Comparative Sociology of Education

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Comparing formal education across time and place has a long scholarly history, but systematic sociological analysis of the topic is relatively new. Older and non-sociological comparative study of education was narrow, lending sociology only a modest intellectual legacy upon which to build, and this likely retarded the early growth of a “comparative sociology of education” (hereafter CSE). So too, founding sociological theory was developed before widespread mass education was evident as a unique feature of modern society. Nevertheless, over the past four decades, improvements in comparative data collection and dissemination, theoretical paradigms, and empirical research have yielded a vibrant sociological approach that has become a significant part of the sociology of education and the study of social stratification. Lastly, two major sociological trends intimately tied to the development of a mature CSE make the comparative analysis of education evermore relevant to sociology as an intellectual endeavor. First is the historically greater institutionalization of formal education worldwide that has brought the institution into its most advanced form. Second is education’s robust institutional influence on central societal processes in postindustrial society, most notably its increasing domination of social stratification.

After a brief discussion of early intellectual currents behind the development of a CSE, four major empirical and theoretical achievements relative to sociological analysis of the development of education as an institution and its impact on social stratification will be chronicled as examples of the field’s contribution to sociology. These include: 1) the study of origins and historical contours of the worldwide education revolution and its demographical expansion of mass schooling; 2) the comparison of national education systems’ ability to instill academic achievement among students; 3) the comparison of organizational and curricular change in Kindergarten through university systems of education across nations; and 4) cross-national comparison of the role of formal education in the social status attainment process and other sociological impacts of the education revolution.

From Humanistic Comparison to an Early Comparative Sociology of Education

Prior to the development of a CSE in the latter half of the 20th century, the comparative study of educational styles, pedagogical philosophies, schooling, universities, teachers, teaching and so forth was chiefly observational in method, taxonomical in aim, and humanistic in intellectual orientation (e.g., Kandel 1933). Lacking a theoretical discipline, this intellectual enterprise celebrated what it presumed to be significant differences across nations’ organization and practice of education, and assumed that a considerable underlying cultural-historical immutability was responsible for these differences. In tandem these ideas created a reigning paradigm in comparative study that ironically restricted systematic empirical comparisons: If most things educational are profoundly different and culturally immutable across nations, little is to be gained from comparative study other than a kind of esoteric humanism. Sociology and sociologists had little to do with this endeavor.

This earlier approach began to shift by mid-century. Motivated by the dual logics of post-World War II Cold War international aid for national development and academic area studies (i.e. the singular focus on education in one or several nations in a geographical-cultural region), intellectual energy was applied to a more methodologically systematic comparison of education accompanied by ideas about its use in practical applications from nation to nation. Taking a step forward towards a foundation upon which a CSE could be built, in 1955 a leading comparative educationalist proclaimed:

Comparative education seeks to discover underlying causes to explain why the educational systems differ from each other, what are their motivating aims and purposes, what their sources are, and what general principles may emerge. If causes are to be ascertained, then a carefully controlled methodology must be carefully followed. (Kandel 1955: 5)

For the time this was a progressive statement albeit a mostly unheeded one, as there was little such scholarship in the field at this point, and the older
ideas about deep cultural-historical differences remained. Note how in an assessment of the state of the comparative education field a year later the old incomparability paradigm echoes on:

Specialists in Comparative Education have been warning for some time that it is not possible to export an educational system to another country. To this we might add the conviction that it is virtually as impossible to introduce in toto any basic educational change into a foreign school system. (Brickman 1956, 120)

Without explicit theory and only limited comparative data, the describing and categorizing of formal education one nation at a time by general comparativists continued into the 1980s. For example, a historical review of publications in the American-based journal Comparative Education Review reports that the overwhelming majority of studies were of just one national education system (Ramirez and Meyer 1981). The single system study done in the “area specialists” style continued to dominate (Koehl 1977). And as the Cold War logic began to dwindle in the late 1980s, funding for general comparative educational research began to decline (Altbach 1991). This would change, however, with a coming greater appreciation of the worldwide dimensions of what CSE has termed the “education revolution” and a highly charged political debate over national economic progress and the quality of schooling in the United States and elsewhere.

The Education Revolution and a Mature Comparative Sociology of Education

The largest undertaking of formal education in any known human society is that which has occurred across the world in the form of rapid growth in education and a robust culture of education over the past century and a half. The demography of the education revolution is well known to sociologists. Gross enrollment rates have consistently risen over the past 150 years, justified as preparing all children for the adult world; with near full enrollments achieved first in wealthier nations, and then since the middle of the 20th century high enrollments spread globally (e.g., Benavot and Riddle 1988; Fuller and Rubinson 1992). While full enrollment in both primary and secondary education is still well into the future for many developing nations, over the past decade there has been considerable expansion of education in China, India, Egypt and similar nations. Certainly issues of low teacher quality and resources continue to hamper full expansion of formal education in many low-income nations, but over the past fifty years it is undeniable that major improvement in access to schooling has occurred (UNESCO 2002). Consequently, 80 percent of all humans aged 15 or older are able to both read and write a short statement about their life—a fact that would have been hard to imagine just fifty years ago, and unthinkable one hundred years ago (UNESCO 2002). Along with the diffusion of mass education, the normative standard of educational attainment has risen with each new generation of schooled parents. For example, in the United States, a nation that has largely led the way in developing mass education, 100 years ago about half of all school-aged children were enrolled, and within the next forty years that proportion rose to 75 percent, and over the next twenty years it rose to almost 90 percent, and now more than 12 years of schooling is the median attainment (US Department of Education 1993). And over the past several decades in many nations, mass education has flowed into the higher education sector, where the beginnings of mass post-undergraduate education are stirring (Schofer and Meyer 2005). In just the academic year of 2006–2007 the entire American higher education system graduated about 1.5 million students with the B.A., and another 755,000 students with graduate degrees, for a ratio of about one graduate degree for every two B.A. degrees; and over 10 percent of the total American population holds a graduate degree (US Department of Education 2008).

Fueling this growth is a powerful ideology that has gained considerable support both among individuals and collectives. For example, one can see the essence of this ideology expressed in the proclamations of many multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2002). It is a three-part ideology. Firstly, all individuals are to be formally educated as the main way to develop their full potential as a human, and this is essential for them and highly beneficial to collective social progress. Secondly, formal education has become far more than the technical pursuit of occupational skill, it is for basic human development and is a fundamental human right that runs deep into preserving the worth of all individuals. And thirdly, the academic knowledge-base,