

COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ENTERING A NEW CENTURY: IMPRESSIONS GLEANED FROM THE *REVIEW*

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes stock of developments in, and the state of, the field of comparative and international education at the beginning of the 21st century, using as data base articles published in the journal Comparative Education Review during the second decade of the 21st century and to compare results with a content analysis done on the first 50 years of the existence of the Review and which was published in 2008. The 246 articles that were published in the Comparative Education Review during the decade 2010–2019 were analyzed under the following metrics: levels of analysis of articles; number of units covered by articles; research methods; narrative basis; phase of education articles cover; and mode of education articles deal with. Compared to the first 50 years of the existence of the Review, single-unit national-level studies still dominate the field, though less so. A case can be made out for a deconcentration to allow more space for research at geographic levels both larger and smaller than the nation-state. The most prominent narrative in which articles

are framed is that of the social justice narrative. The neo-liberal economic narrative stands strong too, while the poor standing of the human rights narrative is disappointing. Turning to modes and phases of education is concerned, the shadow education system has registered on the comparative and international education research agenda, while there seems to be a modest upswing in interest in pre-primary education. Thoughts about the future trajectory of the field are suggested.

Keywords: Comparative and international education; *Comparative Education Review*; human capabilities theory; human rights; international test series; journal analysis; neo-liberal economics; shadow education system; social justice

INTRODUCTION

Comparative and international education has been typified as a field of scholarship that is gaining new relevance in a changing world (Powell, 2020). On the other hand, it has also been described as a field where there is constantly much discussion of the future road the field should take and has also been criticized as a field that is not remotely living up to its potential (Wolhuter, 2008). Such a situation necessitates regular stocktaking and attendant critical reflection as to the state of the field. One method of gaining a picture of the state of the field is a content analysis of the articles published in its most esteemed journals, as has been done by scholars in the field such as Schweisfurth (2015), Davidson et al. (2017), Nordtveit (2016), Flessa et al. (2021), Jing et al. (2023), Schweisfurth et al. (2020), and Wolhuter (2008).

The aim of this research was to take stock of the field of comparative and international education by means of a content analysis of the articles published recently over a decade in one of the top (based on impact factor) journals in the field – the *Comparative Education Review* or, in short, the *Review*. Based on an analysis of the articles published in the *Comparative Education Review* during the decade 2010–2019, this paper constructs a picture of the current state of comparative and international education. As a base reference point, the paper will use the results of a content analysis of the articles published in the *Comparative Education Review* during the first 50 years of its existence, from 1957 to 2006 (Wolhuter, 2008). This will indicate movements in the field during the decade 2010–2019, compared to the state of the field in the past.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Comparative and international education has been described as an amorphous field (see Bereday, 1957; Halls, 1990; Wilson, 1994), a field neither stable nor well defined (Nordtveit, 2015), or an eclectic, diverse field with adjustable borders

and contours that are difficult to demarcate (Epstein & Carroll, 2005), but at the same time also as a dynamic or even an infinite field, constantly testing new frontiers (Wolhuter & Wiseman, 2019) and aiming to adjust and rise to the occasion brought about by new times and contexts (Arnove, 2001). That it is a field with a growing corpus of literature accumulating at an increasing rate is clear from Easton's (2016) analysis of the *Comparative Education Review* bibliography, which was published annually in the Review (until discontinued in 2015). Easton traces the growth of the *Comparative Education Review* bibliography and describes it as "galloping." The number of references increased from 606 in 1990 to 1,232 in 2000, to 2,071 in 2010, and to 4,300 in 2015 (Easton, 2016). Indeed, reflecting on his experience as the editor of the *Comparative Education Review* for 10 years, 2013–2023, and studying the archives of the journal since its inception in 1957, Nordtveit (2023, p. 701) remarks that the rate of change in the field, as reflected in publications in the journal, is accelerating.

An analysis of articles published during the first 50 years of the history of the *Comparative Education Review* (1957–2006) came to the conclusion that during that half century in the Review, two equally strong trends were visible in the field – a remarkable resilience or constancy amid a broadening of the field (Wolhuter, 2008). While new vistas that were beckoning were constantly identified by scholars active in the field, at the same time, strong inertia was detectable, as scholars tenaciously stuck to established traditions and patterns of scholarship (Wolhuter, 2008). This inertia prevented the field from developing to its maximum capacity and use. The inertia hampering the field was evident in four aspects of scholarship: the methodology that scholars used, the paradigms extant in the field, the modes of education, and the phases of education that scholars tended to focus on (Wolhuter, 2008).

To commence with research methods, some comparativists argue that "comparison" is a research methodology in itself (Schriewer, 2014, see also Manzon, 2011, pp. 158–177). Erwin Epstein (2008) maintains that comparative education is nothing but an applied study; that is, the conceptual and methodological tools of the entire range of social sciences are applied to solve education problems or challenges. However, it can also be argued that comparative and international education has a dual nature, simultaneously being a field of study with a clearly specified object of study and representing a method of study (Wolhuter, 2024). The object of study is then education systems in their societal contextual interrelationships. Various education systems in their societal contextual interrelationships are compared to highlight these interrelationships and to gain a more complete understanding of education systems and the interrelationships between education systems and their societal contexts (Wolhuter, 2024). However, even conceding that comparative education is a method or contains an element of the method of comparison, in carrying out this comparison, other methods of research are subsumed.

In the published analysis of the first 50 years of the *Comparative Education Review*, it was found that, despite all the clamor of the field entering a social science phase in the 1960s, with an attendant quantitative revolution, a literature

study remained the most common method of conducting research, although its dominance declined over those 50 years (Wolhuter, 2008). During the first five years of the journal, 72% of the articles it published were on research entailing a literature study as method. This decreased to 48% during the last five years of the first 50 years (Wolhuter, 2008). The second most common research method, making its appearance in the 1960s (the time of the proclaimed social science phase), was the calculation of correlation coefficients (Wolhuter, 2008). The conclusion reached in the analysis was that this was a very limited selection of the range of social science research methods that scholars in the field employed, to the detriment and impoverishment of the field.

The article that surveyed the first 50 years of the *Review* analyzed the paradigmatic affiliation of the articles it had published (Wolhuter, 2008). Analyzing the paradigmatic affiliation of authors and publications was judged to be important, as a paradigm specifies what kind of problems or issues scholars regard as worthy of being studied and what concepts and methods are viewed as legitimate. In that analysis, it was found that, despite theoreticians of the field proclaiming that the field was beset by an impressive and growing assortment of paradigms as a hallmark of its stage of development (e.g., Epstein, 1983; Jules et al., 2021; Paulston, 1977, 1994, 1996, 1999; Psacharopoulos, 1990; Rust, 1991), actual studies on education remained tenaciously stuck in the two conventional, historical frameworks, namely the factors and forces framework and the framework of structural functionalism. These two frameworks stem from, respectively, the 1930s and 1960s (see Epstein, 1983; Noah & Eckstein, 1969; Stone, 1983), and in view of developments in both the scholarly world (e.g., Jules et al., 2021; Suter et al., 2019) and the world of education practice (e.g., Baker, 2014; Coombs, 1968, 1985; Wolhuter & Wiseman, 2022a, 2022b), now seem to be anachronistic.

Turning to foci on various phases of education, the analysis of articles published during the first 50 years of the *Comparative Education Review* found that the two main foci were higher education and secondary education. While over those 50 years, the exact proportion of articles dealing with these two phases varied, typically over any five-year period, roughly 20% of the articles published focused on higher education and 15% on secondary education (Wolhuter, 2008). Criticism was expressed about the low interest in pre-primary education (at most 2% of the articles in any five-year cycle), adult education (less than 10%), and primary education (10% or less of the articles in any five-year cycle).

Finally, turning to mode of education, this was perhaps the aspect of scholarship where the feature of scholars being stuck in trodden paths, thereby impoverishing the field, was most evident. The article that analyzed the first 50 years of the *Comparative Education Review* recognized four modes of education. The first three – formal, informal, and nonformal education – are used as defined by Phillip Coombs (1985). As in the article reviewing the first 50 years of the *Review*, a fourth category was added, namely pre-formal education. Pre-formal refers to what children learn from family, especially parental influences, especially in the years before formal schooling commences (Wolhuter, 2008).

Throughout the first 50 years of the existence of the *Review*, over 90% of the articles it published focused on formal education. The comment was made that in view of the rise of stimuli of informal education (television and the Internet) and in-service training, the existence of ample (occupation and other) training systems outside of the formal education system, and the impact of the preschool years on the subsequent lives of students, there are strong imperatives for scholars to give more attention to informal, nonformal, and pre-formal education. In view of the rise of social media and fake news, also noted by scholars of comparative and international education (e.g., Nordtveit, 2023, pp. 703–704), the call for more attention to the informal mode of education is even more compelling today than in 2008.

This need is even more accentuated with the rise of artificial intelligence, underscored by the sudden emergence of ChatGTP. ChatGTP was released in 2022, and a year later, in 2023, it became the fastest growing computer software in history (Hu, 2023, as cited by Nordtveit, 2023, p. 704). Similarly, in view of the importance of family background in the overall life and development of children and young people (e.g., Acar et al., 2018), also noted in comparative and international education circles (e.g., in 2020 the journal *Comparative Education* had a Special Issue on “Competing Interests: Parents, schools and nation states”; see also Proctor et al., 2020), more attention by comparative and international education scholars to the pre-formal mode of education is needed too.

Evidently, there is now a need to investigate whether scholars have, in recent times, moved away or evolved from the historical patterns of scholarship regarding methodology, narratives, and the phases and modes of education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The 246 articles that were published in the *Comparative Education Review* during the decade 2010–2019 were analyzed in terms of the following parameters:

- research methods;
- narrative bases (i.e., in which of the four basic narratives extant in the field the article falls);
- the phase of education (pre-primary education, primary education, secondary education, post-secondary education, or higher education) the article covers; and
- the mode of education (formal, non-formal, informal, pre-formal education, and supplementary tutoring) the article deals with.

These four parameters were chosen because they deal with features that have, as emerged in the literature survey above, simultaneously defined the field and prevented the field from reaching its maximum potential. This statement is explained and substantiated with respect to each parameter, as the results of the investigation of each parameter are now discussed in turn.

The research method followed in this study is not a review (not any of the 14 review types identified by Grant & Booth, 2009) but a content analysis (see Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Content analysis is an established and accepted method of research in the social sciences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Content analysis entails a systematic coding and categorizing approach used for exploring large amounts of textual information unobtrusively to determine trends and patterns of the words used, their frequency, their relationships, and the structures and discourses of communication (Gbrich, 2007; Mayring, 2000; Pope et al., 2006; Sarantakos, 1998). Leedy and Ormrod (2001) describe the steps of content analysis as follows:

1. The researcher selects the specific material to be studied.
2. The researcher decides on the features to be studied.
3. The features are divided into small, manageable segments or categories.
4. The material is investigated with respect to the features of Step 2 and the categories of Step 3.

Subjecting leading journals to content analysis is an accepted and time-tested method of gaining a picture of the state of a particular scholarly field, including in comparative and international education (see, e.g., Davidson et al., 2020; Jing et al., 2023; Manzon, 2011; Wolhuter, 2008).

RESULTS

Research Methods Employed by Scholars

This paper differs from the approach of the analysis of research methods published in the article that reviewed the first 50 years of the *Review* (Wolhuter, 2008). In the current paper, a distinction is made between three levels of research methods. Following Robson (2011), whose framework for research methods was also used by the publication of Val Rust et al. (1999) on research methods in comparative education, this paper distinguishes between research methods on three levels. These are the level of data collection, methods at the level of data processing, and methods at the level of data interpretation. In surveying the articles used as the source for this analysis, the reality that transpired was that researchers used a variety of methods, which could comfortably be categorized into the three levels of methods of data collection, methods of data processing, and methods of data interpretation.

Methods of Data Collection

The frequency of each of the 10 most used data collection methods, instruments of data collection, or sources of data collection is presented in Table 1.

A small number of methods, sources, or instruments of data collection dominate. While literature studies and documents were the prime method of data collection (75 of the 246 articles), as it was for the first 50 years of the *Review*, it is

Table 1. Frequency of the 10 Most Used Data Collection Methods, Sources of Data Collection, or Instruments of Data Collection.

| Method | Number of Articles |
|--|--------------------|
| 1. Literature survey and documentary analysis | 75 |
| 2. Existing data sets (PISA ^a and IEA ^b test results, UNESCO data, census data, PIAAC ^c , and national test series results) | 67 |
| 3. Interviews | 53 |
| 4. Questionnaires | 15 |
| 5. Observation | 7 |
| 6. Artefacts and work of students (e.g., essays), textbooks, or newspapers | 7 |
| 7. Tests | 4 |
| 8. Focus group discussions | 4 |
| 9. Experiments | 2 |
| 10. Own experience, autobiographies | 2 |

^aPISA: Programme for International Student Assessment.

^bIEA: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

^cPIAAC: The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies is a worldwide study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 24 countries of cognitive and workplace skills.

no longer as dominating (see [Wolhuter, 2008](#)). What is new is the rise of the use of large data sets. This method constitutes the second most common method of data collection (67 of the 246 articles). Hence it seems that Martin Carnoy's (2019) depiction of a general preoccupation with big data as the hallmark of the current phase in the development of the field at Stanford University is an accurate comment on developments in the field at large. This method reflects the rise of international league tests in the world in the past quarter of a century (especially the International Programme for Student Assessment of PISA tests since 2001), the importance of which in turn, can be traced back to the neo-liberal economic revolution and the place of education or human capital in the competition between nations in a competitive globalized world. It should be mentioned that the international league tests and the importance attached to these tests have drawn its share of criticism too, including from scholars in the field (see [Denman, 2019](#); [Meyer & Benavot, 2013](#)).

The third most common method of data collection was interviews. Fifty-three articles in the *Review* had interviews as the prime method of data collection. This can be related to the standing of qualitative research in the social sciences in general and in comparative education in particular – a backlash that has developed since the elevation of quantitative methods in the 1960s.

The value of autobiography as data collection method in comparative and international education research has recently been illustrated in the Doctoral Degree dissertation of [Kamani \(2021\)](#), in the Comparative and International Education Society Presidential Address of Karen Mundy (2016), and in the publication of renowned comparativist David Turner (2022) and is slowly registering in articles published in the *Comparative Education Review* too. The same can be said about observation as a method of data collection. This is also shown in the

Comparative Education Review. The call for observation to be used as a method of data collection by comparativists is also evident in recent comparative and international education literature, for example, in the recently published article of [Luoto \(2023\)](#). The employment of observation as a data collection method by scholars in the field has also been facilitated and made more attractive by the development of measuring instruments such as the International System for Observation and Feedback (ISTOF).

Methods of Data Processing

The frequency of each of the 10 most used data-processing methods is presented in [Table 2](#).

As in the case of methods of data collection, a few methods of data processing dominate. The most common method is a synthesis of information collected, which ties in with literature and documents being the most common sources of data collection. The second most used method is correlation and regression analyses (and related methods, such as factor analysis), which is consistent with an expectation of using large databases as data sources.

Methods of Data Interpretation

Based on the explanation above as to what comparative and international education entails, it can be argued that the use of the comparative method is part of the essential features of the field of comparative and international education. Furthermore, this method, as used in comparative and international education, is aimed at an explication of the interrelations between education (systems) and their societal contexts. Also, the comparative method is a method of interpretation. The overwhelmingly largest part of the articles surveyed in the study displayed this method of data interpretation: 221 in total. The few others, while they all could comfortably fit into this method of data interpretation, explicitly used one of the following acknowledged methods of data interpretation: symbolic interactionism, ethnography, phenomenology, critical ethnography, and methodological individualism.

Table 2. Frequency of the 10 Most Used Data-Processing Methods.

| Method of Data Processing | Number of Articles |
|---|--------------------|
| 1. Synthesis of information collected | 116 |
| 2. Calculation of correlation, regression coefficients, effect sizes, factor analysis, and diffusion analysis | 74 |
| 3. Content analysis | 13 |
| 4. Inferential statistics and calculation of probabilities | 12 |
| 5. Descriptive statistics | 9 |
| 6. Discourse analysis | 7 |
| 7. Historical reconstruction | 6 |
| 8. Critical discourse analysis | 2 |
| 9. Reflection | 2 |
| 10. Phenomenography | 2 |

To summarize the information on research methods, while the assortment of methods with which scholars in the field let themselves be served has widened compared to the past, a limited sample of the rich range of available research methods in the social sciences (see Morin et al., 2021) is still dominating the field.

Narratives

In the analysis reported in this paper, the authors opted to use the notion of narratives as a heuristic device, for reasons explained (Wolhuter et al., 2022). A narrative, being defined as a story or account of events (Ibid.), is believed to be a more meaningful depiction of what takes place in the field. Mapping the field along the dimension of narratives, having identified a small number of narratives, provides a more easily digestible or comprehensible panoptic view of the field than the identification of a large number of paradigms. Another major reason for opting for the notion of narratives is that these, being present in both the (comparative and international education) scholarly and the public discourse of education, also serve to bridge the theory – practice gap – a long-standing problem in the field that has been pointed out by many scholars (e.g., Psacharopoulos, 1990, in his Comparative and International Education Presidential Address; Welch, 2000). The following four narratives, identified by Wolhuter et al. (2022), were taken for the analysis reported in this paper: capabilities theory, the neo-liberal economic narrative, the human rights narrative, and the social justice narrative. The frequency of the different narratives in the articles surveyed is presented in Table 3.

The fact that all four narratives register visibly in publications indicates a broadening of the field and moving with the times, from the fixation on the forces and factors paradigm and the structural functionalism paradigm that dominated until the end of the 20th century. However, on the relative salience of the four narratives, a few notes are apt.

The strongest of the four narratives are the social justice and neo-liberal economics narratives. The strong position of the social justice narrative can be linked to a number of factors. These include the function of the university to critique society and act as its conscience, as well as longstanding traditions or strands in comparative and international education. These traditions include the following: (1) the quest for equality or equity in education as a dominant motive for both the expansion and the reform of education (see Espinoza, 2007; Farrel, 1999); (2) over the past 70 years, the significance or purpose of the field as an ameliorative force in society (see Levin & Kelley, 1994; Lutz & Klingholz, 2017; Switzer, 2018; Unterhalter et al., 2014; Wolhuter, 2017); and (3) the existence of theories

Table 3. Number of Articles Being Part of Various Narratives.

| Narrative | Number of Articles |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Capabilities theory | 30 |
| Neo-liberal economics narrative | 95 |
| Human rights narrative | 29 |
| Social justice narrative | 92 |

such as socio-economic reproduction, cultural reproduction, neo-colonialism, and post-colonialism – all are very strong within the field (see [Gerber & Hout, 1995](#); [Jules et al., 2021](#)).

The strong standing of the neo-liberal narrative can be linked to the largely undisputed and unchecked free rein with which neo-liberal economics has operated in most of the world for the past 30 years (see [Stiglitz, 2019](#)) also as a driving force of education reform (see [Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2019](#)) and also to the rather instrumental use of large data tables in this regard (explained earlier). The rise of individualism, global competitiveness, and creativity may be factors explaining why some authors chose to fit their research into the narrative of the capability theory.

What is disappointing, and unexpected, is the poor standing of the human rights narrative. Although it has been criticized for limited participation in its drafting, the Creed of Human Rights has emerged as a moral code for the globalized world. The poor standing of the narrative of the Creed of Human Rights is also standing at variance with major events and drives in the world of education praxis, where the Creed of Human Rights is visible as one of the major drives of education expansion and reform, at both the national and the global levels (see [Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2019](#)). The right to education has been included in many national constitutions and education acts. At the global level, the narrative of education as a human right has provided an underpinning for the work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), including its Human Rights Education drive and UNESCO declaring the decade 2005–2015 the Decade of Human Rights Education (see UNESCO, 2006), the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education in 2011 ([United Nations, 2011](#)), and the Education for All movement.

The poor standing of the human capabilities narrative is also disappointing. In view of the rise of knowledge economies, their significance in a competitive, globalized world, and the role of the creative class in such economies, there seems to be much scope and much reason for the development of this narrative in the field. The value of this approach for education studies has been highlighted by scholars (e.g., [Walker & Unterhalter, 2007](#)), including scholars in the field of comparative and international education in particular (e.g., [Khanal et al., 2023](#)). In the most recent Comparative and International Education (CIES) Presidential Address, Supriya Baily (2023) links the merits of a capability approach to the issue of social justice, arguing that social justice can only be obtained if people are accorded the agency to realize their vision/ideals through their capabilities.

Phases

The frequency of articles focusing on the various phases of education is presented in [Table 4](#).

The preponderance of articles focuses on secondary (especially) or primary education. This corresponds to the pattern during the first 50 years of the *Review* (see [Wolhuter, 2008](#)). Compared to the patterns then, the substantial interest in higher education has been sustained during the 10-year period of 2010–2019 (understandable in view of the global higher education revolution, see [Altbach](#)

Table 4. Frequency of Articles Focusing on Various Phases of Education.

| Phase(s) | Number of Articles |
|--|--------------------|
| All phases or no focus on any particular phase | 30 |
| Pre-primary | 8 |
| Primary | 23 |
| Secondary | 68 |
| Primary and secondary | 65 |
| Primary, secondary, and post-secondary | 1 |
| Secondary and post-secondary | 1 |
| Post-secondary | 2 |
| Primary, secondary, and higher | 1 |
| Higher | 36 |
| Adult | 10 |
| Lifelong learning | 1 |

et al., 2010). There seems to be a small but growing interest in pre-primary education. While a case can be made that since 1990, the world has experienced a global higher education revolution and that (relative to the 1990 base) the largest expansion of education in recent times was on the level of higher education, the importance of pre-primary education (evident again in the goals of the 2015 Incheon Declaration, spelling out a vision of universal pre-primary education of at least one year by 2030, see UNICEF, 2015). and adult education (against the background of, e.g., the changing age pyramid all over the world), the minuscule attention paid to pre-primary education and adult education is objectionable.

MODES OF EDUCATION

In this analysis, another category was added to the four used in the analysis of the first 50 years of the *Comparative Education Review* (explained earlier), namely the shadow education system (or tutoring). This category has, more recently, become visible in education practice and in the field, including articles published from 2010 through 2019 in the *Review* (see Bray & Khubakidze, 2014) and also in publications (e.g., Bennell, 2023) and fora in the field outside the *Review*, for example Mark Bray's 2017 CIES Presidential Address (Bray, 2017).

The number of articles dealing with the various modes of education is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Number of Articles Focusing on Various Modes of Education.

| Mode(s) | Number of Articles |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Not mode-specific | 11 |
| Formal | 204 |
| Nonformal | 18 |
| Formal and nonformal | 2 |
| Informal | 2 |
| Pre-formal | 3 |
| Shadow education system | 6 |

As was the case during the first 50 years of the *Review*, the preponderance of articles published during the period of 2010–2019 dealt with formal education, though now somewhat less so. There is a small rise in articles focusing on nonformal education. Different from the first 50 years, the shadow education system has now registered, and there is a small rise in articles dealing with pre-formal education as well. However, the persistent neglect of nonformal and especially informal education continues to impoverish the field. This is now even more cause for concern than was the case 20 years ago because of the rise of social media as a source of informal education (and, at that, a mode of education very controversial and challenging). So significant is the rise of social media and electronic media in (informal) education praxis that Strohmaier (2014) identifies it as a new mode of knowledge: Mode 3 knowledge – extending the classification of Gibbons et al. (2003) of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge. The imperative for scholars attending to nonformal and adult education is now more compelling too, in view of the rise of the continuing adult and old population pyramid worldwide, the emphasis now placed on lifelong learning (it is, e.g., mentioned explicitly in Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals), and the rise of micro-credentials (visible in, e.g., the rise of MOOCS or mass online open courses, which were unknown 20 years ago – a topic attended to by none of the 246 articles surveyed). It is regrettable that the work of pioneer comparativists on adult and lifelong learning, Peter Jarvis (1937–2018) (see Arthur & Crossley, 2017, 2020; Holford, 2017), was not continued after his passing.

CONCLUSION

Measured by the articles published in the *Comparative Education Review*, the recent decade (2010–2019) has been one of a marginal broadening of the field compared to past patterns, as pertaining to the research methods which scholars let themselves be served by, as well as by phase of education and mode of education being the object of scholarship. As far as research methods are concerned, what is new in the field is the use of mass databases, notably those containing the results of international test series. Turning to modes and phases of education, the shadow education system has registered on the comparative and international education research agenda, while there seems to be a modest upswing in interest in pre-primary education too. However, on all three facets of research methods, and modes of education, scholars in the field are not by a far stretch realizing the full potential of the field.

While there are articles that are linked to all the major narratives extant in the public discourse of education, the balance of these narratives is lopsided. The most prominent narratives detectable in the field are those of social justice and neo-liberal economics. The poor showing of the human rights narrative is disappointing. Turning to modes and phases of education, the shadow education system has registered on the comparative and international education research agenda, while there seems to be a modest upswing in interest in pre-primary education too.

At present, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought massive changes to education worldwide. The two most salient changes were the increase in home schooling (Hamlin & Peterson, 2022) (albeit more to supplement, rather than replace school education) and the harnessing of technology to assist teachers in teaching and learners in learning (Breslin, 2021). While it is uncertain how permanent these changes will prove to be, it can also be stated that it is unlikely that education will fully return to the old “normal.” This gives comparativists an opportunity to rise to the occasion to conduct research as to how home schooling and technology can be used to augment the effort in schools in a variety of contexts.

Much has certainly been learnt from the mining of large databases – one of the hallmarks of the field in the past generation (as has been shown by the analysis reported in this paper). But such large databases – at least in their existing form, for example, the results of the PISA test – seem at prima facie to be of limited value in the new tasks proposed for the field. Instead, more emphasis should be given to the study of home schooling (thus far eschewed by comparativists) as another mode of education, and then finer textured (geographical levels smaller than the nation state) analyses. This shift may address the imbalance of studies at various geographical levels (shown in this study). Changes in emphasis may improve the ability of the field to contribute to reforms intended to create more equitable, high-quality, lifelong education for all. This would help in the achievement of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the construction of humanity’s collective vision for education in the world of 2030.

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