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The complexity of comparing: tensions and dilemmas

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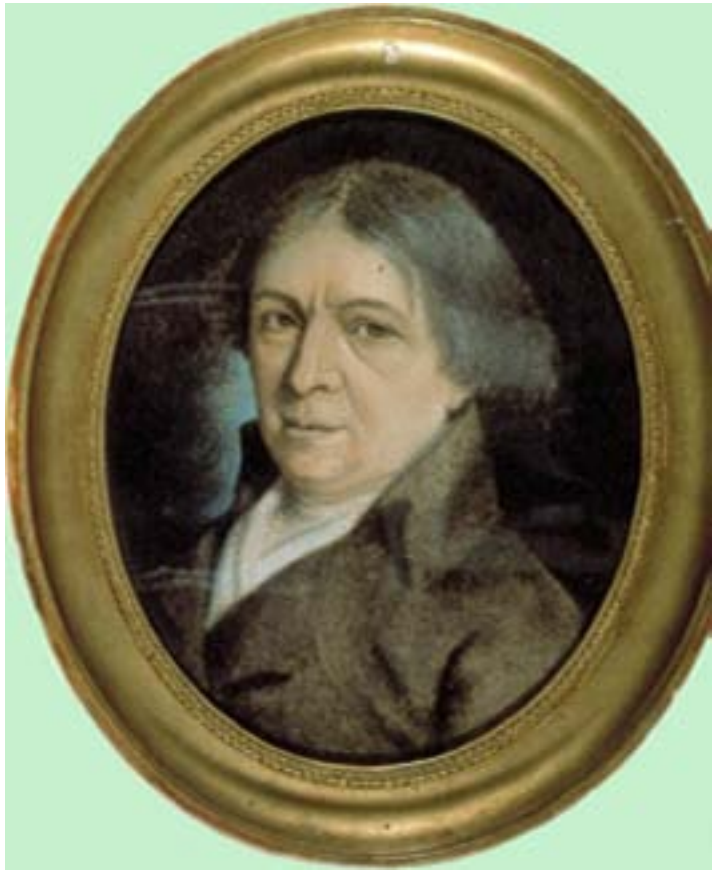
- Marc-Antoine Jullien
  1775 – 1848



Sir Michael Sadler
1861–1943

Why do it? (adapted from Holmes, 1971)

- **Leads to greater understanding of the processes of education;**
- **Promotes interest in, and information about, particular national systems of education, in order to explain why they are as they are;**
- **Facilitates the practical reform and planned development of education systems; and**
- **Promotes desirable international attitudes among those who study it.**
- **Anything else……..?**

‘Trouble the familiar’ and ‘make the familiar strange’

Statement:

I know my home culture better than those who never stayed abroad for a lengthy period of time.

Schweisfurth, M. (2012) Are sojourners natural comparativists? Critical perspectives on the learning experiences of international students, *Research in Comparative and International Education,* Vol 7(1) www.wwwords.uk/RCIE

Likert Scale:

- Strongly disagree 2.2%
- Disagree 0.9%
- Neutral 23.6%
- Agree 50.5%
- Strongly agree 22.8%

Current concerns with uncritical transfer

Cross-national experience is having an increasingly powerful impact upon policy makers, as governments look to other countries for new ways of organising and delivering public services, and as international obligations upon nations to follow practices developed elsewhere become more pervasive……..

cross-national lessons are often based upon a superficial understanding of programmes and institutions and of the conditions that contribute to their success or failure. Valid lessons from cross-national experience can only be drawn on the basis of the systematic applications of knowledge about how policies and institutions work.

(taken from Le Metais, 2000: 41-42)

Criticisms of the unit of analysis

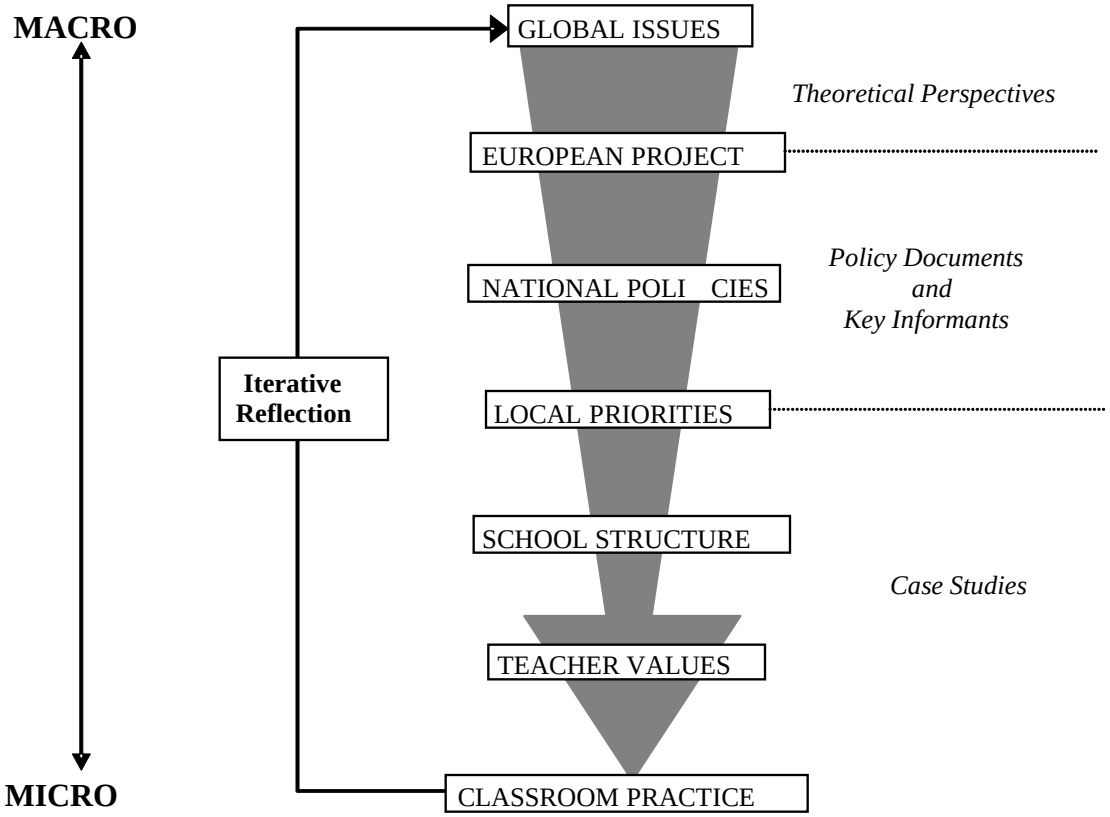
….too much emphasis (is) placed upon policies, plans and structures, at the expense of research on the actual processes of implementation of these in practice when the role of culture – and especially that of teachers – was a crucial influence…….p.266

… (the) centrality of culture and history at every level – national, local, school and classroom – together with the fine-grained qualitative methods of observation and interview required to illuminate this…p.270

(taken from Vulliamy 2004)

Multi-layered Iterative Filter

(McNess, 2013 forthcoming)



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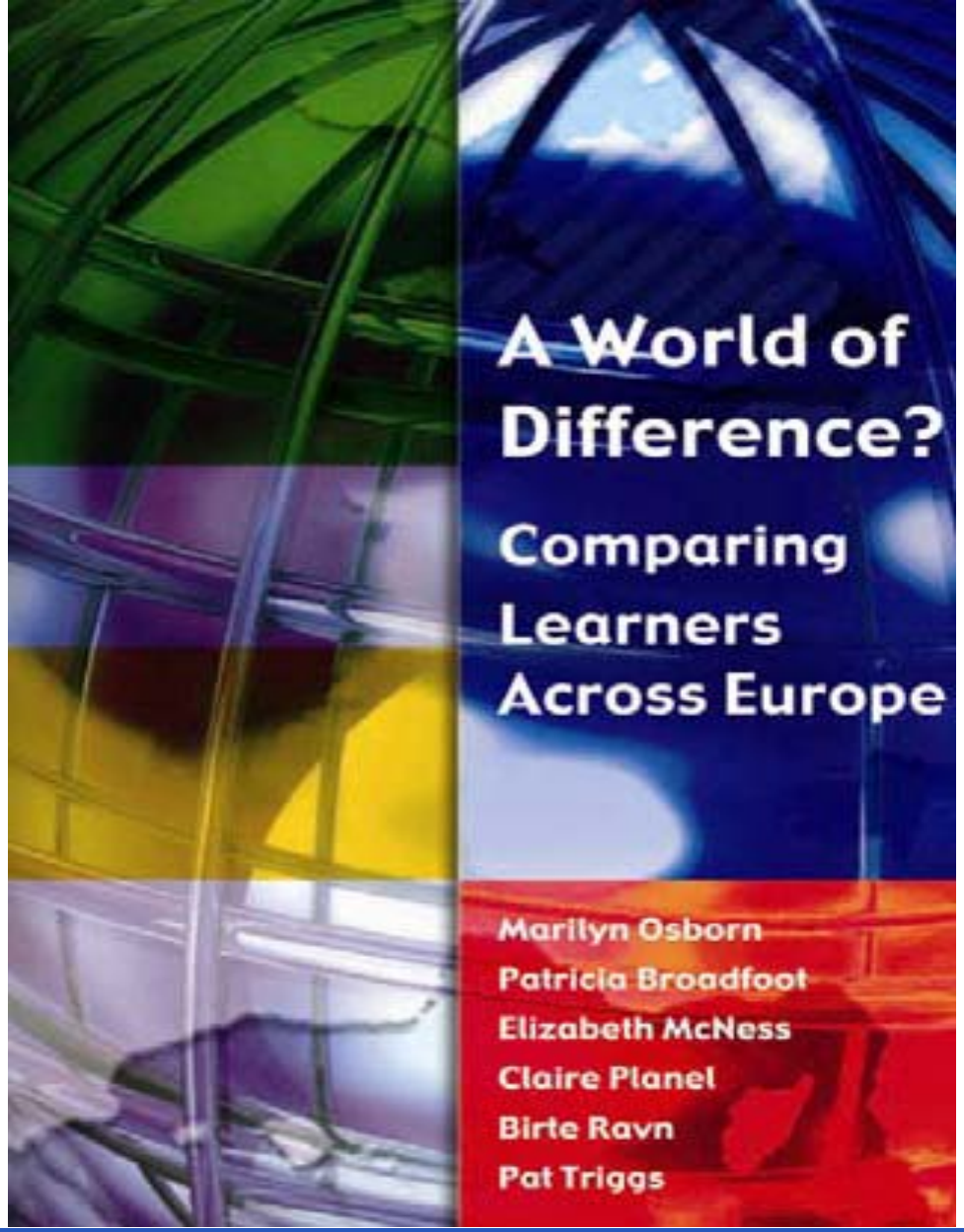
Four Challenges of Cross-Cultural Research

- Equivalence of measurement: Need to consider research design, research questions, research instruments, which may need to be jointly constructed - 'joint-development-concurrent model' (Dujykes & Rokkan, 1954)

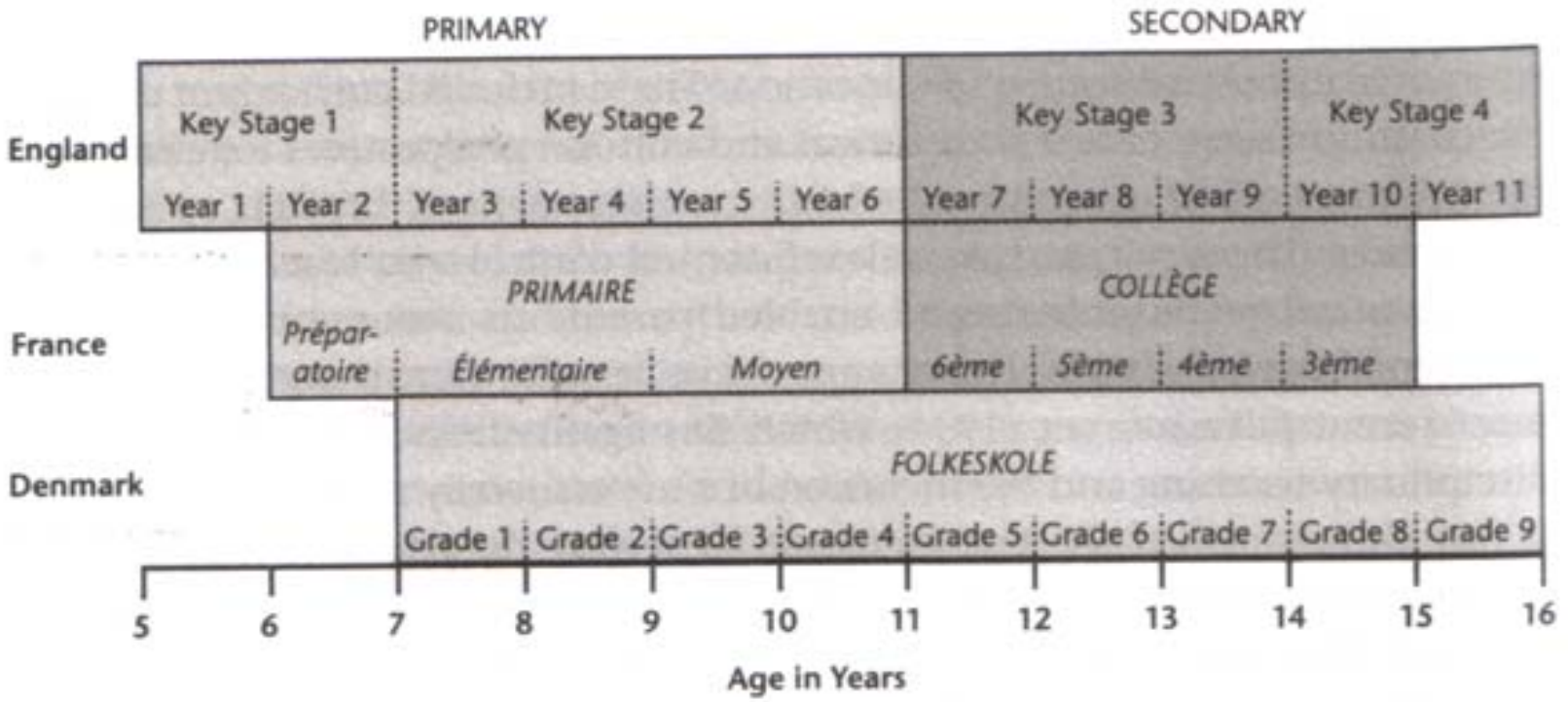
- Equivalence of sampling: importance of an appropriate sampling frame – selection, oversampling or under-sampling of some groups, response rates…..

- Linguistic equivalence: Do literally equivalent words always convey equivalent meaning? Pragmatic competence. Jankowicz (1994) distinguishes between *langue* (language as translated) and *parole* (language as experienced) – use of back translation

- Conceptual equivalence: the need to understand concepts as they are used in different cultures. Salience may differ.


A World of Difference?
Comparing Learners Across Europe
Marilyn Osborn
Patricia Broadfoot
Elizabeth McNess
Claire Planel
Birte Ravn
Pat Triggs

Equivalence of sampling



Linguistic equivalence: the ‘class teacher’

Le Professeur – Monsieur LeProf

Class teacher – Mrs Dixon

Klasselaerer - Hanne

Conceptual equivalence - the teacher?

A. *They think I'm a bit strict* [in my subject lessons] *but the very same kids can also sit down and have a good laugh with me* [outside lesson time]. *As a tutor, you need to be sensitive to children's needs, as very distinct from academic needs.'*

B. *The class teacher should be engaging, able to understand their pupils' concerns and problems and live and grow together with their pupils….. The better children get along with each other the more power and energy they are able to use on learning. Learning will be hampered if you feel socially insecure.'*

C. *It is important that the pupils know something…….his or her socialisation is not my priority, all that matters is my subject*

(Source: ENCOMPASS Project, Osborn et al. 2003)

How do you conceptualise ‘Lifelong Learning’?

- An emancipatory or social justice model: Lifelong learning for ALL
- A cultural model: Lifelong learning for self-fulfillment
- An ‘open society’ model: Lifelong learning for all who want, and are able, to participate
- A human capital model: Lifelong learning for employment

Are there cultural differences between ‘Western’ concepts of lifelong learning and those used in ‘Confucian Heritage’ cultures?

Folkeoplysning versus certification/smart card

Some typical approaches to international comparative study

- ‘Safari’ approach – researcher(s) from one country going into one or more other different national/cultural contexts
- ‘Lone ranger’ approach – data collected independently by national researchers in each country
- ‘Insider/outsider’ approach – International teams of researchers working across national boundaries

Insider/outsider knowledge

What first strikes the Danish visitor to a French school is its clinical and strictly functional environment, which seems to have little connection with young people's lives and their learning. Internally there is an impression of space with wide, bare corridors which are kept clinically clean. There is no evidence of learning outside the classroom. Nor is there any evidence of pictorial decoration or space for pupils to hang coats and leave personal effects. Classrooms, which are kept locked, are also strictly functional…..

Lacking a home base French pupils appear not to belong anywhere. There is much movement in between lessons from one similar classroom to another. Pupils are obliged to carry their school bags and outdoor wear with them during the school day. Pupils do not have the opportunity to create their own physical space where they can express and stamp their individuality.

(taken from Osborn et al. 2003, p. 51)

Further variations of ‘insider’ and ‘outsiderness’

- ✓ The individual researcher working in a different national/cultural context: some language skills, possibly bi-lingual, cultural empathy and more – but what about past and present histories?
- ✓ The individual researcher working in their own national context but researching in an different professional or cultural community : inclusion of local voice but there may be less obvious barriers to do with unequal power relationships
- ✓ The individual researcher working in their own national/professional/cultural community BUT shaping their research questions and data collection approach in a different country
- ✓ Others……..

How do you position yourself within your research?

To what extent do you consider yourself to be an ‘insider’ in your research context?

To what extent do you consider yourself to be an ‘outsider’ in your research context?

To what extent are you neither, or both?

What are the dimensions of your insider/outsiderness?

Insider/Outsider Continuum

The realization then often begins to emerge that there are subtly varying shades of 'insiderism' and 'outsiderism'. The issue may be more one of empathetic, rather than spatial, closeness or distance. Moreover, it can sometimes become quickly apparent that the same researcher can slide along more than one insider-outsider continuum, and in both directions, during the research process.

(Hellawell 2006:489)

‘Third Space’ – a liminal space of in-betweeness

Pratt (1991) talks about the ‘contact zone’ which can be areas of hostility but also great creativity, mutual understanding and new wisdom.

Homi Bhabha (1994:37) refers to these as: *Discursive sites or conditions that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, and re-historicized anew.*

Activity theorists Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002:153) suggest that: *while the core of practice is a locus of expertise, radically new insights and developments often arise at the boundaries between communities.*

Gadamer talked of the need to create a ‘fusion of horizons’. He refers to a positive conception of prejudice as pre-judgement (prae-judicium) or prior knowledge.

Methodological/epistemological approaches:

- Large international datasets aim to apply common frameworks from the point of view of the disinterested scientific onlooker: *'facts and observations arranged in analytical tables'* (Jullien)

- A post structuralist approach to knowledge assumes that 'reality' in situated, relative, and multiple: looks more closely at the context and '*the things outside the school'* (Sadler)

- A social constructivist approach to data collection sees research as a socially situated activity focusing on the inter-subjectivity of collaborative action: '*subtly varying shades of 'insiderism' and 'outsiderism''* (Hellawell)

Some solutions to the problems of cross-national comparison?

- Danger of reliance on single methodology: Additional value of combined methods, quantitative (what) + qualitative (why)

- Need for triangulation and data collection & analysis at various levels (iterative filter): questionnaire survey, documentary analysis, observation, individual interviews, focus groups, case studies

- (Dis)advantages of insider/outsider perspectives : *a priori* knowledge versus 'the sociological stranger' or 'marginal man'

- Need for cross-cultural teams to engage in a deep understanding of the concepts being investigated BEFORE going into the field - 3rd Space – fusion of horizons

Some final thoughts

- Guard against ethnocentric assumptions by *'troubling the familiar'.*
- Consideration should be given to the positioning of individuals within the research process and the way this might change as the research develops: insiderness/outsiderness
- Hellawell refers to both '*empathy*' and '*alienation*' being useful to the researcher.
- Researchers have multiple identities which can play out differently in different situations. How can these be represented? What can they mean in terms of the questions we ask, the data we collect and the interpretations that we make?
- Jones & Jenkins refer to learning from difference rather than learning about the 'Other'

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