Stretching and Bending the Field

Exercises in Comparative and International Education Epistemological Nimbleness

Lauren Ila MISIASZEK

Institute of International and Comparative Education, Faculty of Education,
Beijing Normal University
limisiaszek@gmail.com

Abstract

In reflecting on the range of my own and others' work (and how it is mis/understood), the state of the field, and this special issue, I argue that if one remains vigilant and does not assume or take for granted that the inherent risks of saturation and issues such as aesthetic failure, around, for example, ontologies, epistemologies, and geographic locations are resolved (they aren't), CIE is a field that can be widely expansive. Yet, in the spirit of my previous work around the interconnected dynamic of moving "from discursual vigilance to concrete possibilities for inclusion" (Misiaszek, 2019), the field's expansiveness is only important if it results in new, concrete contributions to education as a project of social justice in this unprecedented historical moment.

Keywords

comparative and international education – ontology – epistemology – interdisciplinary – postfoundational – aesthetics

I fittingly began my three-year elected term as Secretary General (2016–2019) of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES)¹ at "home." I was elected at the organization's 17th triennial World Congress, which was

¹ An umbrella organization comprised of 45 comparative education societies from across the globe and an NGO in official consultative partnership with UNESCO (wcces-online.org).

hosted by my institute at Beijing Normal University (Institute of International and Comparative Education in the Faculty of Education). I served the first administration of WCCES President Professor N'Dri Assié-Lumumba (Cornell University, USA), now in her second term (2019–22). The Congress played an important role in centering our international space in the global field of comparative and international education (CIE). As I concluded my term as Secretary General, I began a new two-year journey as co-editor with Robert Arove and Carlos Alberto Torres of the new two-volume, 5th edition of *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*,² another large-scale project that puts me into constant contact with the nuances and dynamics of this incredibly fluid, interdisciplinary and heterogenous fluid field. Thus, I was pleased when the *Beijing International Review of Education* opened another, complementary international space to center these conversations here at “home,” in which I could draw on the above relevant and concurrent experiences.

In this professional leadership, editorship, and in my own research in the field, I have experienced, through such experiences as misrecognized conference proposal reviews, that the misperception exists that when a person is working from a specific geographic location, their work must by default focus *on* that geographic location. I have found, through a longitudinal tracking of my own reviews, that this most frequently occurs within large Western academic associations like the American Education Research Association (AERA). This seems to be intensified when the location is Beijing, a place of constant change and contradictions, of interest to so many and fully understood, like most places, by very few (including those of us who live here long-term and endeavor to, among other ways of connecting to our immediate reality, speak the language). Some of my recent postfoundational³ foci range from autoethnography that *does* center my small-cultures (Holliday, 1999) in China (Misiasek, 2018) to an essay that interweaves China into more longitudinal reflections (Misiasek, 2020a) to creative writing drawing on both CIE and other fields (Misiasek, 2020b). In reflecting on the range of my own and others’

2 For more on the history and contemporary field of comparative and international education see Arove, Robert (2013). “Introduction: Reframing comparative education: The dialectic of the global and the local.” In Robert Arove, Carlos Alberto Torres, and Lauren Ila Misiasek (Eds.), *Comparative education: The dialectic of the global and the local* (5th edition, forthcoming, 2021). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. See the full edition for cross-chapter discussions on comparative education in China in global context.

3 For more on postfoundational comparative education, see the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES)’s Postfoundational Approaches to Comparative Education Special Interest Group (SIG) website, <https://postfoundational.weebly.com>.

work (and how it is mis/understood), the state of the field, and this special issue (S1), I argue that if one remains vigilant and does not assume or take for granted that the inherent risks of saturation and issues such as aesthetic failure, around, for example, ontologies, epistemologies, and geographic locations are resolved (they aren't), CIE is a field that can be widely expansive. Yet, in the spirit of my previous work around the interconnected dynamic of moving "from discursal vigilance to concrete possibilities for inclusion" (Misiaszek, 2019), the field's expansiveness is only important if it results in new, concrete contributions to education as a project of social justice in this unprecedented historical moment.

In considering what expanding could look like, Ball (2012)'s work on networking is useful as we center the themes of this S1 of trends and tensions in CIE. Ball argues for the "need for method and sensibilities which are attuned to movement and flow rather than structure and place; that is, we have to avoid or *move beyond 'flat' and 'fixed' ontologies*" (p. 143, my emphasis). He goes on to note:

Networks have a particular and rather dull aesthetic, or rather perhaps they suffer from what (Riles, 2000, p. 19) calls an 'aesthetic failure'; she sees this as endemic to the network form. Network evolution is particularly important but extremely difficult to capture and to represent. The network as a representation and as a visualisation is also always partial; a great deal of the social in social networks is inaccessible – although Twitter, Facebook and blogs provide new peepholes into the social under-life of policy networks. The aesthetic of the network fails to convey the activities of networking which animate and energise social relations." (p. 144).

The six articles in this special issue "move beyond 'flat' and 'fixed' ontologies" to combat the risk of a "dull aesthetic" or "aesthetic failure" in our field,⁴ returning catchy but potentially empty, stagnant words like "trend" or "tension" back to their "moving and flowing" origins. The original meaning of "trend" was "the way something bends" (coastline, mountain range, etc.) (1777), even further back, "round bend of a stream" (1620s); the sense of "a prevailing new tendency in popular fashion or culture" is relatively recent, from 1950.⁵ A "tension" has always been active, from the Proto-Indio-European root *ten-*, "to stretch."⁶

4 See also Misiaszek (forthcoming, 2021)

5 <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=trend>

6 <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=tension>

This S1 departs from the position that the “diversity of the world is infinite, ...a diversity that encompasses very distinct modes of being, thinking and feeling; ways of conceiving of time and the relations among human beings and between humans and non-humans, ways of facing the past and the future and of collectively organising life” (Santos, 2016, p. 20). In addition, drawing again on de Sousa Santos (2016), this diversity is often excluded, misrecognized, delegitimized, and/or not valued. de Sousa Santos’ work is thus highly important in the field of CIE, termed “an eclectic field, [which] contains flexible boundaries whose contours are the elephant often difficult to discern” (Cook, Hite, & Epstein, 2004, p. 62; Epstein & Carroll, 2005) and “a field in perpetual transformation [in which] multiple globalizations have had a heavy impact in the field and its orientation” (Torres, 2017, p. 20). There are often epistemological prioritization concerns, especially “about the active colonial legacies within the field of comparative and international education” (Takayama, Sriprakash, & Connell, 2017, p. S1). Thus, our aim for this S1 is to humbly contribute to this project of expanding notions of how the field’s diversity is actively expressed, through these six different projects of bending and stretching.

The limitations in scope of an S1 editorial run the risk of perpetuating the problem of reductionist introductions to this collection’s rich tapestry (a word also interestingly derived from the Proto-Indo-European “to stretch”), but it is nonetheless important to call the reader’s attention to the threads of decolonialities, pluralistic ontologies and epistemologies, and post-foundationalities that run throughout this issue’s articles. In “Decolonizing knowledge, education and social development: Africanist perspectives,” Ali Abdi calls for “needed counter-monocentric reconstructions and knowledge decolonization possibilities for learning and living wellbeing”. In “Decolonizing ‘context’ in Comparative Education: The Potential of Oceanian Theories of Relationality,” Rebecca Spratt and Eve Coxon, “while supporting many of the arguments outlined in recent theorisations of context as ‘assemblage’;...” propose a more explicitly relational CIE approach, drawing on both Southern Theory’s inter-epistemic project and [their] learnings from Indigenous scholars of Oceania”.

In “Comparative global citizenship education: A critical literature analysis,” Yuqing Hou critiques “comparative inquiries focusing on the theorizing and implementation of GCE in different national contexts,” concluding that current trends “limi[t] the possibility to decolonize and transform CIE scholarship, which could be reversed with an inclusion of diverse perspectives and knowledges in future GCE research” (INSERT PAGE). In “Fostering global citizenship through student mobility: COVID-19 and the 4th wave in internationalization of education,” Ratna Ghosh and Xiaoli Jing call for the need to “reimagine international student mobility programs for students equally

without excluding those who cannot afford them on the one hand and on the other hand, that will optimize the possibility of global citizenship education". In "Internationalization as a moral project: An exploration of the emotions, deliberations, and concerns of teaching faculty," Laura Servage and Lorin Yochim "highlight moral and epistemological tensions in the project of internationalizing higher education" noting that "[w]hile these tensions have been considered for some time in critical comparative education circles, they are rarely acknowledged at the level of the mundane, daily practices of teaching".

Finally, in "From alienation to solidarity: Educational perspectives and possibilities in Brazil and the UK," José Ernandi Mendes, Elenice Rabelo Costa, Spyros Themelis, and Sandra Gadelha de Carvalho "discuss alienation through the prism of education," exploring "some recent policy changes in the Brazilian education system, which have resulted in an ever-increasing alienation among stakeholders and especially among those fighting for its reform along democratic, equal, decolonial and more just lines" and "in the UK context through the increasing mental health crisis in higher education".

We co-editors bring you this issue from our likely year-long displacement from China due to the pandemic, where only stretching and bending really make sense as ways forward in our thinking and living. Looking at our Beijing "home" in ways we couldn't have imagined at the start of this SI process, we believe readers will benefit from the articles' timely reflections on the "moving and flowing" of the futures of these topics throughout 2020–2021. Our decision to write these short editorials separately and then briefly respond to each other's challenges the notion that as an intellectual and life partnership, we have a unified voice – this also combats our internal risk of a "dull aesthetic" in our own work.

Questioning encourages stretching and bending, hopefully leaving us more nimble, able to respond to the challenges of the times. In that spirit, we encourage you to ask yourself, how do these pieces, in their own bending and stretching of the field, facilitate your own "exercise" about what comparative education might look like? In what ways is their/your thinking uniquely shaped by and shaping pandemic times? In what ways does this thinking simultaneously draw on long histories of scholar-practitioner work in new ways? What does it mean for these authors and these projects to choose to present their work in this space? Globally, "alongside" whom might you be reading these pieces? As you have found this issue in a relatively new, Beijing-based, global journal, how might also you imagine your "co-readers" in more expansive ways And, finally, how do these pieces contribute to the urgent work of education as an expansive project of social justice capable of confronting the most urgent issues of our times?

October 21, 2020, Nagoya, Japan

References

- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neoliberal Imaginary*. New York: Routledge.
- Cook, Bradley J., Hite, Steven J., & Epstein, Erwin H. (2004). Discerning Trends, Contours, and Boundaries in Comparative Education: A Survey of Comparativists and Their Literature. *Comparative Education Review*, 48(2), 123–149. doi:10.1086/382619.
- Epstein, Erwin H., & Carroll, Katherine T. (2005). Abusing Ancestors: Historical Functionalism and the Postmodern Deviation in Comparative Education. *Comparative Education Review*, 49(1), 62–88. doi:10.1086/426161.
- Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied linguistics*, 20(2), 237–264.
- Misiaszek, L. I. (2018). China with 'Foreign Talent' Characteristics: A 'Guerrilla' Autoethnography of Performing 'Foreign Talentness' in a Chinese University. In Y. T. K. Lahad (Ed.), *Feeling academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist flights, fights and failures* (pp. 87–114). London: Palgrave.
- Misiaszek, L. I. (2019). Engaging gender and Freire: from discursal vigilance to concrete possibilities for inclusion. In C. A. Torres (Ed.), *Wiley Handbook of Paulo Freire* (pp. 389–416). Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Misiaszek, L. I. (2020a). *In situ*: using *timescapes* as a post-qualitative pedagogical methodology to deepen explorations of long-term higher education teaching/mentoring. *Teaching in Higher Education*. doi:doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1810655.
- Misiaszek, L. I. (2020b). A *No Manifesto* of still searching. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (Reimagining the new pedagogical possibilities for universities post-Covid-19 (Michael Peters and Fazal Rivzi, Eds.)), 43–45. doi:10.1080/00131857.2020.1777655.
- Misiaszek, L. I. (forthcoming, 2021). *Transforming Aesthetics in Global Citizenship Education: Experimental Essays*. New York: Routledge.
- Riles, A. (2000). *The Network Inside Out*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA: University of Michigan Press.
- Santos, B. d. S. (2016). *Epistemologies of the South and the future*. Paper presented at the From the European South: a transdisciplinary journal of postcolonial humanities.
- Takayama, K., Sriprakash, A., & Connell, R. (2017). Toward a postcolonial comparative and international education. *Comparative Education Review*, 61(S1), S1–S24. doi:10.1086/690455
- Torres, C. A. (2017). The state of the art in comparative education and WCCES at a crossroads in the 21st Century. *Global Comparative Education: Journal of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES)*, 1(1), 19–96 (Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), English, French, Russian, and Spanish).