Concluding reflections: current issues and future directions for comparative studies in early childhood education

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Abstract

In this article, we consider the current state of comparative studies in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and set out proposals for future directions, in particular contesting the increasing dominance of a 'science of solutions' and proposing the benefits and implications of pursuing a 'science of difference' (Nóvoa 2018). By adopting a 'critical' perspective and working with Nóvoa's concepts, we draw on the papers included in this special issue, to debate issues of purpose, paradigm, position, and power, alongside their significance for the comparative study of ECE. We argue that respecting and valuing diversity discourages solutionist technocratic comparative education approaches. The article maps directions from the past to the present and connects them with the future of comparative education in ECE as a diversity engaged, ethical and democratic 'science'.

Key words: Early Childhood Education, Comparative Education, Purpose, Paradigm, Positionality, Power, Science of Difference, Science of Solution, Complexity and Diversity

What can we learn from comparative studies in early childhood education?

Although we have argued in the introduction to this special issue that early childhood education (ECE) has a 'comparative deficit', there have still been a number of important and varied studies. Within these, we can identify three types. The first, including some of the most notable and critical studies in the past, have focused on cross-cultural research approaches to provide insights on how to understand culturally and socially framed provisions/services and pedagogies across different countries (e.g., Alexander 2001, Cameron and Moss 2007; Tobin et al. 1989; Tobin et al. 2009). The second, descriptive and analytical studies, have included early work by the OECD on early childhood policies and services, Starting Strong I and Starting Strong II (OECD 2001, 2006), and the SEEPRO (Systems of Early Education and Professionalisation) workforce profile studies (Oberhuemer and Schreyer 2010, 2017). Such studies provide comparative information on ECE systems, highlighting differences, and adding to our understanding of diversity and complexity. And the third and most recent have focused on the comparison of 'outcomes', most notably with the introduction of OECD's programme to measure and compare 5-year-olds across different countries, entitled the International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study (IELS)

(OECD 2020). This study represents a further attempt to extend this organisation's matrix of international large-scale assessments of children, young people, and adults.

In our introduction, we also set out how we have been 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'. The 'science of solution', aspiring to the status of an empirical and positivist science, assumes that cross-national measurement of standardised outcomes can lead to universal laws able to deliver more effective methods and improved performance. While the 'science of difference', framed within a paradigm (or paradigms) valuing diversity, complexity, and critical thinking, works to build pluralistic and contextualised understandings of policy, pedagogy, and practice. In this special issue, we have made the deliberate choice to explore the 'science of difference' approach, inviting contributions that have highlighted differences in the comparative analysis of ECE by engaging with 'narratives of possibility' framed within the multiple diversities of cultures, societies, peoples' stories, and geographies.

Specifically, in this special issue, Joseph Tobin (2021) encouraged us to look at the relevance and contribution of comparative multivocal ethnographic approaches, which value diversity, to the study and practice of ECE. Akiko Hayashi (2022) took this debate further by highlighting the recognition of similarities and culturally specific notions, in comparative ethnographic studies across countries. Jennifer Guevara (2022) raised critical questions about the impact of methodological nationalism, which encourages broad claims that are far from local realities and emphasised the need to acknowledge and embrace the complexities of comparing multi-layered systems of ECE in federal countries. Yuwei Xu, Michele Schweisfurth and Barbara Read (2022) maintained that it is essential for comparative research to include observations and voices of stakeholders in the ECE field (including teachers and children) to bring further awareness of how global discourses are enacted in local diverse realities. Amita Gupta (2022) described the importance of identifying global and local narratives which recognise the cultural hybridity of local beliefs and ways of learning in policy borrowing strategies. And Mathias Urban (2022) identified future directions for comparative studies of ECE, turning away from the paradigm of decontextualised knowledge and its creation and making a paradigmatic shift that embraces multiplicity, diversity, ambiguity, uncertainty and shared situated knowledge creation.

These articles contribute to the reflection that, as an interdisciplinary area centred on a geographical perspective of education, comparative education has evolved into several configurations rooted within diverse political agendas and various epistemological beliefs

(Cowen 2018). In other words, ‘there is not one comparative education but several’ (ibid., 16). One parameter of difference concerns contrasting understandings of ‘science’, which brings us back to the distinction Nóvoa (2018) draws between the concepts of a 'science of solution' and a ‘science of difference’. While we do not wish to present comparative studies in ECE as an ‘either/or’ binary ‘science’, nor do we simplistically equate them with quantitative and qualitative methods respectively, we do find these two perspectives helpful to reflect upon central questions raised in the papers included in the special issue, questions that highlight key issues in the comparative study of ECE, namely about purpose, paradigm, position, and power.

Purpose

A variety of purposes can be put forward as rationales for conducting comparative research in ECE. For instance, within the ‘science of solution’, the purpose of comparative education is driven by contemporary technical discourses that hold out the promise of identifying effective means through research. Expressed in terms such as ‘what works’, ‘best practice’, ‘data-driven evidence’ and ‘quality’ to name but a few, these means are presented to realise the promise of high returns on investment, a promise that has done so much to stimulate recent policy interest in ECE (the ‘story of quality and high returns’ referred to in our introduction). The science of solutions, therefore, seeks to elaborate generic one-size fits all solutions about ‘what works’ and ‘best practice’, while simplifying and reducing alternatives (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013; Auld and Morris, 2016). Instrumental purposes such as these, transform comparative education into a ‘system of governance’, not only because they are increasingly driving education policy, but also because they contribute to the creation of mechanisms of prediction and control (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal, 2003; Grek, 2009). This technical and economistic rationality encourages a form of comparative education that follows a self-serving utilitarian purpose that risks comparative researchers neglecting the nuances of what they observe. Hayashi (2022) argued in her article in this special issue that by falling into ‘dataism’ and ‘solutionism’ “we may overlook nuances that the data is showing” (p.18), consequently losing sight of complexity. (A point that again contests reducing quantitative and qualitative methods to an either/or binary choice, emphasising rather the importance of how findings using either approach are viewed, treated and interpreted).

In this context, special attention must be given to the impact that international governmental organisations, and in particular the OECD, are having in promoting these purposes to the comparative study of ECE by positioning themselves as neutral and objective scientific specialists capable of creating universal educational solutions that can be applied to most contexts to perfect education (see Beech 2012). This runs the risk that national education contexts are handled as 'matters of fact' rather than 'matters of concern' (Sobe and Kowalczyk 2014), forming and informing discourses that have the power to govern and influence thinking about what is desirable and narrowing what is possible. This 'problem-solving-attitude', characterized by Cowen (2018) as the 'domestication of comparative education', has been pivotal in (re)producing normalising discourses that do not account for other ways of 'educating' and (im)posing 'values', 'comparative data', and 'facts', which may or may not be relevant to the realities of those being educated.

By contrast, in the study of ECE within the 'science of difference', comparative studies can be perceived as predominantly idealist, with emphasis given to constructing understandings and explanations of local experiences and realities. Such studies suggest a purpose for comparative research that is very different to solutionism: to provoke thought and questioning, re-consideration and re-assessment, what Nikolas Rose (1999, 20) refers to as 'interrupting the fluency of [dominant] narratives…and making them stutter'.

This theme is developed by Tobin (2021) in his article in this special issue, when he explains how the types of ethnographic comparative studies with which he works have the purpose of 'challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, expanding the menu of the possible, and illuminating the processes of global circulation of early childhood education policies and practices' (p.2.). One example of these studies is Tobin et al.'s (1989) *Preschool in Three Cultures*, 'a study not only of three cultures' preschools but also of three cultures as seen through their preschools' (p.2). Through its comparative purpose, this research (and research of this kind) enables an understanding of ECE as a complex field of study, where early childhood education settings are rooted within their nations, cultures, societies, and local communities, and where communities of parents, teachers and children contribute to the maintenance and transformation of society. Reflecting on this research, Tobin concludes that one of its most important contributions was to have confronted more than a few perceived 'truths that are held to be self-evident in the West… becoming less sure, and therefore more open to other possibilities of what one can do with young children' (Tobin 2021, 2-3). It is this unsettling of taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs that reinforces the purpose of comparative education as a humanistic activity framed by an interpretative epistemology, which aims to understand and explain how ECE complex realities are developed and manifested, rather than to elaborate simplified generic speculations of one-size-fits all solutions.

We find a similar purpose acknowledged by the OECD in its early comparative work on ECE, undertaken before its more recent turn to a science of solutions with the development of the IELS:

> Comparative, cross-national research identifies specific policies and practices from which people in other countries can draw inspiration. Its intention is not to identify "models" for imitation or to construct league tables, but to assist policy makers to think more broadly and critically about ECEC. To this end, the thematic reviews of ECEC, conducted under the auspice of OECD Ministers for Education, contribute to knowledge and understanding of this field. Comparative research links well with educational anthropology and socio-cultural theory, and provides a prism or lens to identify the unquestioned assumptions, discourses and practices of one's own country (Moss, 2001). It reveals important differences in management and practice, for example, the wide range of public funding or child-staff ratios practised across different OECD countries. The awareness of such differences can lead to a reassessment of domestic policy, and provide an impetus to further research on important issues, *e.g.* on the cultural underpinnings of ECEC practice (see, for example, Tobin *et al*., 1989, Rayna and Brougère, 2000), on funding patterns or the relative importance across countries of literacy and numeracy practices. (OECD 2006, 190)

Such comparative studies, acting as a resource for critical thinking, are needed because 'people everywhere are embedded in cultural, taken-for-granted thinking, which is both a strength and a weakness' (Bennett and Leonarduzzi 2004, 28) when thinking about the education of young children (or, indeed, anything else). Consequently, adults and governments draw on previous experiences to decide how children should be educated in the present, despite the transformations of societies throughout time, despite the unpredictability of the future and despite the ever-presence of alternatives. This leads to the well-known policy phenomenon of 'path dependency', with its adherence to more of the same, and the failure to imagine or engage with other possibilities.

Comparative education as a provocation to thought through encounters with difference can also offer a further purpose: seeking explanations, both for phenomena observed and the differences between them. Not just comparing systems, practices or pedagogies, but seeking to understand the reasons for differences, from which learning and collaborations can emerge (Bennett and Leonarduzzi 2004). These collaborations should be treated as opportunities to deepen understandings of the past and the present, while presenting possibilities for the future, and not as ideas (policies, curriculum, pedagogies) that can be copied, possibilities that 'must be developed in the historical and cultural context of each country [region or locality]. In this political work, each country [region or locality] must take a position about values and goals for the next generation, and by that relate their culture to other cultures' (Bennett and Leonarduzzi 2004, 28).

The diversity of purposes leads to distinct types of studies, in terms of the methodologies they employ, the discourses and narratives that they produce, and the influences that they have in policy and practice. But despite these differences, one could argue that a common feature of comparative research in ECE is its tendency for searching for practical applications. Often, comparative studies in ECE seek not only to understand and explain, but also to transform educational thinking and practice within different countries for the 'better'. The 'better' as a subjective notion that depends on the perspectives of who is either carrying out the study or who is making the choice of what value to take from it. Which brings us to continue this discussion in the light of the issues of paradigm, positionality, and power.

Paradigm

Paradigm has a profound effect on research and we live, it has been claimed, in a period of 'paradigm proliferation' (Lather 2006). Thomas Kuhn, in his landmark book 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', defined paradigm as a global organizing model or theory with great explanatory power. A broader definition is paradigm as 'a basic belief system through the lens of which we see, interpret and make sense of the world and our experiences in it…a worldview or a mindset [consisting] of an assemblage or bundle of ideas, assumptions and values' (Moss 2019, 28). Paradigms are important when thinking about the comparative study of ECE because they underpin research questions and determine investigative approaches/methodologies which are framed by beliefs and conceptions about the nature, role, and purpose(s) of ECE (OECD 2006). Rather than 'simplistic categorisations of knowledge' (UNESCO 2021, 125), it is essential to recognise the importance of paradigms as 'complex and relational ecologies of knowledge' (ibid.), which enable understandings of the 'multiple ways of going about educational research' (Lather 2006, 52). In this way, certain paradigms are more likely to contribute to the ambitious purpose of explaining and understanding the functioning of education in its relationship with the broad social context.

In the past, the data analysis of comparative studies in education was mostly qualitative. The predilection for qualitative data ensued from historical, constructivist, naturalist, and interpretative attitudes and was entrenched within a 'paradigm of continuous interaction between the researcher and the object-theme researched' (Rust et al. 2012, 165) within its contextual reality. By its very nature, the ‘science of difference’ focuses on the purpose of understanding and explaining while working with paradigms, which as Urban (2022) describes in his article in this special issue, value ‘multiplicity, diversity, ambiguity, and shared, situated co-creation of knowledge’ (p.11).

This is in stark contrast with more recent comparative education studies that have attracted the attention of policymakers and research funders today, which have privileged large-scale quantitative evidence. These studies are orchestrated within the ‘science of solution’, which while it often fails to acknowledge paradigm, in fact, adopts a positivistic paradigm that

> takes a position that applies views about how the natural world can be examined and understood to the social world of human beings and human societies. Understanding is viewed as being akin to measuring. As the ways we try to understand the world are reduced to issues of measurement, the focus of understanding becomes more concerned with procedural problems. The challenge then for understanding the social world becomes one developing operational definitions of phenomena which are reliable and valid. (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 42)

In academia, paradigms that have already been established are very unlikely to be voluntarily and quietly dismissed. In this regard, as Patti Lather (2006) suggests, we might be better oriented towards

> … finding our way into a less comfortable social science full of stuck places and difficult philosophical issues of truth, interpretation and responsibility. Neither reconciliation nor paradigm war, this is about thinking difference differently, a reappropriation of contradictory available scripts to create alternative practices of research as a site of being and becoming. (Lather 2006, 52)

So, rather than supporting one paradigm or another, we conclude that the important lesson for comparative studies is the need to acknowledge the inescapability of paradigm and the profound significance of paradigmatic choice, hence the ubiquity of paradigmatic perspectives, which in turn contributes to the creation of positionality.

Position(ality)

Position(ality) and perspective support webs of identity and geographies of self which cultivate cultural, social, and political sensitivities and subjectivities that can translate the ways we interpret and understand realities and belonging (Anzaldúa 2015). In this sense, positionality is not to be understood in the narrow perception of the term, which identifies one's position as a mere consequence of one's layers of identity that alone can provide/sustain one's view of the world. In other words, we are not indicating that the *identity position* of who is doing the research should be more emphatic than what is being researched (Vickers 2020). As stated by Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 52) there are positions within time and space in which people and events are located, but these cannot necessarily be described as distinct categories of thought'. Positionality is indeed connected with identity and the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, race, class, ability, geography, etc. But it is also much more than that. One's position(ality) reflects a 'genealogical, cultural and political set of experiences' (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 12).

Building on the work of Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Lather (2006) explains that positionality shifts 'attention away from universalizing categories of difference and toward historically located subjects, rather than identity…'; she elaborates by stating that 'positionality is about historical inscription, multiplicity and specificity: situated selves, power regimes and contested meanings' (Lather 2006, 44). In this perspective, positionality can be about identifying different positioning(s) within disciplines, cultures, languages, paradigms, the local and global educational fields, etc., and perhaps most importantly, positionality can be about understanding how discourses are moved within these positions, and how discourses can be transformed by moving from one positioning to another (Beech 2012).

Tobin (2021) argues in this special issue that in comparative studies of ECE 'the positionality of the researchers matters' (p.9), and it matters to balance insiders' and outsiders' perspectives within members of the research team, and to promote the sharing of diversity of experiences, which can lead the research to new unexamined places. Graham and Horejes (2017, 56) contend that 'the positionality of any researcher influences the data collection of their research directly or indirectly, which in turn has an impact on the research being conducted'. More than the collection and then analysis of data, there is also the process of its interpretation, and the role that positionality can have in emphasising nuance and avoiding essentialism. In her article, *Some Japanese ways of conducting comparative educational research*, Hayashi (2021, 148) offers a nuanced explanation of how her positioning as a Japanese researcher, which she terms her 'Japanese-ness', is a factor of influence in her research:

> I am… aware of the danger of suggesting that I conduct research the way I do because I am Japanese. To be clear from the outset, I am not arguing that all Japanese educational researchers do research the way I do, or that there are not

non-Japanese researchers who do research in some of these ways. On the other hand, I also reject and find odd the idea that my way of doing research could have nothing to do with my Japanese-ness.

To adopt an awareness of our positionality as researchers is a meaningful act in the comparative study of ECE because it involves a reflection upon our positioning 'in relation to others' (Takacs 2002), and to our sense of connectedness with the culture(s) under research, the language(s) being used to understand and communicate ideas and interpretations, and the situated meanings of our agency and power. Graham and Horejes (2017, 64) maintain that 'when we consider our positionalities and understand how they can be viewed as a leverage of power, we can acknowledge these concepts and accept our place in the community in order to open the gates for deeper understanding'.

Positionality in this sense can reflect the epistemic, historical, political and socio-cultural experiences, values and beliefs of researchers. It can be attributed to time, location, the questions that are asked and the methodologies that are chosen. It can be a tool to both empower and disempower individual and collective notions of expertise, and above all, as a recognition of one's 'unfinishedness' (Freire 1998), positionality can be a powerful means for relating to others and to listen. For as Takacs (2002,171) states, '[o]nly by truly listening to others can I see how I am constrained and how I can become aware of the conceptual shackles imposed by my own identity and experiences'.

Thinking specifically about the 'sciences' that we have been exploring in this paper, we could argue that engaging with 'positionings', as described above, sits most comfortably with the 'science of difference' as both acknowledge and welcome researchers as hybrid situated beings who can at the same time inhabit multiple positions. In contrast, the 'science of solution' assumes objectivity and universality – the 'god's eye' gaze of either one superior position, or else no position at all, raising questions about the importance of considering the role of power.

Power

Power intersects with purposes, paradigms, and positionality. It interferes with the production, appropriation and expropriation of knowledge(s), and can lead to dominance or resistance. In the comparative research of ECE, it can be argued that power is not 'linear nor necessarily positive or negative' (Cannella 2000, 42), but rather it is an inescapable part of our construction as human 'objects, agents, subjects – thinkers, learners, teachers – adults and children' (ibid.) and can take many different forms. Critical reflections about power in the comparative study of ECE are, therefore, essential to understand influences on constructions of ECE policy, research, and practice (see Elfert and Morris 2022).

Within the ‘science of difference’, comparative studies in ECE assume a power-sensitive posture, and adopt critical perspectives in which realities are perceived as being subjective and subjected to historical, cultural, and socio-political constructions, which take into consideration local and global issues of power (Lather 2006). For example, Xu et al. (2022), in their article in this special issue, emphasised how the interpretation of gender performativity in ECE is embedded within power relations, which influence and are influenced by diverse socio-cultural contexts, also highlighting ‘the relationality of power in practitioner-child interactions and the agency of children within this’ (p.11). In the same vein, by exploring ECE policy borrowing within fluid boundaries in the third space of cultural hybridity, Gupta (2022, 4) in this special issue explains how ‘postcolonial space is created [and] characterised by layers of power dynamics’.

These examples can be used to suggest that power and power relations are of substantial importance for the comparative study of ECE for several reasons. One is that although power can take many different forms and be interpreted and enacted in diverse ways depending on socio-political-historical-cultural-economic realities, through comparative research we can learn that ‘transversal’ struggles (e.g., the patriarchal power of men over women, of parents and teachers over children, of governments over people) are not restricted to individual countries (Foucault 1983, online). Another is that there is value in researchers creating an awareness of how sometimes their choices about certain aspects of their research, and the language they use to interpret them, cannot happen without the acknowledgement of power (Giroux and McLaren 1992). Additionally, the recognition of the unavoidability of power (Foucault 1995) and ideas of hybridity within the paradigm of ‘proliferation of differences’ (Lather 2006), can support a resistance to, or escape from, mechanisms of power which rely on surveillance and control, and which tend to be visible in the ‘science of solutions’.

The ‘science of solutions’ is underpinned by an unacknowledged relationship between power and knowledge, in which powerful individuals, governments and international organisations recognise the knowledge offered by this science as officially sanctioned truths, while in turn the knowledge offered by this science, for example results from international large-scale assessments, validates the policy positions taken by such powerful actors. This power/knowledge nexus helps explain how and why the science of solutions and its practitioners, such as the OECD, are so readily and uncritically accepted by policymakers as sources of real/true knowledge, while the science of difference is ignored or dismissed. Broad dominant discourses prescribing answers to educational problems are thus generated on the back of a universal technocratic solutionism that leads to what Freire (1998) called the 'nonsense of imitative thinking' and reproduction of sameness. 'The communicative power of these discourses resides in this complex combination between stability and malleability, and between discursive limitations and reinterpretation' (Beech 2009, 355). Given this closed and incestuous relationship between power and knowledge, we can pose the question: where are the spaces for renewal?

Where do we go from here? Future directions for comparative studies in early childhood education

We refer in our introduction to Nóvoa's (2018) stark conclusion: 'I want to stress what should be obvious, but unfortunately is not***:*** if not a science of difference, Comparative Education is nothing' (553). Comparative Education, therefore, must participate in a 'science that allows a plurality of perspectives and ways of thinking' (ibid., 556). We agree, and believe that the approaches and reflections in the articles in this special issue support the principles embedded within the 'science of difference'. All provide an understanding of possible future directions for the comparative study of ECE following this particular approach. Having said that, we do not wish to ignore or disdain those who choose to work with a 'science of solutions'. Rather, we would welcome dialogue between those who follow these different approaches, and indeed with those who choose other approaches to comparative education. But the precondition for such dialogue is a recognition on all sides of alternatives and of choices made.

It also seems to us that the adoption of a 'science of difference' calls for the fostering in comparative studies of ECE of a political and ethical vision of comparative education that embraces complexity, diversity, plurality, uncertainty, surprise, and unpredictability as central values, values we believe to be inherent in this approach. Politically, this means a democratic orientation and practice that follows Nóvoa's linkage of the 'science of difference' with 'strengthening the public space' and 'revitalizing the common'. Ethically, a democratic science of difference means contesting 'the Western tradition of totalisation of the other…' (Dahlberg and Moss 2005, p.79) and adopting the ethics of an encounter, an ethics associated with the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas that respects the alterity of the Other and resists the will to know when manifested as making the Other into the Same. In this way, adopting an 'ethics of an encounter' contests the 'science of solution', which epitomises the will to know and the need to grasp the Other, to make the Other into the Same, through its commitment to standardisation, classification and universal principals and laws. The question, then, raised by adopting this ethical approach in comparative education is ‘how the encounter with Otherness, with difference, can take place as responsibly as possible’ (Dahlberg 2003, 270).

Working with a science of difference, inscribed with a democratic and ethical identity, we round off these conclusions with some reflections on the need for possible future directions for comparative studies in early childhood education to acknowledge and welcome the qualities of openness and contestability, diversity and complexity.

Openness and contestability

Openness and contestability in the comparative study of ECE require an understanding that the courses of action which determine what to research, who and how to research it, and the results that emerge from that process are matters of choice rather than fact. An openness to acknowledging and making visible issues of purpose, paradigm, position(ality) and power is necessary to enable spaces in which comparative research and the choices underpinning it can be contested. This also opens up for a critical approach to comparative studies of ECE, especially towards those that Nóvoa (2018, 550) describes as ‘marked by numbers: … a celebration of “big data”, allowing experts to prescribe the best solutions for the different educational systems’. The prospect for the future comparative study of ECE as a ‘science of difference’ would be, in this light, one which avoids technical rationalism and reductionism as the answer to comparative enquiry; but which offers an envisioned future that openly discusses purpose, paradigm, position, and power and which invites historical, political, economic, cultural, geographical, and social values to be examined and debated within those acknowledged positions/perspectives.

In their ground-breaking comparative study of ECE, Tobin et al. (1989) assumed this perspective, arguing that comparative research serves the purpose of opening for critiquing and contesting what we think we know from our own realities and as a form of documentation of the diversity of individual and institutional beliefs. Such openness and contestability in the ECE field are about questioning the 'grand narratives and narrow scientific truths' that are applied to children independently of their life circumstances or realities. Through openness and contestability, comparative ECE researchers can unveil hidden and visible social-cultural-historical-economic-political agendas and embrace a commitment to amplifying the voices of those affected by this research (children, educators, parents).

Openness can be furthered by embracing the intrinsic trans-disciplinarity in which ECE systems are situated. As Mathias Urban has written in this special issue, “[s]uch comparative scholarship, too, would investigate the geo-graphical and geo-political *heres*, the loci, of practice, policy, and lived experience” (Urban 2022, 13, original emphasis). In this, both ECE and comparative education are understood as inter/transdisciplinary and pluralist fields, which in combination can contribute to the broadening of research and the emergence of communities of open and contestable critical and interpretative knowledge(s), opposing the universal promotion of prescriptions, which overlook ECE’s philosophical and pedagogical complexity and diversity.

Complexity and diversity

The comparative study of ECE should not ignore the complexity and diversity of the field. In the six articles presented in this special issue, we can identify diversity within concepts, understandings, practices, parameters, methods, and language(s), to name a few. The comparative study of ECE commands attention to these diversities as they manifest the values, ideas and practices of real-life experiences in the ECE world. This is reflected in Tobin’s (2021) paper in this special issue, when he writes of the multiple layers involved in his ‘polyvocal’ and ‘polysemic’ approaches to the comparative study of ECE, describing a range of different voices and viewpoints from across nations and beyond. Aligned with this, he argues that a benefit and responsibility of comparative research should be to stimulate conscientisation that not only ECE practices, but also theories and understandings, are diverse (Tobin 2021).

Understandings, interpretations and translations of meanings are central aspects to consider in comparative research. Within these, the acknowledgement and visibility of the diversity contained in languages and concepts, as well as positionings and perspectives, are fundamental. Anzaldúa’s chicana feminisms scholarship within and beyond social structures, cultures, and languages, illustrates these perspectives. Drawing inspiration from her work, we could interpret comparative researchers as intermediaries in-between diverse worlds and realities who have responsibility for how they interpret, translate, communicate and ‘grasp the thoughts, emotions, languages, and perspectives associated with varying individual and cultural positions’ (Anzaldúa 2015, 82). In this context, we could argue comparative researchers occupy a vital position that enables them to question and contest taken for granted assumptions often embedded within power structures, privilege and oppressions, while at the same time dealing with ‘conflictive as well as connectionist relations within and among various groups’ (ibid.).

It is fundamental that comparative researchers recognise that concepts can have/represent diverse intersectionalities, various constructions of realities and different translanguaging interplays. In her paper in this special issue, Gupta (2022) reflected upon the challenges brought by comparative studies in ECE that universalise/standardise seemingly unproblematic terms that can have multiple meanings depending on the realities in which they are applied. As she exemplifies, in the comparative study of ECE, words and concepts such as ‘play’ and ‘wellbeing’ are ‘understood differently across diverse cultural worldviews’ (Gupta 2022, 22), which highlights the importance and power of comparative researchers when handling these concepts across cultures, societies, and realities.

The diversities and complexities encompassed in social and cultural worldviews demand recognition of possible circular relationships between global and local educational discourses, which can be adapted, recontextualised and reconceptualised to either form new discourses or reinforce familiar ones. Giroux and McLaren (1992, 7) argue that

> …discourse is inextricably tied not just to the proliferation of meanings, but also to the production of individual and social identities over time within conditions of inequality. As a political issue, language operates as a site of struggle among different groups who for various reasons police its borders, meanings, and orderings. Pedagogically, language provides the self-definitions upon which people act, negotiate various subject positions, and undertake a process of naming and renaming the relations between themselves, others, and the world.

Yet despite the importance of language(s) in working with diversity and complexity, it is often either ignored or deemed a problem in research, opening the way for the dominance of the English language to conduct and disseminate educational research, with little or no consideration given to the implication, for example losing the ‘real’ meanings, nuances, and subjectivities of some of the experiences being investigated. As Walter Lorenz has observed the ‘pragmatic‘ solution of adopting English, ‘with all the associated, exclusionary consequences’ is frequently agreed on to ensure results, but without

> enough time and space to explore the subtleties of discovering meaning through non-comprehension…and yet, it would be precisely the non-understanding which could give us the most valuable clues to differences in meaning, to the need for further clarification of familiar terms and concepts, to the transformation of taken-for-granted perspectives into creative, shared knowledge (Lorenz 1999, 20-21)

Lorenz touches on the ease with which much of importance may be lost in translation, just one example of the losses caused by failing to take difference seriously. He also suggests that linguistic diversity could be a resource rather than a problem and serve different purposes, including forming and unforming identities (ibid.).

The risks posed by the spread of English, and its uncritical adoption as a lingua franca was also recognised by the OECD, again in its early interest in the comparative study of ECE, before its 'dataism' turn. Its Starting Strong II report states

> Given that paradigms underpinning research questions and approaches are determined by particular understandings of the early childhood field, the current dominant place of English-speaking countries in research dissemination is a concern. The research focuses of the English-speaking countries reflect concepts and definitions of early childhood that do not necessarily correspond to the traditions of other countries or to their aspirations for young children (see the discussion in Bowman *et al.*, 2001 on this subject). In addition, many of the themes circulating in English-language ECEC research are derivatives of education research, as ECEC services are often subsumed under education in the English speaking world. In this situation, a predominant focus on standards, instruction methods, cognitive outcomes, the mastery of literacy and numeracy skills at an early age, targeted programming and the like tends to occur – themes that may not be of central interest to ECEC in countries with different socio-economic organisation and traditions.

A challenge for the future of comparative studies in ECE, indeed for all ECE research, is to critically discuss the problems posed by linguistic homogeneity, and how best some of the more serious consequences can be mitigated.

Comparative studies of ECE must also recognise and embrace other varied parameters of diversity and complexity, for example: the exploration not only of national differences but also of local and regional differences (as illustrated in Guevara's (2022) article in this special issue); the perspectives of different categories of stakeholders (e.g., parents and educators (as exemplified in the *Children Crossing Borders* study by Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair (2013); the experience of groups that normally do not get attention (e.g., men in ECE as discussed by Xu et al., 2022 in this special issue; or comparing programmes serving African-American, Latinx, Asian and White families; or programmes within a country offering differing approaches (see Tobin 2021)). These possibilities would also entail a recognition of the diversity of methods in the comparative study of ECE and the value of time.

Broadening the scope of research involves questions and considerations about methodology. Throughout the special issue, diverse methodological tools and approaches have been displayed, including the use of ethnographies (Tobin, 2021), interviews (Hayashi, 2022), participation/observation (Xu et al. 2022), territorial mapping (Guevara, 2022), reviews of the literature (Urban, 2022), and policy analysis (Gupta, 2022), to name some. Common to all these methodological approaches is the recognition of the importance of time. Taking inspiration from the 'slow movement', which has spread from 'slow food' into many other areas, including now 'slow pedagogy', the future comparative study of ECE will benefit from 'slow research'. Beech (2012) explains that time for comparative education research matters, for example, an academic working at a university can take about 3 years to complete a research project (from conceptualisation, data collection, to publication). By contrast, a researcher working for an international agency must normally complete, in the space of a year, field work and data analysis, as well as producing and presenting a report that is meant to be relevant for policy and/or practice. This is important, Beech (2012) argues, because the ways in which, each researcher engages with their study are diverse, producing different types of discourse which can have serious implications for the development, maintenance and transformation of policy and practice. The time spent in research can also support the important analysis of language, meanings, and subtleties as previously argued by Lorenz (1999). Last but not least, following the ideas explored in this article, slow research seems to be more conducive to respecting and enabling the ethical and democratic principles embedded within the 'science of difference'.

In preparing the final act of this special issue we have resisted the temptation to offer our own personal agendas for future comparative work in ECE, and focused our attentions instead on a discussion of the broad directions in which we would like to see research develop, including some of the values and qualities that we deem important in determining those directions and the significance of driving forces such as purpose, paradigm, position and power. We have dwelt at some length on the range of alternative directions available, and whilst making our own choices about the types of research with which we identify, have acknowledged that other choices are available. While we hope for a future where the comparative study of ECE resists domination by the 'science of solution' and is (re)conceptualised as a diversity-engaged, ethical and democratic 'science', the really important issue is that the existence of such choices is acknowledged and the choices actually made are explicit and argued for, with an open, critical but respectful dialogue between researchers adopting different perspectives. If comparative studies can question taken-for-granted assumptions about ECE itself, then these studies themselves should be built on questioning all taken-for-granted approaches to comparative research

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