Dar es Salaam, 2005:212).

At the post-graduate level, the Comparative Education course is compulsory for all students in the Masters of Education (.) programme. Since its inception in the MA.Ed curriculum, the course has been offered to Tanzanian students and those coming other countries such as Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

South Africa:

Comparative Education gained a foothold in South African universities during the 1960s (Bergh & Soudien, 2006). It enjoyed not only prominence in both undergraduate and, especially, postgraduate education courses, but also had an institutional infrastructure (in terms of the departments of Comparative Education and staff exclusively preoccupied with Comparative Education), paralleled in very few places in the world (Wolhuter, 1994). In the post-1994 restructuring of teacher education, however, Comparative Education fell on hard times (Wolhuter, 2006; Wolhuter *et al.*, 2007:131-132). The pressures of financial stringency and streamlining, which saw the collapse of small departments into bigger and more economical schools, as well as the restructuring of teacher education around skills rather than academic disciplines as basic units of teacher education courses, have taken their toll. The latter indicates the influence of the forces of global marketing and neo-liberalism, which led to a much greater decline in Comparative Education in teacher education in Western countries. Kubow and Fossum (2007, p. 17) highlight that the decline has been brought about, in particular, by

the accountability movement, and the attendant market demands to produce a steady supply of teachers, (which) has resulted in a teacher preparation

curriculum that is limited in duration and scope and that is increasingly shaped by externally imposed standards and characterised by measurable teacher ‘competencies’”. Teaching is increasingly being considered a skills-based profession, in which teachers use competences to bring about pre-specified “learning outcomes”.

Comparative Education is not considered to be a mainstream subject in the development of competences and consequently it becomes sidelined (Schweisfurth, 1999; McGrath, 2001; Crossley and Watson, 2003).

In the situation portrayed in the previous paragraph, a few universities in South Africa still offer Comparative Education modules under that name. The trend is that Comparative Education is not studied *per se*, but subsumed in a variety of themes deemed necessary for teacher education. Such themes in current South African universities’ teacher education programmes include: Structure of education systems; principles and foundations of outcomes-based education; the South African education system; the education system and school management; educational change; policy studies and governance in education; education system planning; educational policy studies; policy issues in South African education; civic education; democracy and education; human rights education; the context of schooling; justice, democracy and education; and issues in education (Weeks *et al.*, 2006).

Ireland:

Comparative Education in teacher education never achieved mainstream status in the five colleges occupied with teacher education. In two of the three colleges, student teachers complete a three-year honours B.Ed degree. In the three smaller colleges, students gain a B.Ed degree at the end of their three-year programme, with the option of upgrading it to an honours degree, if they complete a year-long programme at Trinity College. Unlike many other Western countries, Comparative Education never developed mainstream status as a subject in these teacher education programmes, though it has been taught as an elective from time to time in the honours B.Ed course at Trinity College and at one of the other colleges. Its being taught depends upon the availability of a lecturer with an interest and background in Comparative Education. International and comparative elements can also be found in a number of Foundational courses such as Philosophy of Education. In this course, students would study education philosophers from other countries and in Curriculum Development, the curricula of the other countries would be referred to. It needs to be pointed out, however, that as lecturers in these courses do not have a background in Comparative Education, the courses are not taught using the comparative conceptual tools and thus

they do not develop a students' international perspective or make comparisons Concerning the question as to what course developers had in mind when they developed the Comparative Education courses in these countries, only the following could be stated. The paucity of research on the teaching of Comparative Education means that the researchers can only surmise as to the answer. However, historical inertia (simply building on what has been taught in the past and elsewhere in the world) and northern hemispheric hegemony (as explained elsewhere in this article) would probably have been powerful factors.

Method

The research instrument used was a questionnaire consisting of closed and open-ended questions. First, the respondents were asked to indicate what they knew about Comparative Education. Second, they were asked why they wanted to study Comparative Education, and to rank the following nine reasons, in order of importance:

- it is exciting,
- helps me to get a teaching job abroad,
- it is interesting,
- it is worthwhile,
- to gain knowledge of other education systems,
- broaden my mind/personal development,
- to improve my teaching,
- to compare my own country's education system with those of others, and
- to compare various education systems

There was also an open section that had space for the respondents to comment on the above, and where necessary to add other reasons.

Third, the respondents were asked to indicate what they thought they would learn during the course, and to rank the following six in order of importance:

- teaching strategies from other countries,
- how to get a teaching job abroad,
- different cultures,
- education systems,
- comparison between systems of education, and
- broaden general education knowledge

In this case also, there was space for the respondents to comment on the above, and to add other motivations where necessary.

The questionnaire was completed by a cohort of B.Ed honours students at the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, in South Africa, at the outset of their

Comparative Education course. In South Africa, an honours degree is a postgraduate programme, between a bachelors and masters degree. The cohort was made up of part-time students, mostly experienced teachers who wished to enhance their qualifications (professional development) to enable them to become school principals. There were 64 students in the class and all of them completed the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was also administered to undergraduate students at the University of Dar es Salaam at the beginning of the course *International and Comparative Education*. The course is taught in the second semester. In all, 68 students filled in the questionnaire.

A cohort of Irish students, final-year Bachelor of Education students, completed the questionnaire at the start of their Comparative Education course, an elective course at Trinity College, University of Limerick. The entire class of 25 students completed the questionnaire.

The research instrument employed was based upon research already done by one of the researchers in probing her students in her Comparative Education class at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland, regarding what they expected from the course. As such this was a tested instrument. She and the author from South Africa are currently the only scholars internationally focusing on the teaching of Comparative Education. They have decided to do a comparative study between Irish and South African students and to involve a research collaborator from Tanzania, who has had a longstanding research collaboration relationship with the South African researcher.

Results

Students' knowledge about the field of Comparative Education

In the South African class, 4.1 per cent of the students maintained that they knew nothing about Comparative Education. Another 89 per cent saw it as the study of other national systems of education—their different methods, styles and structures; 33 per cent of the respondents maintained that it involved studying and/or using the best systems, practices and policies in order to improve the South African education system. Amongst the Tanzanian students, 72 per cent of the respondents viewed Comparative Education as a course of study comparing and contrasting educational systems from different parts of the world. In Ireland, 75 per cent of the respondents indicated that they “did not know much” about Comparative Education, while 42 per cent indicated that they knew it was about studying other systems of education—“their different methods, styles and structures”.

Reasons for studying Comparative Education

The student respondents were asked to identify the reasons which made them take the Comparative Education course. The responses of the South African, Tanzanian and Irish students are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3, respectively:

Table 1: *Reasons for Studying Comparative Education by Order of Responses of South African students*

Reason	Rank-order								
	(1 – most important – 6 least important)								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Percentages of responses								
Exciting	0	14	0	14	0	7	18	32	15
To help me find a teaching job abroad	4	0	0	11	0	4	8	19	54
Interesting	0	8	11	11	8	19	26	13	4
Worthwhile	8	0	0	15	4	23	26	12	12
Knowledge of other education systems	19	26	19	22	11	3	0	0	0
Broaden mind/personal development	11	26	15	30	18	0	0	0	0
To improve my teaching	12	18	12	27	15	12	0	0	4
To compare our education system with others	15	12	23	27	4	12	7	0	0
To compare various education systems	8	27	15	19	8	8	4	11	0

Table 1 shows that South African students appear motivated to study Comparative Education because they expect to gain knowledge from other education systems that could benefit their own education system by making comparisons, which would finally help them to improve their own teaching.

Table 2: *Reasons for Studying Comparative Education by Order of Responses of Tanzanian Students*

Reason	Rank-order								
	(1 – most important – 9 least important)								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Percentages of responses								
Exciting	0	0	0	0	0	5.5	22.0	16.6	55.9
To help me to get a teaching job abroad	5.5	0	0	11.0	5.5	22.5	5.5	33.9	16.6
Interesting	5.5	0	0	0	5.5	22.0	16.6	33.8	16.6
Worthwhile	0	5.5	0	5.5	16.6	28.2	16.6	11.0	16.6
Knowledge of other education systems	55.9	16.6	22.0	5.5	0	0	0	0	0
Broaden mind/personal development	28.2	11.0	16.6	16.6	16.6	5.5	0	0	5.5

To improve my teaching	5.5	0	0	16.6	33.8	22.0	16.6	0	5.5
To compare our education system with others	22.0	50.5	11.0	11.0	0	0	5.5	0	0
To compare various education systems	22.0	11.0	32.4	16.6	18.0	0	0	0	0

Table 2 shows that Tanzanian students similarly expect that their Comparative Education course would impart knowledge of other education systems and provide a comparison of their own education system with that of others. In this regard, they expect to gain the same thing from this course as their South African counterparts; however, unlike the South African students, the Tanzanian students also see this knowledge as a means of broadening their own minds or contributing to their personal development.

Table 3: *Reasons for Studying Comparative Education by Order of Responses of Irish Students*

Reason	Rank-order								
	(1 – most important – 6 least important)								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Percentages of responses								
Exciting	0	0	0	0	12	18	6	29	35
To help me find a teaching job abroad	35	6	6	29	6	6	6	6	0
Interesting	30	6	18	6	12	12	0	6	10
Worthwhile	0	23	0	0	18	18	6	23	12
Knowledge of other education systems	12	23	18	23	0	9	9	0	6
Broaden mind/personal development	23	12	23	0	12	6	6	6	12
To improve my teaching	0	12	6	6	23	0	0	18	35
To compare our education system with others	0	12	6	23	6	23	12	18	0
To compare various education systems	6	6	24	12	18	12	10	0	10

Tables 1, 2 and 3 illustrate that the motivations for studying Comparative Education differ remarkably. Table 1 shows that South African students had purely utilitarian motives for studying Comparative Education. Two main factors emerged as motivating South African students to study Comparative Education: their yearning for “knowledge of other systems” and their need “to compare the South African education system with others” (first and second most important reason), in order to improve the South African education system. Information obtained from the open section of the questionnaire revealed the following reasons for studying Comparative Education: “To compare education systems and improve our own”, “Very important to evaluate one’s own system against other systems of the world”, “To be able to improve our system”, “We must learn whether we are on track with the rest of the world”, and “To find out what is wrong with our system”. They were also motivated by the desire to improve their own teaching skills: “From the different strategies I can learn strategies to

improve my own strategy”, and “I need to transform as a teacher because our education system is undergoing transformation”.

Amongst Tanzanian students, “knowledge of other systems” emerged as the primary motivation, followed by “broadening mind/personal development” and “comparing various education systems”. This hierarchy was reiterated in the open-ended section, as the following responses reveal: “I want to know how education provided in a certain country is different from ours”, “I want to understand the educational background of different countries in the world”, and “To help me to compare how education is provided or offered in different geographical locations”.

For the Irish students, the course would qualify them to teach abroad, which also emerged as the most popular reason for studying Comparative Education. Indeed, the course was considered to be “very informative for finding jobs and what to expect” and “it will help me if I go abroad as I will have studied other systems and cultures”. The other factors that motivated Irish students to study Comparative Education, in order of importance, are: Comparative Education is interesting; it broadens the mind/personal development; knowledge of other systems; to compare various education systems (“very interesting to compare and contrast different systems – what works and what does not work”); and to compare the Irish education system with other systems, as well as to improve their teaching.

What Students expected from learning Comparative Education

The responses of the South African, Tanzanian and Irish students are presented in Tables 4, 5 and 6, respectively.

Table 4: *What South African Students Expect from Comparative Education*

Category	Rank-order					
	(1 – most important – 9 least important)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Percentages of responses					
Teaching strategies from other countries	22	19	19	39	7	3
How to get a teaching job abroad	0	0	0	4	15	81
Different Cultures	0	30	15	15	30	11
Education Systems	19	37	19	19	6	0
Comparisons between systems of education	30	37	15	15	4	0
Broaden education knowledge	11	26	7	22	26	4

This table shows that South African students expect to compare various education systems and to learn about the teaching strategies of other countries.

Table 5: *What Tanzanian students Expect from Comparative Education*

Category	Rank-order (1 – most important – 9 least important)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Percentages of responses					
Teaching strategies from other countries	11.0	0	11.0	50.5	22.0	5.5
How to get a teaching job abroad	0	0	0	0	33.0	67.0
Different Cultures	5.5	11.0	11.0	22.0	39.5	11.0
Education Systems	22.0	22.0	33.7	16.6	0	5.5
Comparisons between systems of education	44.0	44.0	12.0	0	0	0
Broaden education knowledge	56.0	22.0	22.0	5.5	0	5.5

The Tanzanian students, like their South African counterparts, also expect to learn about other education systems and to compare those systems, but the final outcome—for them--was a broadening of their minds.

Table 6: *What Irish Students Expect from Comparative Education*

Category	Rank-order (1 – most important – 9 least important)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Percentages of responses					
Teaching strategies from other countries	6	12	0	18	35	29
How to get a teaching job abroad	23	0	23	18	18	18
Different Cultures	12	18	29	23	12	6
Education Systems	12	18	12	23	23	12
Comparisons between systems of education	23	41	6	12	18	0
Broaden education knowledge	23	12	29	6	12	18

The data in Table 4 reveal that South African students also ranked comparison between education systems the highest, with teaching strategies from other countries (which is absent from the reasons cited by Tanzanian students) second. Their views contained in the open section emphasised “comparisons between education systems” for the betterment of their own education system. Thus for them, Comparative Education has a utilitarian role, that is to enlighten the South African education reform drive, and to gain better teaching strategies from other countries.

The Tanzanian students’ expectations regarding what they would learn in the course were connected to their motivation for studying Comparative Education. Table 5 reveals that Tanzanian students expected to study education systems, and that the

course would broaden their education knowledge. These were reiterated in their comments in the open section: "...expect to learn about ... changes in education systems ...", and "How different countries design their curricula, teaching materials, philosophies, objectives, evaluation and measurements, etc".

The Irish students' greatest expectation is that Comparative Education will assist them in their quest for jobs abroad: "To understand different ways of finding and applying for jobs". They also expected to compare education systems "To see what works and why", "to help us understand their systems and to improve our own". Furthermore, they expected their Comparative Education course to broaden their education knowledge: "Why systems are set up in this way and about the influence of the environment" and "It shows that there are many different ways to teach, our own system is not the only one or even the best. All systems have good parts and bad parts that can be drawn upon". Finally, they expected to learn about different cultures: "To learn more about people and their ways, especially if you have a foreign child in your class", "Interesting to see how culture influences education"; "As our own culture is becoming more diverse it prepares us to deal with it and what to expect, e.g. children with little English or racism".

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The expectations of the South African, Tanzanian and Irish students are quite divergent. South African students look to Comparative Education courses to gain knowledge of other education systems to improve their own education system and their own teaching. Irish students, on the other hand, see this course as a passport to teaching positions abroad, while Tanzanian students see Comparative Education as a mind-broadening course. These differences might be related to contextual differences. The South African students wanted a course that would further enhance the South African education system, in addition to helping them sharpen their teaching skills. South Africa is currently in the process of a fundamental societal (social, political, economic and educational) reconstruction project. Education is thus widely seen as main instrument for effecting the desired political, social and economic transformation (Wolhuter, 1999). The education system inherited from the apartheid era and ways of teaching were found to be wanting, inferior and outdated, with foreign or international trends being perceived as the model for South Africa to emulate (De Wet & Wolhuter, 2007). The interest in knowledge from outside South Africa recently emerged following an intellectual boycott, whereby large sectors of the outside world had for three decades seen this country as a pariah state that had also isolated itself from intellectual and educational developments occurring in other parts of the world due to discriminatory

and racist policies (Harricombe and Lancaster, 1995).

In the case of Tanzania, the country has long since passed through the post-independence educational and societal reconstruction period of the 1960s (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2004), thus making Tanzanian students somewhat more detached from everyday practice, hence their seemingly purely intellectual expectations of the Comparative Education course. They expect the Comparative Education course to contribute to the broadening of their general knowledge and to their personal development. Irish students, by contrast, consider Comparative Education as helping them to teach abroad. All the Irish students intend to teach abroad at some stage in their career. Their next two reasons are also personally oriented, i.e. Comparative Education is interesting and it will broaden their minds.

Recommendations

The comparative study highlighted the role of the contextual factors in shaping students' expectations with regard to Comparative Education, and the need to develop home-grown courses and material (curricula, textbooks, etc.), in consonance with the African context and how students can benefit from Comparative Education courses in Africa that steer them away from Northern hemispheric material, developed in a different context for different needs. In this regard follow-up qualitative research (employing for example interviews and focus group discussions) to probe students' inner feelings and motivations would be a valuable complement to this study, controlling and deepening its findings, thus laying the foundation for Comparative Education courses that are a meaningful and enriching experiences in the lives of students.

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