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Narratives as a way of conceptualising the field of comparative education

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ABSTRACT

Based on the authors' wide reading in the field, this article suggests the notion of the narrative as a fitting and meaningful way of conceptualising and mapping the field of comparative education. Four prominent narratives can be identified in not only the field of comparative education (and the scholarly discourse on education) but also the public discourse on education. These are the narratives of the capability theory, neoliberal economics, the creed of human rights, and the call for social justice. These narratives are contrasted, and guidelines are offered for further research on reconstructing and reflecting on the current state of comparative education and its future trajectory.

KEYWORDS

Capabilities approach; comparative education; human rights education; narratives; neoliberal economics; paradigms; social justice

Introduction

This research has been stimulated by the tension created within comparative education as an expanding field. In testing new frontiers and exploring new theoretical frameworks, drawing from related fields of social science, a disconnection between the world of scholarship and praxis has developed. 'Praxis' is used here as referring to both education policy making and the teaching-learning taking place in institutions of education.

The period 1970–1990 has been described as the age of 'heterodoxy', characterised by proponents of opposing paradigms attacking each other's position (Paulston 1994). Each of these has spawned an array of paradigms (see Paulston 1996, 1994, 1999). Since 1990, the proliferation of paradigms has been identified as a key feature of comparative education. Celebrating diversity appears to be in contradiction with one of the sources of inspiration for scholarship or science, namely the search for unity in a large variety of phenomena.

Highlighting paradigm diversity also resulted in scholars in the field formulating and defending their own paradigmatic stances against one another, losing sight of education praxis. This was perhaps first and most graphically done by Psacharopoulos (1990), in his 1990 Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) presidential speech.

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While this diversity of paradigms makes for a dynamic field and has a host of advantages (which will be enumerated later in this article), the field has also been criticised often on this point ever since (see, e.g. Anderson and Herr 1999; Cummings 1999; Bray 2014).

This is a position paper, suggesting a complementary dimension to map and conceptualise the field. A position paper is a common type of academic argument written after having read about and having reflected on a particular issue (Myers 2020).

The aim of this paper is also to bring into one schema much of the public and the scholarly discourse on comparative education. Using Bray's (2014, 29) enumeration of the five categories of actors in the field of comparative education, the scholarly discourse is that which takes place within the parameters of the scholarly field of comparative education. The public discourse is the discourse of the policy-makers of education, their constituencies (as they discourse, for example, in the media), parents, and practitioners (teachers and principals), and is part of the discourse within international organisations (such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO). Some of these organisations and actors straddle public and scholarly discourse.

This paper suggests that the depiction and celebration of the proliferation of paradigms as a key feature of the field may be supplemented by the notion of the narrative as a fitting and meaningful way to conceptualise and map the field. The paper identifies four major narratives prominent not only in the field of comparative education (and the scholarly discourse on education) but also in the public discourse on education. These are the narratives of the capability theory, neoliberal economics, the creed of human rights, and the call for social justice.

The prevailing depiction of the field of comparative education as a kaleidoscope of paradigms

Following three great scholars in the field, Noah, Eckstein, and Paulston (see Noah and Eckstein 1969; Paulston 1977, 1996, 1994, 1999), it has become customary to depict the historical evolution of the field of comparative education in five stages running up to the 1960s, followed by three more phases. The first five phases were named by Noah and Eckstein (1969) a phase of travellers' tales, a phase of the systematic study of foreign systems of education with the intention of borrowing best practices to improve the domestic education system, a phase of international cooperation, a factors and forces phase, and a social science phase.

Paulston (1977, 1996, 1994, 1999) distinguished three phases in post-1960 comparative education. He called these a phase of orthodoxy in the 1960s (which is the social science phase of Noah and Eckstein), a phase of heterodoxy (or a phase of paradigm wars) in the 1970s and the 1980s, and then, finally, commencing in 1990, a phase of heterogeneity. This last phase is described by Paulston as a proliferation of paradigms, with tolerance and acceptance, even an appreciation of alternative (or a diversity of) paradigms, by various proponents.

For more than 30 years, Paulston's depiction has been a central reference point. It has been featured not only in the discourse about theoretical frameworks extant in the field of comparative education but also in their importance in marking out a trajectory of the

field (e.g. Gorostiaga 2017; Denman and Jacob 2016). There are several other extant typologies depicting the historical evolution of the field. These roughly correspond to the typologies of Noah and Eckstein (1969) and Paulston (1994), as summarised earlier. For example, Phillips and Schweisfurth (2014, 27) distinguish between description, systematic data collection, socio-economic understanding, outcomes analyses, globalisation context, and postmodern approaches as stages of different emphasis.

The phaseology of Noah and Eckstein (1969) is still often used in the explanation or critical interrogation of the field (see, e.g. Silova 2019). In their survey of the field, Bradley Cook, Steven Hite, and Erwin Epstein conducted an extensive bibliometric survey of the CIES members and found the 1969 volume of Noah and Eckstein the second most cited publication, while their survey also showed that scholars in the field regarded that volume as the second most influential publication in the field (Cook, Hite, and Epstein 2004, 138).

The continued use of Paulston's characterisation of the current situation, more than a decade after his passing away in 2006, calls for an update and the consideration of alternatives or supplementary conceptualisations in view of the rapid development and expansion of the field and the exigencies of the present. In contrast to the fast succession of prior phases (orthodoxy lasted 10 years, and heterodoxy about 30 years), the use of Paulston's characterisation now suggests that since 1990 the field has been stagnant. The only activity in the field has been a multiplication of the total count of paradigms.

Furthermore, while not referring explicitly to Paulston, many publications in recent years portraying the field have held up the growing number of paradigms or theoretical frameworks as a striking feature. Carnoy's (2019) recent reconstruction of the history of the field over the past 50 years in general and at Stanford in particular consists of an accumulating number of theoretical orientations added each decade. A variation on the theme of stressing (the growing) diversity in the field is scholars typifying comparative education as taking on different forms in various parts of the world as it gets co-shaped by the contextual contours of various settings (see Bray 2003, 217–218; Takayama 2020). Cowen (2000, 333) writes that it is more accurate to talk of 'comparative educations' in the plural. Manzon (2011, 41 *et seq.*) writes about many scholars, in view of the diversity, even disparity, inside the field, doubting whether it can be called a 'field', let alone a 'discipline'. Rust et al. (1999) see mapping the field in terms of research methodology as a display of diversity, as is Novoa and Yariv-Mashal's (2003) highlighting two divergent strands running through the field, namely the applied (comparison as a method) and the cultural relativistic (comparison as a historical journey) strands.

Meanwhile, vast changes have occurred in the world and the world of education in particular. Reflecting these changes, the body of comparative education scholarly literature has grown enormously, as is recorded in, for example, successive comparative education bibliography lists published in the *Comparative Education Review* (see Easton 2015). The prevailing celebration of diversity and the characterisation of the field in terms of (accumulating) diversity provoke the search for commonalities and for unifying or integrating features.

A problem in depicting the 1970s and the time from the 1990s onwards as, respectively, times of 'paradigm wars' and times of the acceptance of multiplying paradigm diversity is that it is a gross simplification of a complex field. Paging today through back editions of leading Anglophone journals in the field (such as the *Comparative Education*

Review, Comparative Education, and Compare), it is not easy to find articles in which a scholar with steadfast beliefs proclaims his or her theoretical position in a head-on attack on proponents of other positions. Some can be found, for example Heyman's (1979) paper in which he took issue with macro-social theories (both structural-functionalism and conflict theories), advocating instead an ethnomethodological approach – but these are very sparsely spread.

Reflecting on the field, Klees (2008, 306) remarks that there have been no direct debates between proponents of various paradigms. Therefore, the term 'paradigm wars' is a misnomer of what characterised the field in the 1970s and 1980s. Also, in the *Comparative Education Review*'s first special issue on theoretical frameworks in the field (1977, volume 2/3), Paulston's (1977) paper is not a template proclaiming one paradigm and discrediting others but rather an exercise of mapping out the kaleidoscope of paradigms making up the field.

In the post-1990 era, after the turn of the millennium in particular, articles by paradigm proponents have appeared in top-ranking journal articles, advocating their positions and using strong language in opposition to others. For example, Epstein and Carroll (2005) distinguish between three theoretical positions in the field, namely historical functionalism, positivism, and postmodernism, take a stance for historical functionalism, and scathingly criticise postmodernism. Cortina, in her 2019 CIES presidential address, took issue with the dominance of Northern Hemispheric paradigms in the field, linking to the discourse on the need for a postcolonial comparative education. This was also the theme of a special issue of the *Comparative Education Review* in 2017 (volume 62S1), in which this line of attack on Northern Hemispheric paradigms is traceable in all articles, though most poignant in the paper of Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell (2017). But even so, articles in which the centrepiece makes a case for a particular paradigm in opposition to others are very few and far between, and by no means can a case be made that it is or ever has been the signature feature of the field.

Writing about paradigms in the scholarly field(s) of education, Popkewitz (1980) describes a paradigm as a scholarly community sharing a set of assumptions about the nature and character of social inquiry and sharing a set of norms, standards, and language that provide ground for judging work of individual research. To the extent that the state of the field of comparative education can be depicted as comprising a variety of paradigms, such a presentation also raises the concern of portraying and fostering (in so far as a positive assessment of such a state of affairs is expressed or implied) a community of scholars in silos, isolated not only from one another but also from practice.

A depiction of a field severed from practice lies at odds with the presence of a whole range of actors in the field of comparative education enumerated above. Steeped in practice, they have acted with a large number of stated and accepted purposes or rationales for practising comparative education – from borrowing to improve the domestic education project to the philanthropic ideal – ever since the time of Jullien, a driving force of passion and a source of meaning for scholars in the field (Wolhuter 2017). Wiseman and Matherly (2016) report on research that notes that in 2015, 37% of the members of the CIES described a development, research, or policy organisation (rather than a university or institution of higher learning) as their primary institutional affiliation.

In as far as the multiplicity and proliferation of paradigms are an accurate description of the field, and also to the extent that such a depiction encourages an even further proliferation of paradigms, such an exclusive conceptualisation holds dangers to the field and asks for a counterbalance. In his volume discussing a similar situation in the field of organisational theory, Donaldson (1995) explains how this can promote the disintegration of a field. The promotion of multiple paradigms results in the absence of standard concepts and in information overload for students of the field. Furthermore, the multiplication of paradigms distracts attention from the real object of study.

Narratives as another way of conceptualising the field

For the reasons stated above, narratives are suggested as a supplement to paradigms as the descriptor of what is taking place in the field and in the public discourse on education. The concept of narrative has taken hold across the social sciences (Fisher 1985; Borisenkova 2009). Furthermore, it has taken on a range of meanings (Czarniazski 2004). For clarification, a distinction should be made between individual narratives and social or societal narratives (Czarniazski 2004). As used in this paper, ‘narrative’ refers to a social narrative – an account of social situations. Narratives in the scholarly field of comparative education and in the scholarly discourse of education provide accounts of education in its societal context. These are collective, dynamic exercises. Ricoeur (1984) states that a narrative brings actions, events, and results together in a meaningful, holistic configuration.

Without denying or negating the requirement of rigorous scholarship in the field, what scholars do with narratives is not so much the falsification of (especially opposing) paradigms, the defense of their own paradigms with cold logic, or even explanations of phenomena. Instead, they are collectively engaged in building narratives pertaining to education in its contextual embeddedness, that is, narratives about education-societal interrelationships in diverse contextual settings.

Scholars of comparative education recognised the notion of narratives tangentially in depicting features of the field, such as Zembylas (2022), Takayama (2018, 459, 464), *Comparative Education Review* editor Nordtveit (2019, 311) in his editorial column, or Sobe (2018, 327) in his CIES presidential address. In descriptions of the public and scholarly discourse on a particular issue in education, the notion of narratives is cursorily used too, for example, Monaghan and King (2018, 370) or Lall and South (2018, 486, 488). In the most recent CIES presidential address, Silova (2021) uses the term ‘narrative’ six times, while 2 years prior, Cortina (2019, 466) in her CIES presidential paper drew attention to a line of eminent scholars in the field, such as Rust and Masemann, who had called for the Comparative and International Education scholarly community to clarify the metanarratives driving their work. However, the notion has never been foregrounded, systematically explored, and unpacked regarding its potential value in mapping the field.

The authors also believe that the concept or metaphor of narratives has connotations of more porous borders and open ends, rather than the silos (mutually exclusive positions) implied by (at least Popkewitz’ above-cited definition of) ‘paradigms’. With the notion of

narratives, it is possible to reduce the number of positions in the field (compare the growing number of paradigms listed in the succession of publications of Paulston, cited above) to more manageable proportions from the seemingly infinite number of paradigms.

Paradigms tend to portray the actual state of education, answering the ‘what?’ question, and, as such, have the shortcoming of not having within their purview the ‘what should?’ and ‘what could?’ questions of education. This is a shortcoming that Sobe (2018, 325 – 343), in his CIES presidential address, also identifies in the preoccupation with big data sets by scholars in the field. Carnoy (2019, 197–216) views the preoccupation with big data as the hallmark of the current phase in the development of the field, at least at Stanford. The authors believe using the notion of narratives to map the field can overcome this shortcoming.

Lastly, the concept of narratives adds a moment, substance, or thrust of attaching meaning, a purpose, and élan that are absent in or foreign to the notion of paradigms (Fisher 1985, 77). However, these (a meaning, a purpose, and élan), which for certain have been present in comparative education since the days of the inception of the field, are provided for in the notion of narratives. To summarise, the prevailing conceptualisation of the field of comparative education as consisting of an assortment of paradigms has been found useful by scholars in the field. Such a depiction demonstrates the scope (breadth and depth), dynamic virility, and ever-expanding range of the field. At the same time, there is a need to counter-balance or supplement this construction of the field with mapping along other dimensions. Particularly, the need for a centripetal, integrating, or unifying vector, the need for common reference points for the diverse scholarly communities making up the field (Wiseman and Anderson 2013), the need to link the scholarly field of comparative education with practice, the variety of actors in the field engaged with the public discourse, and the search for meaning come to mind. It is for these reasons that the notion of narratives is suggested as a complementing way of conceptualising the field.

Four current narratives in the field of comparative education and in the public discourse on education

At least four narratives in the field of comparative education and in the public discourse on education in the post-1990 era have been present and have gained traction over the past 30 years and seem by now to constitute fixed and relatively permanent features in the landscape of both the field and the public discourse. These can be called a human capabilities narrative, a neoliberal narrative, a human rights narrative, and a social-justice narrative.

A synoptic overview of the four narratives and their differences in key facets is presented in Table 1.

This table was developed solely by the authors, using the material appearing in the article, in order to provide a one-page synopsis of the narratives described in the article.

Table 1. The four narratives in comparative education and in the public discourse on education.

Narrative Facet	Human Capabilities	Neoliberal Economics	Human Rights	Social Justice
Fundamental theorem/concern	Human beings have huge potential and capabilities. Conditions to be created for capabilities to flourish. (Nussbaum 2000).	Sees human beings as production and consumption units. Economic performance or output is the <i>summum bonum</i> . (Wolhuter and Van der Walt 2019).	Views human beings as endowed with basic, natural, unalienable rights. (UNESCO/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006)	Justice is seen in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. (Piketty 2020)
One-(two) word(s) summary of core idea(l)	(Individual)self-actualisation. (Sen 1999).	(Economic)Productivity (Robeyns 2006)	(Human)Dignity (United Nations 2011)	(Social)Equality (Piketty 2020)
Other key/threshold concepts	(Individual) excellence (Nussbaum 2000)	Quality assurance, efficiency, and managerialism	Education as a human right, and peace education (UNESCO/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006)	Power relations (Apple 2013)
Objective of education in terms of Biesta's (2013) triad	Maximum opportunities to each learner (Algraini 2021)	(Useful, relevant) skills (Wolhuter and Van der Walt 2019)	Social: socialisation (UNESCO/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006)	Social: societal reconstruction (Apple 2013)
Concern with/in education	Education for individual excellence (Robeyns 2006)	Education for productivity, efficiency in education, educational outcomes (achievements) (World Bank 1988)	Education about, through and for human (UNESCO/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006)	Education system to create social justice in education and in society (Apple 2013).
Criticism	Reproduction of unequal privilege in society (Bowles and Gintis 1976)	Criticism of reduction of human beings to production and consumption units (Waluyo, Eng, and Wiseman 2019)	Who defines human rights? Gap between manifestos or constitutions and reality (Kennedy 2001, Kennedy 2004)	Demands of modern world, equality impossible, and dangers of social engineering (Friedman 1962)
Comparative education authors and literature attached to narrative	Kim (2014), Unterhalter (2020), Algraini (2021) and Sakata (2021)	Special edition <i>Research in Comparative and International Education</i> (volume 14 number 1), World Bank (2013) and Krafft, Branson, and Flak (2021)	UNESCO/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2006), McCowan (2013), Biseth and Holmansdottir (2013), Klees (2016) and Russell (2018)	Komatsu and Rappleye (2017), Auld, Rappleye, and Morris (2019), Cortina (2019), Silova (2021)

The human capabilities narrative

The philosophy of human capabilities, as formulated by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000), and others, views human beings as having huge potential and capabilities. This approach argues that conditions should be created so that these capabilities can flourish. The core idea is that of individual self-actualisation or individual excellence. The capabilities theory has a flipside view on social change and society too. Robeyns (2006, 78) describes this side

of the capabilities theory as ‘a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society’. The idea of creating space for creativity (see Grigorenko 2019) also fits in comfortably with this approach of human capabilities.

Biseth and Holmansdottir (2013, 4) is of the view that the question ‘why do we want an education system?’ or ‘what do we want the education system to do (or accomplish)?’ can be answered in three basic ways, namely as a means to teach particular skills, offer maximum opportunities to each individual learner, and teach learners to adapt to and fit into society.

Of the four narratives explicated in this paper, the human capabilities narrative clearly endorses the second proposal, namely that education institutions and systems should be crafted to offer maximum opportunities to each individual learner or to individualise education maximally to make possible the development of individual talent and make space for creativity to flourish. Such a narrative of education seems to find support in the contemporary world. It takes into account trends such as the development of a knowledge society and knowledge economy (i.e. an economy where the production and consumption of new knowledge have become the driving axis of an economy). Examples of this narrative in comparative education include publications by the Institute of Education, University of London, scholar Unterhalter (2020), as well as Kim (2014) and Algraini (2021).

Critics note that in the first place, no public education system has ever been funded well enough to give maximum opportunities to every individual student. Only members of the most affluent strata in society can afford the best education for their children. Such a system, if installed, would result in the reinforcement of existing privilege, as theories of socio-economic reproduction have convincingly demonstrated in the past 45 years, commencing with the trailblazing publication of Bowles and Gintis (1976).

The neoliberal economics narrative

The neoliberal economics creed views the human being as a production and consumption unit. Economic performance or output is the prime value. Key concepts in the neoliberal economics discourse on education include quality assurance and efficiency under the pro-neoliberal economics lobby, and managerialism and performativity among the anti-neoliberal economics lobby, especially when higher education is under discussion. Key authors include protagonists of the human capital theory, such as Schultz (1961, 1981), and advocates of extreme free market policies, such as Friedman (1962).

In the political-economic context that had evolved first in the West since the beginning of the 1980s and which, after 1989, had spread first to the East Bloc and soon after to the Global South, the hegemony of neoliberal economics, which has spread to domains outside the economy (such as health, education, and public transport services), has become a powerful driving ‘force’ (for the lack of a better word – too strong to be called a ‘philosophy’ but probably *just* too shy to be called an ‘ideology’) of education reform worldwide. In the field of education, this narrative is fixed on efficiency and productivity in education. Flowing from that, favourite themes of scholarship are the privatisation of

education, the ranking of universities, rates of return analyses, educational outcomes and the determinants or correlates thereof, and, as a source for such studies, the use of international test series data.

An example of the salience of educational outcomes is the recent (March 2019) special edition of the journal *Research in Comparative and International Education* (volume 14, number 1) on 'Raising Learning Outcomes in the Education Systems of Developing Countries: Research Designs, Methods and Approaches'. Examples of major studies of the determinants or correlates of academic achievement and students are the World Bank's (2013) SABER (Systems Approach for Better Education Results Study), the McKinsey Study (McKinsey and Company 2007) and Hattie's (2008) monumental study. The whole industry of university rankings, which has emerged from nowhere over the past 30 years, is anchored in and is part of the neoliberal economics narrative of education.

Apart from feeding studies finding correlates of student performance, big data sets produced by international test series have given new momentum to the public discourse and to governments taking over what appears to be best education policies and practices. Big data sets are also giving direction for the discourse in international aid organisations regarding their allocation and dispensation of aid to education (e.g. Forestier and Crossley 2014; Auld, Rapplee, and Morris 2019; Klees et al. 2020).

According to Altbach (1991), by the early 1990s, the World Bank had emerged as the largest producer of comparative education literature in the world. These World Bank publications are typically in the mould of the neoliberal economics narrative. For example, the World Bank's (1988) seminal publication on education expansion in sub-Saharan Africa begins with a presentation of the results of rate of return analysis studies, and on the basis thereof, makes a case in favour of, firstly, investment in education (on the basis of rendering higher returns than any other kind of investment) and, secondly, governments and aid organisations concentrating on the expansion of primary schools rather than higher education (as the former invariably results in higher rates of return).

Neoliberal economics as a basis for education has been criticised for its very reductionistic and narrow view of human beings and education (see Waluyo, Eng, and Wiseman 2019). The creed of neoliberal economics and its hold in the post-1990 world have been criticised even from within the world of big money, by no less than the previous president of the World Bank, Stiglitz (2018). Stiglitz draws attention to the fact that, in a world where neoliberal economics sets the hierarchy of values, the ecological crisis will proceed unchecked (to a point where human survival will be at stake), no funds will be available for basic research (it should be remembered that much of the technology available today has been invented on the basis of knowledge that had been discovered by basic research previously), and inequality in the world will increase and reach obscene proportions.

On the criticism levelled against the neoliberal economic revolution having been brought into the education sector, it should be noted that neoliberal economics also figures in one of the other narratives, namely the social justice narrative. In the social justice narrative, however, the neoliberal economic revolution is criticised as being a force working against social justice in the world.

The human rights narrative

This narrative is built on the fundamental principle that human beings are endowed with basic, natural, and unalienable rights. The Creed of Human Rights has developed over a period of two centuries in the West. By a succession of events, among which two pivotal events were the creation of the United Nations in 1945 and its Declaration of Universal Human Rights in 1948, it was internationalised to become a moral code and order for a globalised world. As such, it also constitutes one of the major forces driving the global education agenda.

A good idea of the scope of human rights education can be gleaned from the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training*, dated 20 December 2011. Article 2 of this declaration describes human rights education as entailing education *about* human rights, education *for* human rights, and education *through* human rights (UN 2011).

In Biesta's (2013) triad of educational objectives, the narrative of human rights tends to be at the social or societal end, education should socialise students into the new global order organised according to the Creed of Human Rights, and education should serve to strengthen this nascent society and its moral code. The human rights narrative can, however, also be described as having an 'individuating effect', as noted by Biesta (2009).

If the World Bank's publications on education (e.g. World Bank 1995, 2011, 2021) are part of the neoliberal economics narrative, then those of the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) are examples of literature on education in the human rights narrative actively produced by an international body. A very salient example is the 2006 UNESCO document on a plan of action for human rights education. It should be noted that within this narrative, criticism has also been levelled against UNESCO as to how, in recent years, the organisation has been compromised by the pressure emanating from neoliberal economics and its demands for a technocratic education regime. Scholars such as Elfert (2018) and Klees (2016) criticise the strong impact of neoliberal economics on education, contending that education premised on neoliberal economics hampers the realisation of education as a human right. On the other hand, Xiaomin and Auld (2020) point out how the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (an organisation steeped in neoliberal economic structures and philosophy) has been attempting to promote its humanitarian image.

In his 2001 article 'The International Human Rights Movement: Part of the Problem', updated in 2004 in his book *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism*, Kennedy highlights a number of problematic issues regarding the Creed of Human Rights, such as the question whether human rights are really natural, that is, whether they pre-exist attempts to formulate them. There is also the criticism that the Creed of Human Rights serves as a factor muting emancipatory narratives and negating the role of non-state actors. Furthermore, according to Kennedy, this creed creates an abstract understanding of the human experience and suppresses activism and alternative ways of expression. Then, there is the huge problem that in large parts of the world, constitutions and statutory laws contain solemn guarantees of human rights but lack the capacity to implement these undertakings.

The social justice narrative

The social justice narrative has had a long historical run-up, from both religious and secular sources. These include Western sources salient since the nineteenth century (with Saint Simon, Proudhon, Marx, and Engels being notable) and in the twentieth century (such as Rawls). After the conclusion of the Second World War, sources (writers as well as political leaders) from the Global South too, such as Fanon, Nasser, Mao Zedong, Nkrumah, and Nyerere, have contributed to this narrative. The more pronounced inequality in the wake of the neoliberal economic revolution since the 1980s made the call for social justice sound more compelling.

Social justice refers to the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. Piketty (2020, 967) defines a just society as ‘one that allows all of its members access to the widest range of fundamental goods’. Human beings should be treated equally, and opportunities and resources should be equally accessible to all. Social equality is of paramount concern, and power relations is a threshold concept.

While all four narratives considered in this article refer to distribution, they differ in terms of the principles by which opportunity and privilege should be distributed. While the human rights narrative proclaims equal treatment of human beings, the narrative of social justice aims to benefit the most disadvantaged or vulnerable categories of people. While the human rights narrative calls for equal or equitable opportunities, the social justice narrative demands equal outcomes and, therefore, for example, more or disproportionate help for the poor to gain access to and value from quality education. Policies and practices of affirmative action or social engineering may well be eschewed or, at best, cautiously and provisionally subscribed to by proponents of the human rights narrative but easily and wholeheartedly embraced by advocates of the social justice narrative. It should be added here that Piketty’s definition of a ‘just society’ refers to the distribution of goods, whereas social justice includes access to knowledge and values as well. Furthermore, Piketty’s definition of ‘justice’ can also be described as a Northern Hemispheric or an industrialised Western version.

Regarding the concern or views of education visible in the social justice narrative, these can be placed on a spectrum. At the one end, education is seen as an instrument to equalise opportunities. Then, there is a cluster that views education as an instrument to achieve social justice but not education in its present form. In this regard, a cluster of scholars criticise neoliberal-shaped education, in particular the use of comparative metrics. These scholars include Auld, Rapple, and Morris (2019) and Komatsu and Rapple (2017).

On the other end of the spectrum, the contention is that education can be an instrument empowering people and opening up opportunities but not in society in its current form (where education benefits the already privileged only and serves as an instrument to suppress the powerless). In other words, society must first change before education can make any difference. An example of this view is Apple’s (2013) volume *Can education change society?* Theories of socio-economic reproduction, cultural reproduction, and the dependency theory in the scholarly and progressive public discussion of education, all of which express doubt about the value of schools (at least in their current form) in creating a fairer world and opening up opportunities for people, all fit into the narrative of social justice.

The classic publication of Swedish scholar Husén, *The School in Question: A Comparative Study of the School and Its Future in Western Society* (1979), ends with the conclusion that the school, promoted as ‘the great equaliser of society’ (i.e. an instrument of social mobility), has proved itself to be instead a ‘great sorting machine’ of society. Thus, a feature of this narrative is strong criticism of the kind of schools or education in society or the kind of society, and the contention that one or both of these should change for education to be an agent of more social justice in society.

The narrative of social justice can be criticised on the grounds that the modern world and economy ask from education institutions individual excellence rather than pulling every one down to the lowest common denominator, that no society has ever in history succeeded in becoming a fully egalitarian society, and that all instances of social engineering to this end (of which there are abundant examples in the twentieth century) have resulted in untold economic disaster and human suffering. It would be difficult to defend a society ending or going the way of Huxley’s ‘brave new world’ or such as the Russian author Zamyati describes in his work of fiction titled *We*. The testimony of a national education system currently coming closest to this ideal, that of Eritrea, where, in an extreme exercise in creating an equal playing field for all, all students are obliged to spend their final school year in the Warsai Yikealo Secondary School and Vocational Training Centre, a boarding school where students also have to live in, is not something that makes nice reading. In fact, it has been described as a situation of child slavery (Allison 2019).

Discussion

We do not purport that the four narratives that we have identified and described are a complete description of salient features of the texture of both the scholarly and the public discourse on education, but only present this depiction as a tool for getting a panoramic view of the field from one vantage point and a tool for reflecting how to take the field forward. We put forth this conceptualisation of the field as one-dimensional, supplementing rather than supplanting the mapping of the field in terms of a diversity of paradigms or theoretical frameworks. In our conceptualisation, world systems and the world culture theory can figure in, for example, either the neoliberal or the social justice narrative, depending on whether the scholar views world culture as an impediment to social justice (social justice narrative) or as an aspect of a benevolent global neoliberal economic revolution (neoliberal narrative).

Conceptualisations of the field focusing on the diversity in the field surely have their merits in mapping its full scope, richness, promise, and possibilities. At the same time, there is merit in supplementing or counterbalancing these with conceptualisations along other dimensions, striving at convergence, building coherence, and serving an integrating function. We neither claim this to be an exhaustive list of all narratives in the field nor do we propose that all research in the field can be neatly fitted into one of these four narratives, but merely state that these are four salient and interesting narratives that have crystallised over the past 30 years and appear to have attained relatively permanent status in the field. Two nascent narratives currently in circulation but not included in our set are those of decolonial education (see Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017) and of Covid-19 pandemic-stimulated education reform (see Oleksienko et al. 2020).

Two of the authors of this article are located in the Global South, where the call for decolonial education and the decolonisation of education is passionately waged in both academe and the public discourse. Vickers (2020), from the vantage point of comparative education, has in a recent publication identified many caveats in this discourse. However, the call for decolonisation has implications for the Global North too, as events in the past year in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere have underscored, and decolonisation may well evolve as a salient, relatively fixed feature on the map of narratives in the field. The worldwide changes in education precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the scholarly and public discourse these have spawned may similarly eventually take on a permanent form.

A third discourse that may well soon develop into a major narrative is that of education and the sustainable development goals as the global community's vision for 2030 (see Ighobor 2015). Even Pope Francis, in addressing the United Nations, has lent gravity to this issue. Recent publications in comparative education have taken up the theme as well (see, e.g., Komatsu et al. 2020). Finally, since the inception and influence of mass comparative testing and mass databases (e.g. PISA) in this century (discussed earlier), a new schism appears to be developing in the field, namely between the applied or solutionist approaches and the interpretative or critical approaches to comparative education. Scholars in the field and theoreticians of the field in particular may well find it a meaningful exercise to follow and to interrogate this rift when mapping the field.

Comparative education has, as do many fields of scholarship, a history of scholars doing a content analysis of top journals in the field. Since Koehl's (1977) content analysis of three journals in the field, as part of the *Comparative Education Review*'s first special issue on the state of the field, such content analyses have regularly been done in an attempt to reconstruct the identity of the field and to use this as an informed basis to reflect on the future trajectory of the field (see, e.g., Cook, Hite, and Epstein 2004; Wolhuter 2008; Manzon 2011; Jing et al. 2021). As a follow-up study to this research, an analysis of recent volumes of top journals in the field should survey these narratives in conjunction with other aspects of published articles (such as themes, authorship, methodologies, and geographical foci of articles). This would be a valuable exercise to glean the current state of the field and to ponder ways to take the field forward in the twenty-first century. This kind of analysis would permit assessing whether existing narratives should be modified, more finely calibrated, or supplemented by other perspectives.

Conclusion

At least four salient strands detectable in the texture of both the field of comparative education and the public discourse on education are the narratives that we can best call the human capabilities narrative, the neoliberal economics narrative, the human rights narrative, and the social justice narrative. This article has argued the value of narratives as a heuristic device for mapping and obtaining a panoramic view of the field of comparative education along one dimension. The arguments presented were that narratives serve a unifying and integrative function absent from the conventional mappings of the field and are more connected to the public discourse on education. Furthermore, the notion of narratives

captures important aspects of education (such as the ‘what should?’ and ‘what can?’ of education), often lost in the conventional paradigm mapping of the field (which limits itself to the ‘what is?’ question of education).

The suggested mapping has been offered as one alternative, supplementary way of understanding the field, rather than proposing to replace other, conventional ways of doing so. In a field as complex, dynamic, and ever expanding as comparative education, a simple consensus is beyond reach. However, that should not nullify the continued search for holistic patterns to render this complex field to comprehensible proportions by means of mapping.

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