BOOK REVIEW/CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

MARK BRAY, BOB ADAMSON, & MARK MASON (EDS.). *Comparative education research: Approaches and methods* (CERC Studies in Comparative Education, Vol. 19). New York, NY: Springer. (2007). 444 pp. $329.00 (Hardcover). (ISBN 978-1-4020-6189-9).

Whether we call it "educational effectiveness" or "best practices," the fundamental goal of education research is to identify the perspectives, strategies, and methods that best satisfy the needs of stakeholders in educational systems. The outcomes of such research—which, naturally, require *comparison* at some structural level (classroom, school board, province, nation, region)—usually result in the transfer of ideas and policies from one location to another. As such, all disciplines within education, from adult education to women's studies, may at times fall under the umbrella of comparative education: "a field which welcomes scholars who are equipped with tools and perspectives from other arenas and who choose to focus on educational issues in a comparative context" (p. 345). *Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods* outlines useful considerations for graduate students or other newcomers to the field who are contemplating whether or not to take on comparative research themselves. The book's foreword declares its mandate to "[systematize] the field of comparative education, probing what it means, why it is important, and how it is possible rigorously to compare education systems and structures, places, eras, cultures, organisations, curricula, pedagogies, achievements, and values" (p. xiii). Although when referring to the functions of international agencies and professional societies the book can read more like a brochure than a scholarly defence of the field's legitimacy, it remains faithful to the comparativist tradition and showcases the variety of perspectives, tools, and forums currently available to researchers. Then again, while the book's comprehensiveness suggests its desire to be included as required reading in comparative education courses, its hefty price tag would undoubtedly bar it from most reading lists.

Bray, Adamson, and Mason, all widely published comparativists and former Directors of the Comparative Education Research Centre (CERC) at the University of Hong Kong, organize *Comparative Education Research* into three

parts. The introductory chapters explore the nature of the field and the debate over quantitative versus qualitative approaches. The subsequent chapters examine units of comparison (places, systems, times, cultures, values, educational achievements, policies, curricula, educational organizations, ways of learning, and pedagogical innovations) and critique literature that has used these units as the basis for analysis. The final chapters frame comparative education in relation to other domains of inquiry.

From a historical perspective, Bereday (1964) impelled comparativists to trace the field's development along major shifts in methodologies and research traditions, but it was perhaps not until the graphic representation of the Bray and Thomas cube (1995) that researchers could visualize the full dimensionality of comparison—in terms of aspects of education and society (e.g., curriculum, teaching methods, finance and management, political change, labour market) and their effects on non-locational demographic groups (e.g., ethnic groups, age groups, gender groups, religious groups, entire populations) across geographic/locational levels (e.g., world regions, countries, districts, schools, classrooms, individuals). But comparative education research still faces many challenges in the validity of its execution. For example, Gregory Fairbrother's chapter on the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative approaches reminds readers that both are necessary for "more complete understanding of important educational issues" (p. 61) because they result in different *kinds* of answers to similar research questions. He also warns that quantitative methods, despite "certain pressure within the field for [their] use" (p. 45), have sometimes been employed uncritically and in a biased fashion. Mark Bray, in his chapter on "Actors and Purposes in Comparative Education," discusses how conflicts can arise in the interpretation of information by academics, policymakers, and international agencies — yet he might also mention teachers and students, who are often allowed little or no voice in the appraisal of educational efficacy.

Comparative Education Research can be very instructive in reviewing methodological dos and don'ts, particularly for students who are in the early stages of research design. In the chapter on comparing places, Maria Manzon discusses how both macro- and micro-level comparisons can assume a homogeneity within populations that obscures the significant differences that exist within one nation, province, school district, or classroom. She also raises awareness of how terms like *nation*, *country*, or *state*–as well as regional identifiers like "Latin American" or "Asian"—can be used inconsistently or ambiguously. Bray and Kai's chapter points out that not only do systems of education vary between and within countries, but the distinctions between spatial (e.g., "European Union") or functional (e.g., "private" schools) criteria are also blurred and constantly in flux. Postlethwaite and Leung encourage researchers working with testing data to thoroughly examine how test content is defined, whose achievement is being measured, and how translation affects interpretation of test items. Adamson and Morris' chapter on comparing curricula is the book

at its best. They go beyond academia to discuss practical applications of comparative education research and their variable consequences: from allocating resources to schools based on government markers of performance down to the effects of students voting on "Teacher of the Year" (p. 271).

On the other hand, the book contains a number of chapters that might be worth skipping entirely. Rui's comparison of policy touches on problems of borrowing and lending but stops short of showing what can be accomplished through policy comparison. Sweeting's and Mason's respective comparisons of time and culture deconstruct these units in overly theoretical terms, in contrast to the rest of the book's accessibility and functionality. Dimmock's comparison of educational organizations is highly problematic in trying to categorize cultures along dichotomies such as "group-oriented vs. self-oriented" or "fatalistic vs. proactive"—much like how Watkins' comparison of learning strategies employed by "Asian" and "Western" students assumes cultural homogeneity among diverse individuals and groups. And Lee's and Law's respective comparisons of values and pedagogical innovations fall into the trap of positivism by treating such complex, subjective concepts in oversimplified, quantitative terms.

All in all, this book is refreshingly candid in its continual acknowledgment of the limitations of comparative education research. Each chapter's suggestions for improved validity certainly aid in promoting the legitimacy of the field. The problem, duly acknowledged by the authors, is that individual researchers are often prevented from undertaking comparative work of international scope because of their lack of resources, cultural and language skills, and access to institutions around the world. Nevertheless, the book certainly does leave the reader with a critical understanding of the myriad contextual considerations that shape the tools used for comparative education research.

MARIUSZ GALCZYNSKI, *McGill University*

REFERENCES

Bereday, G. Z. F. (1964). Comparative Method in Education. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Bray, M., & Thomas, R. (1995). Levels of comparison in education studies: Different insights from different literatures and the value of multilevel analysis. Harvard Educational Review, 65(3), 472-490.