

From ‘borrowing’ to ‘learning’ in international comparative study: a critical reflection

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The state of public education debate, which to a great extent only reflects policies and practices abroad, is examined. The process of learning from others should replace the process of borrowing (of usually inappropriate policies/practices) from others. Two examples of the issues involved in the debate on public education, namely, Outcomes-Based Education and Medium of Instruction, were analysed through reference to media reports and discussions and through applying the time-honoured, seasoned and responsible principle of ‘learning’ rather than ‘borrowing’ from others, as prescribed by the science of Comparative Education. It was found that journalists and guest authors summarily employed policies and practices from abroad to motivate their own points of view and even used these as points of departure for political discourses. There was no sign of a scientific factoring-in of contextual similarities and differences between South African education systems and those abroad. This is a highly questionable and dangerous practice. In this regard Comparative Educationists have an important role to play in supplying a superstructure of relevant knowledge to inform education policy formulation.

Aim of the article

Too many aspects of the public debate around education simply reflect the policy of other countries indiscriminately (Grant, 2000:309), and far too many public discussions reflect nothing else than the use of the word “international” to justify a viewpoint (Noah, 1986:161-162). The National Policy on Religion and Education can be taken as an example (DoE, 2003:4). This is apart from the discourse and policy directed by normative international studies in which South Africa’s position is given as the most important justification in criticising education. The authors want to adduce that the age-old motive for comparative travel and study, namely, to gain an understanding of the self and others, should form the basis for international comparisons. The process of learning from others should replace the process of borrowing (of usually irrelevant proposals/policies) from others.

Two examples of matters in the public education debate, namely, Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) and Medium of Instruction (MI), are analysed according to media reports, and in following the seasoned, time-proven and justified prescription from the science of Comparative Education, namely, to “learn” rather than to “borrow”. Although the two matters pertaining to the education debate justify a separate discussion, it was decided to address both in one article to illustrate the influence of political and educational paradigms on the public education debate. From the content analysis it transpired that, in spite of the divergence of the topics, the underlying motivation for the use of examples from the international education scene seemed to be the same, namely, either the praising or the disparaging of OBE and the home language as MI.

Prescriptions from Comparative Education: learning rather than borrowing

Comparison is a typically human activity. The extrapolation could therefore be made that Comparative Education is as old as the habit of visiting cultures (or communities, or societies, or states) other than one's own. Such visits, whether for the purposes of trade, religious missions, war, work, or merely because of inquisitiveness, date from the earliest times in mankind's history. Such travellers brought back from their journeys facts, impressions and ideas regarding the cultures and the customs of the people that they visited, including facts, impressions and ideas with regard to their education. In the earliest literature, such as that of Xenophon and Tacitus from ancient Greece, for instance, comparisons between countries and their education practices were already found (Wolhuter, 2001:3). The roots of Comparative Education can already be discerned during the era of travel accounts, although still in a primitive, pre-scientific phase.

With the start of the nineteenth century a new type of traveller emerged. At that stage it was mainly civil servants and delegations that undertook study travels abroad, with the purpose of borrowing ideas, insights into and practices from foreign education systems and consequently transplanted these into the home education system. The best known case was certainly that of Victor Cousin (1792-1867) who was sent by the French Government to study the Prussian education system. His report led to the Guizot Act of 1803, which brought into being the national primary education system of France. Other examples are John Griscom, Calvin Stowe, Horace Mann and Henry Barnard from the USA, KD Ushinsky from Russia, Sarmiento from Argentina, Matthew Arnold from England and Friedrich Thiers and FA Hecht from the German-speaking parts of Europa (Barnard, 1984:248-250). During this phase of the Comparative Education descriptions of foreign education systems were still unscientific. Real juxtaposition and evaluation of education systems according to objective measures were not yet in existence. Descriptions were filled with eulogies. Reports found some education systems better than others on the grounds of certain personal prejudices (Wolhuter, 2001:5).

A turning point in the historic development of Historical Pedagogy was the well-known 1900 Guildford Paper by Michael Sadler: "How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education?" Sadler rejected the rash borrowing from foreign education practices, as advocated and practised by civil servants. Sadler argued for the study of national education systems within their respective community or cultural contexts. Sadler also showed that a specific education system is the outcome of forces of society (the economy, political system, demography, geography, socio-cultural set-up, technology and religion/philosophy of life). An education system is created and forced by the forces involved to serve society (Stone, 1981:24-25).

Ever since then it has been a maxim in Comparative Education that education systems are the outcomes of the forces of society within which they are embedded. Such a maxim draws the line with regard to the possibility of a take-over by foreign education systems. A transplantation of a practice from one education system to another can only take place after the complete

settlement of the agreements and differences between the form-giving forces the systems of both societies. An ill-considered borrowing is a futile and even dangerous exercise. At best, the study of a foreign education system can inform one about societal education system contexts within a specific context. Arnove (2001:482-483) illustrates this point by referring to the following question often asked: What is the most important determinant of academic achievement — school-related factors or the socio-economic background of learners? Arnove (2001:482-483) points out that research in developed countries, including the comprehensive studies by Coleman and Jencks in the USA and Plowden in Great Britain, time and again comes to conclusions in favour of socio-economic background, whilst studies undertaken in developing countries come to the opposite conclusion. Arnove relays the differences to contextual differences between developed and underdeveloped countries. Another example is the system of dual vocational education and training, which was very successful in Germany (the country where this was developed over an extended period of time), but which failed in all the many countries across the world where they tried to implement this system, as a result of contextual differences between Germany and that of other countries (Wolhuter, 2003: 145-151).

The well-known outlining of and warning about the borders of the meliorative potential of Comparative Education, is that by the eminent Comparative Education specialist, Noah (1986) in his “The use and abuse of Comparative Education” (originally published in the *Comparative Education Review*, 1984). In this publication, which has already attained classical status within Comparative Education, Noah (1986:153) again points to the tendency amongst authorities and participants in the public education debate that, when they are confronted with education problems, grab at foreign education systems for instant solutions. He refers to the example of the USA, where the education system of the USSR was presented as a model for quite some time after the launching of Sputnik in 1957. The post-war successes of Japan led to the Japanese education system widely lauded as example in the USA. Noah (1986:161) describes the adoption of a foreign education system as an abuse of Comparative Education, and states that “The authentic use of comparative study resides not in the wholesale appropriation and propagation of foreign practices but in careful analysis of the conditions under which certain foreign practices deliver desirable results, followed by considerations of ways to adopt these practices to conditions found at home” (Noah, 1986:161-162).

Contrary to the justifiably central maxim of Comparative Education explained above, namely, that summary, unqualified take-over (borrowing) of practices from foreign education systems is a futile, even potentially dangerous exercise, regardless of the fact that Comparative Education study maximally yields an understanding of the education-society nexus in specific contexts, the naïve belief that education practices can be transplanted from one social context to another, persists in government circles, as well as in the public education debate. South Africa is no exception. In the next section we indicate by means of an analysis of media reports how this naïve belief is also endorsed in South Africa.

Media reports

In electronic searches piloted by SAMedia (<http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za>) in September 2005, key words pertaining to OBE yielded 2 345 points of contact with regard to newspaper reports published during the period from January 1997¹ to September 2005 in South Africa and in which the matters under discussion were reported, as well as 2761 reports about language as an education matter. Therefore it can be concluded that OBE and language as education issues are comprehensively reported in the printed media. Only a selection of the large number of media reports about the two topics were investigated. The selection was determined by the purpose of the article, namely, to determine how and to what extent international education practices and debates are used in support of or rejection of the mentioned issues in the South African education system. Articles published in 25 of the approximately 35 local and national daily and weekly newspapers were studied (<http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za/Pubs.htm>).

In order to attain set objectives the researchers employed qualitative content analysis. Content analysis throws light on a specific newspaper's perception of the reality. A newspaper's reality often differs considerably from the quantifiable reality. Secondly, it can be determined by means of a content analysis whether a specific newspaper regards a specific political party, cultural group, social group, or race as more important than another. By analysing the language, symbols, pictures and arguments, it is possible to afford a glimpse into a specific newspaper's view of its readers. Furthermore, it is often possible to determine the influence of a specific report on the likely reader by means of a content analysis. A quantitative content analysis is usually applied to try and find answers to preconceived problem questions by means of a critical analysis (Windhal, Signitzer & Olson, 1998:133-134; Berger, 1991: 27-30).

In order to ensure validity and reliability, Altheid's (1996:22-44) 12 steps for content analysis were conscientiously followed during the course of this investigation:

The research problem and source for analysis

Step 1: Identify a specific research problem.

Step 2: Familiarise yourself with the process and content of the sources of information.

Step 3: Familiarise yourself with a variety (6 to 10 examples) of the relevant sources of information.

Draw up a protocol

Step 4: List various items or categories to guide the collection of data and draw up a protocol.

Step 5: Test the protocol with data obtained from various documents.

Step 6: If necessary, revise and refine the protocol.

Step 7: Plan how to obtain the sources.

Data collection

- Step 8: Collect the data. Make use of previously identified codes and descriptive examples. Store the data with the original documents. Feed the data into the computer by means of a computer text format to facilitate text encoding and the tracing of information.

Data analysis

- Step 9: Analyse the data.
- Step 10: Compare extreme and important differences in each subdivision. Take textual notes. Summarise the data for each category succinctly.
- Step 11: Combine the brief summaries with typical, as well as extreme examples.
- Step 12: Integrate and interpret the data.

Regardless of the relatively large number of newspaper reports studied for the purposes of this article, as well as the careful adherence to Altheid's (1966:22-44) guidelines for content analysis, the general validity and reliability of the analysis might possibly be questioned. Hisa's (1988:318) remark must therefore always be kept in mind:

When content analysts are free to choose the content, we may fault them for their biases; when they use random selection procedure, we may blame them for missing something important.

Outcomes-Based Education

Since the National Department of Education announced in May 1997 that "content-based rote learning" (Daily News, 1997:6) was to be replaced by OBE, academics (amongst others Jansen, 1998:1-4; Kaak, 1998:1-8; Steyn & Wilkenson, 1998:203-207; Waghid, 2002:127-132; Botha, 2002:361-371; Waghid, 2003:245-265) have published comprehensively with regard to the topic. From the computer search (vide <http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za>) it transpired that the media initially published a mass plethora of reports about OBE. Media interest regarding a topic is mainly determined by the newsworthiness of a topic, and therefore it is easy to understand that reporting of a topic will decline in the course of time — this tendency can also be perceived with regard to reporting on OBE. It transpires that reports about OBE published since 1999 had the supply of information about changes in curricula in mind as goal rather than critical, investigative journalism (Mecoamere, 2004:6; Rapport, 24 July 2005:5).

From the analysis following it will transpire that major differences exist amongst newspaper reporters about the merits of OBE. For some of them, international OBE practices offer conclusive proof that Curriculum 2005² (known as the National Curriculum Statement since August 2003), is bound to fail, with or without regard of South Africa's unique circumstances. For others, international practices confirm their positive review of OBE. However, some people are of the opinion that one cannot only learn from international OBE practices, but that some of the practices could be adopted with some

reservations, or even without any discernment.

According to Packer and Christensen (1998:12) it is more or less a *fait accompli* that South Africa will have to study the USA example in order to apply Curriculum 2005 successfully because, according to them, many similarities exist between the two countries. However, it appears that, in their opinion, South Africa should not only learn from the USA; they should also, with the necessary reservations, borrow from the USA:

No-one can claim that the USA (or any other country) already has the answers, which SA must now copy ... As risky as this situation may be, it at least gives SA the potential to win the race. The fact that the two nations have chosen parallel courses offers some reason for confidence in the direction taken (Packer & Christensen, 1998:12).

Mkhatshwa (1997:22) ascribes the education successes in Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong and Bulgaria to OBE. He concedes that OBE has failed in some countries, but is of the opinion that the system could work in South Africa if this country's unique circumstances are taken into consideration:

The new system has apparently not worked in some instances, one cannot assume that it will not work in South Africa, for there are many interpretations of outcomes based education and we will have to implement this method in such a way as to meet the unique needs of this country.

Mkhatshwa (1997:22) is sure that OBE will succeed in South Africa because it was successfully put into practice in the poverty-stricken New York Johnson City District. According to him there is satisfactory proof that OBE can successfully be implemented in schools situated in impoverished South African residential areas. Yazbek (1997:15) is also positively inclined towards OBE, mainly because of the successes that the system achieved in the USA and United Kingdom. For her it does not boil down to borrowing, but rather to learning. She pointed out that both countries adapted and developed OBE in accordance with local needs. Van der Horst and McDonald (1997:25) report that, based on research with regard to education in the USA, Australia, South America and the United Kingdom, various European countries, Singapore and Japan, they came to the conclusion that OBE has a place and a function in South Africa. Van der Westhuizen (1997:2) quotes the former Western Cape Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Education, Martha Olckers, to indicate how one can meaningfully learn from other countries how to avoid the "various traps" accompanying the implementation of OBE. From the above-mentioned newspaper reports it transpired that OBE, if adapted to the South African education situation, ought to be applied successfully. Therefore one can both learn and borrow from international practices. Whilst some newspaper journalists use international practices to recommend OBE, others use it to point out to readers that worldwide evidence exists that the chances for OBE to be successful are slim.

Venter (1997:13), a Cape Town principal, is worried because OBE in South Africa is presented as being the "universally accepted answer to all our curriculum problems". According to Venter a growing resistance towards OBE is mounting in various states in the USA. Not only Venter, but also MacMe-

nigall (1997:12), Mulholland (1997a:221 & 1997:3b), Rademeyer (1997:5; 2000:7) and Khoisan (2005:16) make use of international examples to express their concern about OBE. According to MacMenigall (1997:12) a large percentage of schools in the USA and Britain no longer apply OBE in certain subjects. In the USA parents complained because they felt that OBE undermined their parental authority and led to lowered academic standards. MacMenigall (1997:12) makes the unverified accusation that the sharp increase in teenage illiteracy, drug abuse, pregnancies and crime in the USA go hand in hand with the implementation of OBE in that country. Mulholland (1997b:3) points out that various schools in the USA are continuing with OBE, regardless of “predicable disastrous results”. Mulholland (1997a:22) also states that OBE has never been implemented successfully up to now. According to him (Mulholland, 1997b:3), more and more American parents turn to private classes “to overcome the damages done by OBE”. Mulholland (1997b:3) also warns that “this is precisely what will happen in South Africa if OBE is let loose on our children.” Eight years after the publication of the preceding report Mulholland (2005:8) is still relentless with his criticism against education practices in the USA and against OBE. He writes: “We have the United States to thank for the Outcomes-Based fad and some educators there are now taking their nonsense even further”. After a critical discussion of new assessment tendencies in the USA he still expresses the following wish:

Let us trust that our South African educators do not fall into this faddish trap or we will start producing generations of kids with high self-esteem who can't read, write or do arithmetic properly.

In 1997 the radically right-wing publication *The Aida Parker Newsletter* (July 1997:10) stated in an article in which the ANC government was criticised that OBE should be held responsible for the “stunning failure” of the American education system. Six months down the line the same publication (*The Aida Parker Newsletter*, 1999:11) started an article about OBE as follows:

From being the best, US public schools are today among the worst in the civilised world, largely thanks to a socialist absurdity known as Outcome Based Education.

In a follow-up article (*The Aida Parker Newsletter*, February 2000:7) it was alleged that “OBE has already gone far towards destroying the US education system”.

International education practices are therefore not only implemented by journalists and guest authors to inform their readers about the most recent developments in education, but also to verify their own viewpoints, even as a point of departure in political discourse. While journalists and guest authors depend on eurocentric and eastern examples, in particular, to laud or damn OBE, it will transpire from the content analysis of MI that authors specifically refer to African countries in support of their viewpoints.

Medium of Instruction

The South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a: art. 29) and the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b: art. 6) acknowledges the right of all learners to be educated in the official language or languages of their choice at public education institutions, if practically possible. In accordance with the Constitution

and the Schools Act, the Departement of Education (DoE, 1997:1-2) aims to promote the development of the official languages and establishment of a school language policy that will expedite education and learning.

Various South African researchers (amongst others De Klerk, 2002:6-7; Desai, 2001: 323-339; Kotzé, 2000:1-5; Smuts, 2000:1-5; Vermeulen, 2000: 265; Von Gruenenwaldt, 1999: 205; De Witt, Lessing & Dicker, 1998:119) are convinced, based on local investigations and international findings, that home language is the appropriate MI, especially during the first four years of education. From the analysis following it will be clear that not only academics, but also the media (<http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za>) freely use international practices and research in support of their statements regarding the use of English or the home language as MI in South African schools.

Various reports (Mda, 1997:6; Volksblad, 1998:3; Gaum, 2000:13; Beeld, 2001:8; Die Burger, 2001a:10; Bonthuys, 2001) point to the fact that the decision by African countries, after independence, to use the colonial/european language as the MI should be seen as one of the most important causes of educational problems in African countries.

Alexander (2001:28), a great champion of the home language as MI advocates a paradigm shift among South Africans.

We have to stop being held in thrall by Anglocentric delusions and realise that we live in Africa and that our children, like children throughout the world, can be taught in their own languages and at the same time become proficient in the global language, English, as and when they need to do so.

Kathleen Heugh (as quoted by Maluleke, 2001:7) writes in the same vein:

Nowhere in the world does any society produce top scientists and mathematicians unless students are taught and trained in the language they know best.

In their plea for the use of home languages as MI, Mda (1997:6), Gaum (2000:13), Alexander (2001:28), Bonthuys (2001:15) and Seepe (2001:20) point out that the preference for a european language as MI is not only a South African, but an African phenomenon. However, according to them, there is a noticeable change in attitude in African countries: education leaders and users in, amongst others, Botswana, Nigeria and Swaziland apparently realise the importance of the use of the home language to enable learners to express their problems and to (often) eliminate them. Because Seepe (2001:20) considers the development of African languages as important for the empowerment of Africans, he explains "we should talk the talk of Africa". Not only research in Africa, but also in Europe, Australia, India, Scandinavian countries and Russia, as well as UNESCO recommendations with regard to the importance of home languages as MI are quoted in various newspaper reports (Fakier, 1997:4; Volksblad, 1998:3; Gaum, 2000:13; Die Burger, 2001b:3) in support of their point of view that the home language, rather than English, should be developed and used as the MI in South Africa.

Although there are, at first glance, few similarities between the South African education situation and that in New Zealand, Dempster (2000:8) is of the opinion that South Africa can learn much from that country. According to Dempster (2000:8) poor achievement was synonymous with Maori educa-

tion until they started with so-called Maori schools. The principal of one of these schools told Dempster that “Maori children learn best when taught in the Maori language by Maori teachers using traditional Maori teaching methods.” According to Dempster this is sufficient proof that schools in South Africa should afford greater recognition to indigenous languages and cultures.

In the right-wing newspaper *Frontnuus*, Liebenberg (2002:23) wants to motivate his readers to, like the “Vlaminge in België, die Suid-Triolers in Italië, die Baske en Katalane in Spanje en die Quebecois in Kanada”,³ join the “language struggle” for the preservation of Afrikaans as MI. From the newspaper article by Liebenberg it seems as if South Africans who are of the opinion that their language and other education rights are disregarded, could learn much from the Europeans and the Canadians. In this regard Liebenberg (2002:23) states that “taalregte ’n belangrike motiveringsfaktor vir ’n volk is en dat dit meestal tot versetoptrede op ander terreine lei”.⁴

The printed media uses international research and education practices in an effort to persuade the South African readers to turn their backs on MI practices in the majority of African countries, where the use of European languages are prioritised, and to take cognisance of and to learn from the latest language practices and research in Africa and elsewhere where home language teaching is identified as the key to academic success. It is an open question whether the media will succeed in their self-imposed task if attention is paid to the underlying reasons why English rather than the home language is preferred as MI. According to De Wet (2002:119-124; 2000:37-57), South African learners’ (and their parents’) choice of MI is determined by political, economic and social considerations and not by educational considerations.

Conclusion

In the two examples discussed above, journalists and guest writers summarily turned to foreign practices in order to motivate their point of view and even as point of departure for political discourse. There is no sign of any scientifically justifiable accounting of the contextual similarities and differences between South Africa and the foreign countries. It is a practice that lends itself to be criticised to a great extent and is even a dangerous practice. In this regard there is an important function for Comparative Educationists — who have been absent from design of education policy for a considerable time — to provide a superstructure of relevant knowledge as guidance for the formulation of education policy. This function pertains not only to the two education matters discussed above — OBE and MI — but also to the whole range of education issues where decisions have to be made and strategies determined, for example, equal education opportunities, eradication of adult illiteracy, role of education in the eradication of poverty, employment of education in the creation of social capital and education as instrument for economic growth, to mention but a few. An example is the issue relating to private schools. In the past two decades a great deal of research has been done worldwide on private schools. The most salient example is probably the work by Walford (1989). Foreign research is a rich source for Comparative Educationists in South Africa in their research on the possibilities, advantages, as well as disadvantages, of private schools in South Africa. However,

all the contextual similarities and differences (geographical, demographical, social, cultural, economic, political and religious) between South Africa and the country where the research is undertaken, need to be thoroughly accounted for. If this is done, Comparative Educationists can play their potential role in the establishment of a dispensation regarding private schools that will best serve the interests of South Africa.

Notes

1. Reports that appeared in South African daily and weekly newspapers and magazines, as well as Sunday newspapers since January 1991, are available to registered SAMedia users via the Internet (<http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za>).
2. Media reports published since the publication of the National Curriculum Statement in 2003 have not made use of an international perspective. These reports were mainly informative in nature (amongst others Mecoamere, 2004:6; City Press, 2005:42; Daily Dispatch, 2005:3; Schreuder, 2005:13). For this reason we have concentrated on reports aimed at Curriculum 2005.
3. "... Flemish in Belgium, the Southern Tyrolese in Italy, the Basques and Catalans in Spain and the Quebecois in Canada".
4. "... language rights are an important motivating factor for a nation and that it mostly leads to resistance actions in other areas".

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