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Time-worn pebbles or unpolished gemstones? (Un)usable pasts and possible futures of comparative education

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on the contributions to this special issue to highlight the urgent need to restore checks and balances in our evaluation of ‘usable pasts’ in comparative education. Considering that our reading of the field’s history not only moulds our understanding of comparative education now but also shapes our imagination of its potential futures, reflecting our implicit biases and the way we construct and narrate its history becomes imperative. This article unveils the persistence of silences and exclusions concerning specific histories, countries, and topics, and highlights the possible influence of evolving geopolitical power dynamics on the future of comparative education. Consequently, it urges critical examination of the field’s positionality amid shifting geopolitical tensions and calls for a thorough scrutiny of entrenched silences and the reductionist use of sweeping policy signifiers such as globalisation, decolonisation, excellence, and the notion of ‘future’ as explanatory concepts.

KEYWORDS

Comparative education;
Imagined futures; Histories
of comparative education;
Usable pasts

Introduction

In his famous 1918 essay, *On Creating a Usable Past*, the American literary critic and historian Van Wyck Brooks wrote, ‘When Matthew Arnold once objected to Sainte-Beuve that he did not consider Lamartine an important writer, Sainte-Beuve replied, “Perhaps not, but he is important *for us*.”’ (Brooks 1918, 340). Brooks then asked, ‘*What is important for us? What, out of all the multifarious achievements and impulses and desires ... ought we to elect to remember?*’ (Brooks 1918, 340, original emphasis); in this context, Brooks was specifically referring to the ‘achievements, impulses, and desires’ of nineteenth-century American literature. However, the essence of the excerpt is equally applicable to and prompts us to think about the *histories* of comparative education being recounted in the present day. As a two-centuries-old field of study, comparative education has undergone a series of theoretical and methodological turns of its own (see Manzon 2011). The icons of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their individual histories were highlighted and examined vis-à-vis their epistemological standing (Epstein 2020;

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Phillips 2020), albeit not without the ‘silences’ of *certain* histories and people (i.e. the theme of empire, underrepresented groups such as women and ethnic minority scholars) (see Cowen 2014; Kim 2020a; 2020b). Such silences, not only in the selection of ‘icons’ but also how and by whom the ‘history’ of comparative education gets written, invariably signal and steer the direction of what that generation of comparative education scholars perceives as ‘usable pasts’ (Brooks 1918).

In the pursuit of a usable past within history, whether it be a personal history or a history of the field, individuals naturally gravitate towards specific events and shared experiences that provide comprehensive explanations for understanding the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of a subject. By scrutinising this process, we gain a heuristic lens to understand the relationship between the past and the present. It also allows us to discern how the past is understood and constructed in the present (Jensen 2009); for example, comprehending the past as an ‘invention or at least a retrospective reconstruction to serve the needs of the present’ (Olick 2007, 19). It is in that sense that the past becomes an *objet d’art* which we can re-write, re-create, re-invent from the perspective of the seer (Seddon 2023) and the passage of time. Its ‘usability’ can be (re)valuated through the dilemmas and struggles of the present and beyond. Its worth is also relational, and the very fact that it is relational makes it plural: the *histories* of comparative education, and not a single but many ‘comparative educations’ (Cowen 1990; 1996), each with its respective versions of history. In other words, what one perceives as a ‘time-worn pebble’ may be seen by others as an ‘unpolished gemstone’, and what was once a gemstone can soon become a pebble. Nonetheless, the ‘usable pasts’ we elect to remember help us to understand the present and shape our anticipations and imaginaries of prospective futures.

The articles in this special issue are contributions to identifying what we elected to remember as ‘usable pasts’, what we simultaneously overlooked as ‘unusable pasts’, and what may become of our future. They neither offer prophecies nor prescriptions, as that would rather render the purpose of this special issue futile. Instead, each article adopts an outward-looking view and presents new ways of seeing and thinking using their respective ‘Cassandra voice’ (Cowen 2010). In doing so, each article offers its own visions of the role academic comparative education should play in addressing the future uncertainties within the field of comparative education.

In this final article, as a postscript to the special issue, I offer three points of discussion. First, I explore some of the usable and unusable pasts the field has employed over the past centuries. Second, I look at how some of the articles in the SI ‘re-read’ the past from the perspective of the present and explored shifts in the usability of *certain* pasts and the silences that emerged along the way. Finally, I discuss the role of academic comparative education in constructing not only the usable pasts but also the present to imagine possible futures of comparative education.

Usable and unusable pasts in comparative education

As an academic field, comparative education has for long been the interest of state and non-state agencies (e.g. the U.S. Office of Education’s Advisory Committee on Comparative Education, the UNESCO International Bureau of Education), academic institutions, and professional societies. This has consistently led to questions about what we mean by

'comparative' or 'comparative education', and how the field's intellectual histories, research agendas, and methodologies reflect the broader changing landscape of political and economic interests (Brickman 1966; Cowen 2014; Manzon 2011). Scholars such as Noah (1973) noted how the jurisdiction of *doing* comparative education shifted in parallel with the change of interest in other social science disciplines of economics, political science, and sociology. Thus, its earlier interest before the 1960s of 'countering parochialism or ethnocentrism, or for assisting in the improvement of education at home' gradually shifted to problems and hypothesis-testing (ibid., 109–110). Over the past decades, we have seen further rounds of changes in those jurisdictions, where comparative education turned into a project for 'measuring the other' and 'introducing a new social contract for education' (Elfert 2023; Seddon 2023), each of which give new meanings to the term 'comparative'.

Each jurisdiction also involved different *usable* and *unusable* pasts – like the *raison d'être* and usable pasts cherished by East Asian scholars Nakajima (1916) and Yu (1917) in the early twentieth century, whose jurisdiction involved learning about the past and present of 'civilised' Western countries to improve their own (see Tröhler 2023). These differed from those 'predictors' adopted by Nicholas Hans, Isaac Kandel, or Michael Sadler who expressed scepticism towards the feasibility and efficacy of implementing foreign practices 'at home'. Sometimes, the future predictions made in the past were later deemed unusable and irrelevant in solving new challenges of the present and beyond. King (1975), for example, famously argued:

We need a quite different 'model' and analytical mode when we have to investigate phenomena or 'factors' which have not previously been important, or even existent. Here we need not only academic analysis but operational hypotheses and precise working sequences ... No past predictions can help us here. The most careful extrapolations of 1970 are out of date in 1975 — not only in detail but in the framework of thinking. The oil crisis, rapid change in the structure of employment, and a turnabout of personal preference all entail a re-investigation in education itself, with new analyses to match. (88–89)

Nonetheless, these *pasts* – i.e. the rationales for comparison, the 'methods debates' and a heavy focus on 'cross-national comparative education' before the 1980s – were continuously analysed and debated over and over again by future generations of scholars. Some relayed these pasts in a selective manner to build credibility in their *use* of comparative education (see also Cowen 2023), whereas others came up with a proposal to consider new forms of comparative education that embody wider objects of comparison; a new intellectual area; and, above all, to (re)define comparative education.

The issue of *whose* reading(s) of these pasts count and become a major historical narrative does not operate on a level playing field. Little's (2000) review of the content themes of articles published in this journal during the late twentieth century revealed that more than eighty-five per cent of the contributors were based in 'developed countries', where a disproportionate number of articles also focused on developed countries in Europe, North America, and Asia. Furthermore, an invisible and fuzzy line demarcating what is or is not a study of comparative education adds another layer of complexity to our collective process of deconstructing our implicit assumptions and worldviews. While attempts were made to search for links between comparative education and its seemingly cognate fields of study, such as international education

(Epstein 1968), intercultural education (Bleszynska 2008), and development education (Parkyn 1977), what took place simultaneously in these attempts was the boundary-making between these fields. In other words, our longstanding devotion to *defining* and *scrutinising* the intrinsic boundaries of comparative education, as well as the anxieties of conflation and dilution of the field, may have invariably imposed limits on how themes that have become even more prominent over the past decades, such as decolonisation, climate change, and racial justice (e.g. the Black Lives Matter movement), are understood and discussed in the field.

The common thread that runs through this special issue is that we are still missing *alternative* (re-)readings of the past – perhaps, due to our own bounded rationality in thinking about the way forward. Across these articles, we see a wide range of re-readings of the public history of comparative education, which reveal some uncomfortable truths. For example, our compliance to the jurisdiction of short-term problem-solving compromised the field's attention to the issues of climate change and Anthropocene educational space (Seddon 2023), and we are yet to reflect the positionality of the field vis-à-vis new forms of geopolitical rivalry and the shifting global regime of accumulation (Brehm 2023; Klerides 2023). These issues cannot be solved simply by relying on the seemingly humanistic fantasies portrayed in the visions of 'solutions-comparative-education' (Elfert 2023; Kim 2022), but rather should be approached with a constant sense of 'uncomfortableness' (Cowen and Kim 2023). Auld and Morris's (2023) article illustrates the insights that can emerge from analysing beneath the surface of the anticipatory narratives and apocalyptic symbolism embraced by the self-proclaimed prophets of the future of comparative education. What emerges in this special issue is the crucial role that the interface between comparative education and its cognate fields, such as intercultural education, international relations, philosophy, theology, and historical sociology of education, can play, and the central influence of politics in shaping the future direction of the field. Unpacking these would offer alternative ways of seeing and addressing the unresolved perspectives on envisioning the future that persists to this day.

Silences of the present

In more recent decades the quest to identify the 'silences' (see Schweisfurth 2014) has emerged; the silences which need to be understood as 'usable pasts' in their own rights, and the very act of identifying the silences of the past revealing the nature of the present. There are several reasons why silences may exist: (i) the subject matter may be politically sensitive with a potential to compromise the academic's positionality; (ii) the topic may be deemed unprofitable; (iii) but also, ironically, the topic may be *too* well-loved by many, which may result in counterarguments being dismissed without proper appraisal.

Cowen and Kim (2023) and Cowen (2023) in this special issue highlight the instances of silences generated by the first reason: the limited discussion surrounding 'sensitive' topics like war, revolution, empires, and religion within the field of comparative education, and the uneven politics of representation. Similarly, Brehm (2023) explores how the objectives of comparative education since World War II have mirrored colonial logics by perpetuating Eurocentrism and expecting non-Western countries (and former colonies) to conform to Western ideals and be more like the 'West'. These rationales also mirror ethnocentrism

in the sense that ‘development’ – the anticipated outcome of ‘comparison’ and ‘learning from others’ – is assumed to be a unidirectional process. Often, these silences that exist within the field are more or less ironic; as pointed out by Cowen and Kim (2023), the field itself was established, developed, and continues to be greatly influenced by academics whose educated identities were shaped by experiences of multiculturalism or interculturality.

The second type of silence stems from the scholarly pursuit of what is profitable, leading to a simultaneous disregard for topics that are perceivably and objectively *unprofitable*. One example is the constant uncritical promotion of sweeping policy signifiers, such as globalisation, as explanatory concepts as highlighted by Tröhler (2023). Another example is the discussion of *time* as a unit of comparison, which is often dismissed due to its perceived unusability and lack of profitability, particularly in studies where the primary purpose of comparison is to measure and provide evidence would be another (Sweeting 2014). Over the past century, the field of comparative education has arguably found itself entangled in the modernist trap, valorising its identity as a policy science and Marc-Antoine Jullien as the progenitor of modern comparative education for the ameliorative purpose and ‘development’. The historical dimension in comparative education, in turn, has received diminishing attention, resulting in a disregard of the inherent value and explanatory power of historical inquiry in comparative analysis (Phillips 2014, 81).

Also increasingly coming into view in the recent works of comparative education is an upswing in the coverage of mainland China, both as a stand-alone unit of study and more broadly as a political and educational space (Brehm 2023; Chen 2023; Klerides 2023). Among the last ten journal issues published respectively by the three leading journals in the field – *Comparative Education*, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, and *Comparative Education Review* – more than half featured at least one, and in some cases, up to three articles that specifically focus on China. The surge of scholarly interest in China can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the growing presence of China in the major hubs of academic and empirical comparative education, namely the US and UK, is evident. This presence is seen not only through the growing number of Chinese students studying in these countries and the universities’ increasing dependence on their tuition fees but also through the establishment of Confucius Institutes and research funding provided by the Chinese government, state-owned companies such as Sinopec, and private companies like Huawei (China Research Group 2021; *The Economist* 2022). Secondly, the geopolitical tensions and perceived ‘new Cold War’ between the US-led Western coalition and the anti-Western coalition led by China and Russia have further fuelled the interest in studying China. Lastly, the socioeconomic impact of China’s major global infrastructure development projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, on participating countries (King 2020) has added to the urgency of understanding China’s educational and political landscape within comparative education research. Both Brehm (2023) and Klerides (2023) noted that the future of comparative education will be affected by the growing presence of China.

What we witness here, however, is the ‘representation by the dominant majority’, as aptly described by Cowen and Kim (2023), once again, accompanied by a dearth of counterbalancing voices. Indeed, the growing concern lies in the prevailing ‘semi-silence’ in how the field discusses China, although this issue is not exclusive to comparative

education alone. To date, only a limited number of works have explicitly expressed their concerns regarding the role of academic comparative education in addressing this semi-silence. Vickers and Morris (2022) shed light on some alarming developments occurring in Hong Kong, such as the erosion of liberal studies (see also Vickers 2023) and the widening and deepening of 'national security' discourses. Furthermore, Chen (2023) has explored the implications of the 'cultural turn' in contemporary Chinese politics. This turn, which has received substantial attention by scholarship in the west that often operates double standards, is selective in its criticality, and often interprets China through a narrow lens of instrumentalist culturalisation and the spiritualisation of politics (see Bamberger and Morris 2023).

A telling example of the third type of silence – the disregard for alternative readings of a widely embraced topic – can be observed in the stark contrast between the popularity of the grand narrative of 'world culture and isomorphism' arguments and the relative silences surrounding anthropological and ethnographic perspectives in the field. The notable lack of discussion surrounding these alternative perspectives is disconcerting, given the crucial need for robust checks and balances in discussing and determining 'usable pasts' for our future. This necessity becomes particularly evident when the field is inundated with a barrage of *grand* policy signifiers. If we consider globalisation, neoliberalism, and postcolonialism as a set of grand signifiers that dominated the field in the 1990s and 2000s, we can find new additions in more recent decade, such as the notions of 'future', 'equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)', and 'impact' (Kim forthcoming). On top of these, persistently pervasive in the field, are the crude and outdated binaries such as 'developed' and 'developing' countries, Global North and South, the East and the West, and the West and the Rest (Cowen and Kim 2023).

The ways in which these signifiers and binaries operate often lead to a problematically oversimplified – and uncritically worshipped – single 'reading of the world' (Cowen 2000, 334), thereby marginalising numerous other potential readings. It is within this context that anthropological and ethnographic perspectives assume a crucial role in questioning the muddled and taken-for-granted metanarratives. Tobin's (2022, 311) inductive analysis of international comparative ethnographic studies of early childhood education, for instance, reveals that the '[p]rocesses of the globalisation and localisation of early childhood educational ideas do not flow evenly over time or space'. By giving prominence to the voices and experiences of individuals, diverse interpretations and readings emerge, where each of their deeply ingrained cultural values and local meanings 'tells the story of how some universals work out in particular times and places, through friction' (Tsing 2011, 10). The potential value of another neglected reading of comparative education, namely that informed by philosophical and theological perspectives, is also illustrated by Auld and Morris (2023).

Conclusion

A *usable past* is neither objective nor politically 'neutral', but is rather ridden by what Rappleye (2020, 49) describes as an 'implicit assumptive horizon'; that our reading of the past is shaped and compromised by underlying biases and loaded questions. The perils associated with an implicit assumptive horizon can be found in a well-known letter penned by British economists during the peak of the global financial

crisis in response to Queen Elizabeth II's question, 'Why had nobody noticed that the credit crunch was on its way?':

So where was the problem? Everyone seemed to be doing their own job properly on its own merit. And according to standard measures of success, they were often doing it well. The failure was to see how collectively this added up to a series of interconnected imbalances over which no single authority had jurisdiction. This, combined with the psychology of herding and the mantra of financial and policy gurus, lead to a dangerous recipe. Individual risks may rightly have been viewed as small, but the risk to the system as a whole was vast.

So in summary, Your Majesty, the failure to foresee the timing, extent and severity of the crisis and to head it off, while it had many causes, was principally a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people, both in this country and internationally, to understand the risks to the system as a whole. (Besley and Hennessy 2009, 2–3)

As the excerpt of the letter reveals, the implicit assumptive horizon of individuals, compounded by a herding instinct, constrained their ability to fully grasp the risks posed to the system as a whole. Despite the competence and intelligence of each individual performing their respective roles, these constraints hindered the collective system of checks and balances from adequately foreseeing the crisis.

A similar herding instinct can be observed in the present field of comparative education. The mainstream direction of comparative education research is increasingly influenced by grand policy imperatives, such as 'world class university', 'excellence', 'impact', and 'EDI'. While these frameworks undoubtedly encompass important aspirations and visions of 'solutions-comparative-education', they also risk overshadowing the potential unintended consequences that such policy imperatives might entail (Kim [forthcoming](#)).

The future remains as uncertain as ever, and we are yet to discover what it may hold, or which pasts are usable or *unusable*. What I suggest through this article is that, in order for a historical inquiry into the past to be truly 'usable', not only for individual academics but also for comparative education now and in the future, the first step that 'academic comparative education' must take is to adopt a reflective approach. This approach entails a constant questioning and challenging of our implicit assumptions and worldviews, as well as of the silences that we identify along the way.

Notes on contributor

Min Ji Kim is a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Education, University College London. Her research interests centre on comparative education, particularly on the issues relating to student happiness and well-being, the role of international organisations and transnational corporations in education policymaking, and future and sociotechnical imaginaries of education.

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