

Introducing the special issue on 'Comparative studies in early childhood education: past, present and future'

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Abstract

In recent years, Early Childhood Education (ECE) has emerged as a policy priority for many governments and international organisations. Yet while there has been much research about ECE, and despite some notable exceptions, comparative studies have figured less in ECE than in other sectors of education. This paper introduces the special issue on 'comparative studies in early childhood education'. It provides the rationale for this issue alongside a brief historical overview of the relationship between ECE and comparative education, explaining how the embodiment of diverse forms of comparative enquiry can reveal interplays between policy, politics and practice in the past, present, and future comparative studies of ECE. It concludes by introducing the contrast between comparative education as a 'science of solutions' and as a 'science of difference', concepts that frame the special issue.

Key words: Early Childhood Education, Comparative Education, Science of Difference, Science of Solution

Aims and definitions

The aim of this special issue of *Comparative Education* is to 'stimulate critical reflection and discussion about past work, the present situation and future directions for comparative studies in Early Childhood Education (ECE).' Its articles, we suggested in the proposal to the journal, might 'address historical, social and cultural diversities in early childhood education, espousing various approaches that have been, are being and could be taken to comparative studies in ECE.' While we further suggested that sub-themes of the special issue might 'include diversity and complexity; discussions surrounding the comparison of ECE systems; the roles played by international organisations; the permutations between the local and global; borderlands and disparities of power; and the challenges of policy borrowing strategies for early childhood education.' But before considering the rationale for this special issue on the early childhood sector of education, and the importance attached to diversity and complexity, it is necessary to define the field and the term we have chosen to describe it.

'Early childhood' is defined by UNESCO and others as the period from birth to eight years old, an age span that covers the early years of primary or elementary schooling, as well as

the period before. We have chosen to confine this issue to the period before primary or elementary schooling begins, which varies between countries – often six years, but sometimes five years and occasionally seven or older. A generation ago this might also have been taken to be the border between voluntary and compulsory schooling, but recent years have seen a gradual spread of compulsion to attendance at ‘pre-primary’ education. For example, in 2018 France made attendance obligatory at *école maternelle* (a school for children from 2 to 6 years of age, literally ‘motherly school’) from the age of 3 years (www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-43562029), a step already taken by Hungary some years earlier.

Nevertheless, attendance at services before primary or elementary school remains voluntary in most countries. Moreover, despite considerable variation between these services in different countries, including pedagogy, governance and structure, there is a common starting point. In most, if not every, country, early childhood services have divided origins: some (both in centres and offered in private homes) providing childcare for working mothers, often primarily for poorer families and for children under 3 years; and others (offered in kindergartens or some form of school) with a primarily educational purpose, usually for children over 3 years and often, initially, used mainly by middle class families. In Sweden, for example, the first crèche was opened in 1854, for the children of poor working mothers, and subsequent crèches were mostly run by foundations and churches: ‘they were open from seven in the morning until seven in the evening...The interior was spartan, they had large groups and the staff often had no training’ (Korpi 2007, 13). At the same time, Froebelian kindergartens reached Sweden from Germany, which were ‘open three to four hours a day and were run for purely pedagogical purposes, often by private persons...the children came from affluent, well-educated families...and those working in the kindergartens were liberal, radical women’ (ibid., 13, 15); the first public kindergarten opened in 1904.

From the start, therefore, the early childhood sector was split, between ‘childcare’ services and school or kindergarten services, usually overseen by different branches of government, and differing in terms of regulation, funding, type of provision, workforce and primary purpose. Today a handful of countries have moved beyond this initial split and created a completely integrated early childhood service; for example, in Sweden now nearly all young children go to the same kind of service (a ‘pre-school centre’, legally defined as a school), all children are entitled to a place from 12 months, and there is a common curriculum, a single funding system and a unified workforce based on a specialist early childhood teacher; this seamless system is the responsibility of the Swedish Ministry of Education since 1996.

Such total integration is uncommon. Services in most countries have not escaped their split history, though the degree of integration achieved between childcare and school/kindergarten varies. France, for example, has an early childhood sector that remains almost entirely split between childcare services for children under 3 (*crèches* and family day care) and *écoles maternelles* for children from 2 to 6 years, the former under the Ministry of Solidarity and Health, the latter under the Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports; by contrast, New Zealand has (like Sweden) brought all services under its education ministry, has a common curriculum and has created a workforce largely consisting of specialist early childhood teachers, though services themselves are still split and fragmented. Split systems vary not only in how far they have progressed towards integration, but also in the relative balance between childcare and school/kindergarten services. Childcare services dominate in the Anglophone world, with school or kindergarten provision as junior partner; elsewhere, for example across Continental Europe, nursery school or kindergarten is predominant. This difference is accompanied by difference in governance, with childcare services more often provided privately, schools or kindergartens more often publicly.

Apart from defining the early childhood field, for the purposes of this special issue, as for children below primary school age, we have also chosen to use the term 'early childhood education' (or ECE). Under that heading we include all formal early childhood provision, both in childcare services and in schools or kindergartens. This spread of provision is often referred to as 'early childhood education and care'. We have opted for 'early childhood education' because we want to contest the split between childcare and education services, arguing that all early childhood services should be educational, though we acknowledge that these services can and often do serve many other purposes, and that care, understood as a relational ethic, should be a defining feature of all services for all children.

The rationale for a special issue on comparative studies in ECE

The last 30-40 years has seen increasing interest by governments and international organisations in early intervention policies in general, and ECE in particular. This interest has been sparked by a number of concerns and hopes. ECE, and other forms of early intervention, have come to be seen as a means to mitigate poverty and a range of other social problems, leading to a spate of targeted programmes, especially in the Anglophone world: 'Head Start' in the USA in the mid-1960s, as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, 'Early Start' in Ireland in 1994-1995, 'Aboriginal head Start' in Canada in 1995, 'Sure Start' in England in 1998, 'Best Start' in Victoria, Australia in 2002, 'Flying Start' in Wales in 2007. ECE has further been advocated as a means to support gender equality, as

part of a package of policies to enable more mothers to remain in or re-enter the labour market, and hence also as an economic necessity to help countries make best use of their existing human capital. The economic case has also been made for ECE as a means to provide strong foundations for building future human capital, by providing essential preparation for later educational success.

These arguments have drawn for legitimacy on various research studies and the advocacy of a number of influential academics, notably Professor James Heckman, from the University of Chicago, whose much quoted 'Heckman Curve' purports to show that

the highest rate of economic returns comes from the earliest investments in children, providing an eye-opening understanding that society invests too much money in later development when it is often too late to provide great value. It shows the economic benefits of investing early and building skill upon skill to provide greater success to more children and greater productivity and reduce social spending for society (<https://heckmanequation.org/resource/the-heckman-curve/>).

Armed with such technical evidence and economic arguments, mostly emanating from the Anglophone world, the case for ECE has been adopted and promoted by a range of influential international organisations, including the European Union, UNESCO, the IMF, the World Bank and the OECD. Impervious to questioning and criticism, a dominant discourse has emerged and circulated globally, what has been termed 'the story of quality and high returns':

It is a story of control and calculation, technology and measurement that, in a nutshell, goes like this. Find, invest in and apply the correct human technologies – aka 'quality' - during early childhood and you will get high returns on investment including improved education, employment and earnings and reduced social problems. A simple equation beckons and beguiles: 'early intervention' + 'quality' = increased 'human capital' + national success (or at least survival) in a cut-throat global economy (Moss 2014, 3).

To express scepticism about the often grandiose and naïve claims made for ECE is not to reject the case for ECE, rather to point to how that case has been captured by a particular argument, mainly emanating from the Anglophone world, a case of 'hegemonic globalisation', involving 'the successful globalisation of a particular local and culturally-specific discourse to the point that it makes universal truth claims and 'localises' all rival

discourses' (Santos 2004, 149). Other rationales, expressed in other discourses, are available, including the position that children have the right to education from birth (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005, para.28), but these have had far less influence in national ECE policy development.

While there has been much growth of and research in ECE in recent years, comparative studies have figured less in ECE than in other sectors of education; one indication of this state of affairs is the rare representation of ECE in the journal *Comparative Education*, with just two of the 167 articles published between 2015 and 2021 focused on this sector of education (Sriprakash et al. 2020; Tschurennev 2021)¹. Much past work has taken the form of collecting information on and comparing systems of early childhood education; these studies have often been within Europe, and stimulated by the sustained interest of the European Union in ECE going back to the 1970s and 1980s and the (then) European Economic Community's commitment to promoting gender equality and more female participation in the labour market. Less attention has been paid to the comparative study of what might be called the culture of ECE, the understandings, beliefs and practices that shape what goes on within the structures of ECE, with some notable exceptions such as the ethnographic studies by Tobin and colleagues of 'preschool in three cultures' (Tobin, Wu and Davidson 1989; Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa 2009). The result is that 'while we know rather a lot about the structure of early childhood services, especially in the EU (largely because of its funding of comparative research), we know far less about culture' (Moss 2018, 25).

There are, of course, other possible themes for comparative research. One is the study of the adoption and implementation of policies, for example the movement towards integrating care and education or the relationship between early childhood and compulsory education, where again the tally to date is limited (cf. Cohen et al. 2004, 2021). Another is the measurement and comparison of national performance. It is here that the most recent developments in comparative research have occurred, developments that entail consideration of the changing role of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In 1998, the OECD launched a *Thematic Review of Early Childhood and Care Policy*, which eventually covered 20 member states over the next 8 years. Influenced by a children's rights, as well as a gender equality, perspective, the review based its work on country visits by review teams, consisting of members drawn from other countries. In its two substantial

¹ In addition to these two articles, the first article for this special issue (Tobin 2021) was published online in December 2021

reports, Starting Strong I and II (OECD 2001, 2006), the search for common conclusions and lessons was combined with a recognition of the importance of context and diversity. Shortly after its conclusion, it was claimed that this review was

the most important cross-national study we have had in this field, both for the breadth of material it has brought together and for the rigour and depth of its analysis and conclusions. Moreover, the review addresses policy and provision and practice, an unusual combination in cross-national studies. It is also striking for what has been described as its 'egalitarian, rights-based approach', which places the interests — and rights — of the child at the centre. OECD is an organisation primarily concerned with economic issues, such as employment and productivity; it is therefore a (pleasant) surprise to find the Starting Strong review so concerned not only with children as active subjects, but "taking a broad and holistic approach that considers how policies, services, families, and communities can support young children's early development and learning" (OECD 2006,12) (Moss 2007, 12).

The OECD retained the 'Starting Strong' label. But subsequent Starting Strong reports took on a different tone, dropping the review team method and adopting a narrower focus reflected in their titles: a 'Quality Tool Box for Early Childhood Education and Care' (Starting Strong III, 2012); 'Monitoring Early Childhood Education and care' (Starting Strong IV, 2015); 'Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education' (Starting Strong V, 2017); and 'Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care' (Starting Strong VI, 2021). Most recently, OECD has sought to extend its role in ECE and its repertoire of ILSAs (International Large-Scale Assessments) by introducing a comparative testing regime into this sector. The International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study (IELS) is the OECD's programme to measure and compare 5-year-olds across different countries. As awareness of this project initially spread through the early childhood community, it met widespread criticism (e.g., Moss et al , 2016; Carr, Mitchell & Rameka 2016; Moss and Urban 2017, 2018; Urban & Swadener, 2016), for example for its superficiality, exemplified by the study's disinterest in context and failure to address issues of diversity, and pointlessness, it being unclear to what serious issues such a study could provide answers. Ignoring such questioning, the OECD continued and a first cycle of testing took place in 2018/19, though only three countries (England, Estonia and the United States) volunteered to participate. A second round of testing is now proposed, with OECD seeking more countries to participate.

The present situation is, therefore, one where a major new initiative in comparative studies of ECE is seeking to establish itself. Given this context, the rationale for this special issue

has been not only to help stimulate more comparative studies in ECE; but also, to stimulate thought and discussion about the purpose and form that these studies might take. What, in short, might and should be the future direction for the comparative study of ECE? This very short history of OECD's involvement illustrates both that there are alternatives, but also that comparative studies in ECE risk being dominated by a particular approach, one that we find deeply problematic as symptomatic of 'a science of solutions.'

A science of solutions or a science of difference?

In framing the purpose of this special issue, we were strongly influenced by a discussion raised by António Nóvoa, in which he contrasts two approaches to comparative education: the concept of a 'science of solution' and the concept of a 'science of difference' (Nóvoa 2018). Nóvoa's argument is that there has been a 'solutionist drift of Comparative Education...[involving] an uncritical appropriation and generalisation of global solutions' (ibid., 551). That 'drift' partly involves the emergence and global distribution of prescriptions for governments to follow, based on what Nóvoa terms 'evidence on what works' and 'where the best results are.' This is closely complemented by 'a new phase of Comparative Education [from the 1960s], marked by numbers: '[p]erhaps we can call it "*dataism*,"... a celebration of "big data", allowing experts to prescribe the best solutions for the different educational systems' (ibid., 550). Comparison, in this case through the education achievement of students, is defined as 'a powerful instrument to prescribe solutions and, even, to foster new modes of governance' (ibid.). Such Comparative education, Nóvoa concludes, 'has strongly contributed to a homogenised view of education, which draws on the examples, images, and models of the "Anglo-Saxon North"... [giving] rise to an "incestuous writing" that produces and reproduces the same argument' (Nóvoa 2018, 553)

Over time and through this solutionist drift in comparative education, OECD has established itself as monitor and arbiter of the conduct of compulsory education, both measuring performance and dispensing prescriptions. Now, it is seeking to extend these roles to ECE, through the increasingly technical and managerial direction taken by Starting Strong, becoming a leading narrator of 'the story of quality and high returns', and now attempting to add 'big data' through the IELTS. As time passes, OECD's earliest Starting Strong work fades from memory, although it provides an example, or at least a precursor, to Nóvoa's 'science of difference'.

Dismissing the 'science of solutions', as a 'pragmatic approach [that] is based on the false idea of consensus on the aims of education and the paths to achieving them', Nóvoa proposes an alternative approach:

The construction of a more problematised Comparative Education, which avoid [sic] the error of assuming as “natural” or “obvious” solutions that, in fact, derive from the methods of work, research, and comparison that have been adopted...[and which includes] [t]he gesture of estrangement, that is, the ability to see the unknown and therefore to distance ourselves from what is already known, opening up to new possibilities of thinking that are not limited to the “naturalization” of solutions that come from a unifying vision of education (ibid., 551).

This approach to Comparative Education seeks to *develop three lines of work*:

To build a *science of difference*, rather than a ‘solution’ that tends to homogenise educational directions throughout the world; To *strengthen the public space*, instead of contributing to the authority of experts, as if they alone possessed the type of knowledge that can be transformed into policy; To *revitalize the common*, instead of yielding to the current fragmentation, a world of hyper-individualization in which we only interact with what is similar to us (ibid., 552)

Nóvoa offers a personal and blunt conclusion: ‘I want to stress what should be obvious, but unfortunately is not: if not a science of difference, Comparative Education is nothing.... [CE must participate in a] science that allows a plurality of perspectives and ways of thinking’ (ibid., 553).

We have argued that ECE has, to date, experienced a comparative deficit. Given its increasing presence and importance, globally, it merits more such studies. But what direction should future work take? The ‘solutionist’ drift with its science of solutions is already embedded, with the dominance of the ‘story of quality and high returns’, and the search for effective human technologies (‘quality’) that will maximise returns on investment in early interventions; and now with the prospect of OECD extending its regime of testing and big data into ECE. But we also have some indications of what a different direction, a ‘science of difference’, might offer. These indications include OECD’s earlier work on ECE, reported in the Starting Strong I and II reports, and whose second and final report ended not with the prescription of universal solutions, but with policy areas ‘proposed for consideration’ by governments and stakeholders. These, the authors insisted, were ‘not intended to be normalising orientations’. Sound policy they added, and resonating with Nóvoa’s ‘desire to strengthen the public space’

cannot be a quick fix from outside but more a matter of democratic consensus generated by careful consultation with the major stakeholders. Official policy in the early childhood field can meet resistance or be ignored unless it is based on prior consultations with the major stakeholders, and provides a space for local initiative and experimentation (OECD 2006, 10).

Contributions to this special issue

Following the normal practice of *Comparative Education*, we have invited authors to contribute to this special issue, though acceptance of their proposals and articles was subject to approval by the journal's editorial board and usual review processes. In making our invitations, we sought to ensure some diversity of contributors, in terms of gender, ethnicity, area of work and stage of career. There is a diversity, too, in the themes of their articles, though not in broad approach. All are, in Nóvoa's terms, working with the science of difference rather than the science of solutions. For it seemed to us that the latter already had a privileged position, through the visibility and power of OECD, other international organisations and their influence with governments, so justifying the foregrounding of alternative approaches and positions.

The special issue begins with a contribution from a pioneer of comparative research into ECE, Joseph Tobin (2021) in the United States. Drawing on long and deep experience he argues the case for International comparative ethnographic studies in ECE settings, describes effective strategies for conducting them, and provides examples of how this approach can impact research, practice, and policy. Among the issues he addresses are the rationale for selecting countries for comparison, the formation of a research team, and distributing interpretive voice and power.

The second article, by Akiko Hayashi (2022) in Japan, shows how a comparative ethnographic study has been used to research the development of expertise in preschool teaching in three countries and to identify both similarities and culturally specific differences in what the participants have to say about characteristics of less and more experienced teachers and also how expertise is fostered. Among issues raised are problematizing the role of remembering and reflection in professional practice and the value of experience.

The next article, by Jennifer Guevera (2022), working in Ireland but from Argentina, argues that standardised approaches to comparison that assume nation states are the natural and necessary unit for comparative study are prevalent in ECE. But drawing on

studies in Argentina, she argues that a full understanding of ECE systems, especially in federal countries, calls also for research at subnational levels, which enable the reconstruction of the different actors and institutions at play in all levels of ECE systems.

Next, Yuwei Xu, Michele Schweisfurth and Barbara Read (2022), in the United Kingdom, examine an important subject in ECE: men's participation (or lack of it) in the workforce. In the context of a global narrative about the need to have more men working in ECE, their article presents findings from a study conducted in Scotland and China that explores how male and female practitioners and children talk about gender and how gendered relationships and roles are 'performed' in practice settings.

In her article, Amita Gupta (2022), working in the United States but from India, encompasses two sub-themes identified for this special issue: the roles played by international organisations and the challenges of policy borrowing strategies for early childhood education. She provides a critical analysis of the influence of the US-originated Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) approach, with its emphasis on "play-based, activity-based, and discovery-based learning", on the ECE section of the Indian Government's latest version of its National Education Policy issued in 2020.

The final submitted article, by Mathias Urban (2022), in Ireland but from Germany, addresses a key issue: the ability of influential actors and organisations in the field to adequately embrace issues of diversity and context. This, he argues, means abandoning the dominant paradigm of ECE - the paradigm of the universal, individual child and its development, of decontextualised knowledge and its creation, of simplistic measurement and comparison, and of policies and practices as tools for solving distinct social problems by distinct professions and academic disciplines. In its place, he calls for a paradigm that embraces multiplicity, diversity, ambiguity, uncertainty and shared situated knowledge creation.

The special issue concludes with the editors' reflections on possible future directions for the comparative study of ECE, addressing the key issues of purpose, paradigm, position and power, and arguing for a 'science of difference' with a clear political and ethical basis that welcomes and embraces openness and contestability, diversity and complexity. They also call for dialogue between those working with different approaches, a dialogue based on a general recognition of alternatives and that choices have been made between them.

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