

## **Chapter 12**

### **Some final reflections on educational comparison**

**Brendan Bartram**

#### **Introduction**

In some ways, concluding a book like this might at first sight seem something of a challenge. Each contribution has focused on a specific sector or form of education in particular countries. It might be suggested that the differences between the chapters outweigh any common ground between them. On closer analysis, however, this may not be an entirely accurate assessment. A large number of educational issues in an equally varied set of contexts have admittedly been explored, but it is nonetheless possible to identify a set of common threads throughout the chapters.

#### **Individual/group task**

Review and reflect on each of the chapters and draft a list of common ‘background’ themes that you have detected.

#### **Educational convergence**

That a number of common themes emerge is perhaps less surprising than might initially be thought. For some years now, many commentators have noted the ways in which ‘convergence theory’ is playing out in the global educational arena. As long ago as 1983, Inkeles and Sirowy (1983) analysed patterns of change across a large number of education systems and concluded that tendencies towards educational similarity were ‘pervasive and deep. It is manifested at all levels of the educational system, and affects virtually every major aspect of that system’ (p. 326). Since then, these ideas have been the subject of much debate and theoretical analysis. Globalization - much mentioned throughout the book - has become a perennial fixation for scholars in many fields, not least of all comparative education, where discussions have centred on the nature and processes of globalizing influences. (For more insight into theories on this, see Robin Shields, 2013, listed below).

For some (e.g. Friedman, 2007), globalisation operates predominantly on the basis of competitive pressures on and between nation states - driven by a common quest for competitive advantage, countries increasingly come to adopt policies and practices that are commonly perceived to deliver 'the best results'. This view is challenged, however, by those like Wallenstein (2000) who see globalization as a process of conflict - world system analysts attribute globalising tendencies and trends to the privileged position and influence of powerful 'core' countries. Economically advanced states thus exert their influence on poorer countries at the 'periphery' who are manipulated by the core players into acting and thinking 'their way' about what is important in education and other spheres of life. An alternative view is offered by world culture theorists who see increasing convergence arising as a result of a growing international consensus around common cultural values, such as democratic citizenship, respect for individual rights, autonomy and the importance of technological applications. Entities such as the EU and OECD mentioned throughout the book become important in this respect because they act as mediating structures, setting 'common agendas' increasingly followed by governments around the world.

**Individual/group task**

Which of these three different views on globalisation are you most inclined towards? Can you think of educational examples that support how this theory operates in practice?

How does all this relate to the subjects of the chapters in this book? Re-examining them, it can be argued that a number of common educational concerns and themes are noticeable. In no particular order, I would suggest some of these could be as follows:

- the relationship between the world of work and learning;
- education as an economic agent;
- increasing participation and engagement in education;
- responding to economic challenge and austerity;
- maintaining and improving educational standards and outcomes;
- a focus on assessment, testing and rankings;
- the inculcation of values;
- tensions between the social and economic functions of education;

- increasing political scrutiny of education;
- educational diversity, experimentation and inclusion;
- the varied influences and effects of globalisation.

### **Group/individual task**

How does this list compare with the one you produced in the first exercise above?

Focus on each of the above themes and try to establish where you can detect them in the different chapters. Did you identify additional themes?

Which ones appear to be the most conspicuous, and what does this suggest to you about current educational trends?

### **Conclusion**

Finally, it is hoped that the book has illustrated some of the central tenets and aims of comparative education, referred to in the introduction. The chapters have shown how educational developments are always firmly rooted in socio-cultural specifics, and that we need be aware of these contextual factors in order to interpret what is happening and why it is happening. Broader social values, economic conditions and political priorities form complex amalgams which not only shape educational phenomena but help us understand them.

Rozsahegyi and Lambert, for example, show us how differently balanced social values and ‘outlooks’ have resulted in different approaches to early years training and pedagogy in Hungary and England.

We have also seen how common global pre-occupations and concerns become differently translated in different contexts: we saw, for instance, how growing labour market competition has led to the growth of shadow education in East Asia, the expansion of HE in Germany and England, and greater attention to work-based forms of learning in many countries. In addition, the chapters have illustrated a range of educational thinking and alternative modes of operating in relation to an equally varied number of topics. Comparison in this way

performs a useful service in encouraging us to reflect on different approaches, helping us maintain a questioning attitude and an open mind – which must surely be our default position as both educationists and educators. As the chapters have shown, however, distilling lessons – let alone specific policies – from comparison remains as ever a challenging undertaking, but a worthwhile intellectual and practical endeavour all the same.

### **Recommended reading**

Shields, R. (2013) *Globalization and International Education*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

### **References**

Friedman, T. (2007) *The World is Flat: The globalized world in the twenty-first century*. London: Penguin Books.

Inkeles, A. and Sirowy, L. (1983) Convergent and Divergent Trends in National Educational Systems. *Social Forces* **6**(2), pp. 303-333.

Shields, R. (2013) *Globalization and International Education*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Wallenstein, I. (2000) Globalization or the Age of Transition? A long-term view of the trajectory of the world system. *International Sociology* **15**(2), pp. 251–267.