



Comparative education in Asia: inaugurating the APJE-CESA affiliation

Edward Vickers

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Comparative education in Asia: inaugurating the APJE-CESA affiliation

This special issue of the *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* (APJE) inaugurates its formal affiliation with the *Comparative Education Society of Asia* (CESA). This initiative is motivated by our shared desire to promote stronger “Asian” voices in the field of academic educational research, thereby helping to address a persistent East-West imbalance in the global academic debate that extends well beyond the field of Education. This imbalance is not necessarily, as some have appeared to suggest, the outcome of any conscious “hegemonic project” on the part of Western scholars, some of whom are among its most prominent critics (see Lim & Apple, 2016). But it does underline the continuing need for a stronger platform within Asia for communication amongst educational scholars and dissemination of their research. Moreover, redressing the East-West balance in this way is something from which all educational researchers – “Western” or “Asian” – ultimately stand to benefit.

This vision of strengthening “Asian” voices in the field of educational research crucially informed the establishment of the CESA over 25 years ago (in 1991), and was also reflected in the slightly later (1995) decision to give the former *Singapore Journal of Education* a wider remit as the APJE. From its founding, the CESA has always seen as one of its central tasks outreach to communities of scholars in Asian societies where Comparative Education as a field is less developed. It has aimed to draw scholars in regions too frequently consigned to the periphery of international debate into fuller engagement with the wider community of academic educationalists throughout Asia and worldwide. This aim is clearly congruent with the APJE’s role as one of the leading Asia-based education journals published in English. Recognizing our common goals, the Boards of the APJE and CESA have concluded that we can pursue them more effectively together.

In concrete terms, this collaboration will take two forms. Firstly, starting with the CESA’s next biennial conference (in Siem Riep, Cambodia, in May 2018), the APJE and CESA will organize an intensive pre-conference writing workshop for a small group of scholars, with the aim of coaching them through some of the key steps involved in preparing a paper for publication in English in a peer-reviewed journal. The model for this will be the excellent writers’ workshops organized by *Compare*, with the support of the British Association of International and Comparative Education (one such workshop was run in conjunction with the CESA’s 2016 conference in Manila).

Secondly, each biennial conference of the CESA will henceforth be linked to a special issue of the APJE. The process of compiling this special issue will begin before the conference, on a theme related to that of the conference but more tightly focused. It is expected that most, if not all, of the papers featured in these special issues will be based on presentations delivered at the CESA conference; indeed, the conference itself will constitute a crucial opportunity for authors to receive feedback on early drafts of their papers. The pre-conference writers’ workshop will also provide some authors with the opportunity to receive more systematic advice on submitting papers for publication in the APJE special issue, or in regular issues of this or other international, peer-reviewed journals.

This inaugural special issue features several papers presented at the CESA’s latest conference in Manila, in January 2016. It is less tightly themed than future special issues will be, since the process of compiling it followed the decision taken at that conference (by the CESA Board) to propose a tie-up

with the APJE. Nonetheless, it does highlight some of the ways in which the APJE-CESA collaboration has the potential to help contribute to the more forceful and effective articulation of Asian perspectives in educational research.

This mission, and its promise of enriching educational research globally, is most explicitly addressed in the article by Maria Manzon, in which she surveys the state of Comparative Education as a field within Asia. The theme of the CESA's Manila conference was "diversity in education", and in this paper – based on her keynote address – Manzon presents a vision of educational research that embraces Asia's diversity while contributing to a more "multipolar" academic conversation worldwide. Far from portraying scholarship within the (rather nebulous) borders of "Asia" as underpinned by some totalizing vision of "Asianness", Manzon is at pains to emphasize the enormous variety that characterizes Asian approaches to education.

While noting that such variety is a potential source of strength for comparative scholarship, in her conclusion Manzon challenges scholars more fully to address the many dimensions of diversity across Asia, and to do so in a spirit of (constructive) criticism. For example, she alludes to the recent fashion in the West for viewing some Asian societies – especially in East and Southeast Asia – as models of educational success. But those of us who not only research societies such as Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, or Shanghai, but also live there and send our children to school there, are conscious of the very significant costs incurred by many systems that score well in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests (on Japan, see Arai, 2016). At the same time, even while naïve (or duplicitous) Western policymakers hail the vaunted educational success of certain Asian societies, across Asia itself the tendency to look to the West or to "developed" East Asia for models of "best practice" or "what works" remains entrenched.

All too often, public debate over the cross-national transfer of educational policies or practices – whether intra-Asian or East-West – reflects an extremely narrow vision of education's social purpose; a narrowness that the recent fashion for quantitative cross-national comparison only exacerbates. Manzon notes the peculiarly strong influence of "methodological nationalism" on much Asian educational research (something also reinforced by international league tables of educational outcomes), but in fact nationalism *tout court* has strongly coloured views of education's fundamental aims. In countries that have experienced colonialism (of either Western or home-grown Asian varieties), or pursued modernization in its shadow, maximizing "human resources" and fostering unquestioning patriotism have often been the supreme imperatives of education policy.

In advocating a broader conceptualization of education's nature and aims, Manzon calls for comparativists to reconnect with Asia's indigenous ethical traditions, specifically alluding to notions of "holism", "collectivism", "spirituality" and the importance of raising awareness of "value systems other than [those of] Confucian-heritage cultures". However, across much of Asia, in so far as ideas of ethical indigeneity enter into educational debate, they do so as a dead legacy selectively deployed for the legitimation of state goals, rather than as living traditions, openly debated, reflecting and informing contemporary societal challenges. A Darwinian vision of inter-state relations is frequently invoked to justify subordinating individual or communal goals to promoting national strength or competitiveness – despite the dubiousness of the evidence linking schooling (beyond a certain basic level) to the enhancement of economic productivity (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017; Wolf, 2002). Social Darwinism with Asian characteristics distorts domestic educational priorities, exacerbating competitive intensity right down through the schooling system, and thereby squeezing out space for consideration of broader conceptions of learning and its intrinsic benefits (on the case of China see Vickers & Zeng, 2017, especially the concluding chapter).

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the phenomenon of "shadow education". Studies of this phenomenon constitute an excellent example of how Asia-based educational research can enrich the field worldwide. Shadow education has become particularly widespread in the prosperous regions of East Asia, but is now also spreading to poorer, less "developed" societies such as Bangladesh (see Bray & Lykins, 2012). Amongst the features associated with the intense competitiveness that underpin this phenomenon are ultra-meritocratic ideologies, profoundly instrumentalist visions of the purposes of

education, and minimal public welfare provision. In societies where state-provided safety nets are minimal or non-existent; possession of a college degree has become an indispensable to secure, high-status professions; and the branding-for-life of teenagers according to performance in crucial public examinations is institutionalized, total commitment to examination success comes to be seen as crucial to determining not just the fate of the individual student, but of his entire family. As the papers here by Yamato and Zhang, and Mahmud and Bray demonstrate, these conditions have often fostered a sort of mass hysteria around private tutorial schooling – albeit involving quite rational calculations at the level of individuals and families. This craze both feeds off and accentuates an ethos of extreme, pseudo-meritocratic competition. The results of this vicious cycle include a corruption of formal schooling, and a cramping of young lives. Given the factors causing this phenomenon, we have to ask how far it may spread, and whether Asian experiences with “shadow education” prefigure what neoliberal ideologues have in store for much of the rest of the world.

But the capacity of social scientists – educationalists included – to explain the present, let alone predict the future, depends very much upon their grasp of the past. Understanding how to deal with the problems thrown up by the “shadow education” craze requires an appreciation of why it has arisen in particular societies, and of how it relates to their broader political, cultural, and socio-economic conditions. Put simply, it requires historical analysis – something too often neglected in mainstream educational research. This neglect is perhaps especially serious in many Asian societies where educational research has typically been conceived merely as an exercise in seeking technical improvements to existing systems, rather than asking how and why those systems have evolved, whose interests they serve, and what it means to talk of “improvement” in any given social, cultural, or political context.

These are the kinds of questions addressed in Maca’s ongoing project on education and the history of labour migration in the Philippines. This highlights the intersection, in that archipelago’s educational past, of colonialism, nationalism, and (more recently) neoliberal globalization. Maca analyses how the early twentieth-century American pursuit of an English language-based “civilizing mission”, combined with the collaborative foundations of colonial rule, buttressed the social dominance of established elites while creating the foundations for future growth in overseas labour migration. When this later took off during the Marcos dictatorship, it acted as a “safety valve”, helping to deflect popular demand for thoroughgoing social or political reform. As Maca has argued elsewhere (Maca & Morris, 2012), economic, social, and political dysfunction in the modern Philippines can be related to a failure on the part of the state to construct or articulate a coherent, unifying narrative of national identity. Indeed, the very absence of nationalism, manifested in the ease with which Filipinos adapt to life in other societies around the world, has come to be hailed as a defining characteristic of “Filipino-ness”. If the history of a society like Japan demonstrates the power of a combination of strong-state nationalism and state-led developmentalism, as well as the dangers inherent in this formula (not least for international peace), the Philippines arguably constitutes the reverse case. Maca thus shows how addressing present-day educational challenges requires understanding how political, cultural, and economic factors have shaped Asian societies and their education systems. He also illustrates how, in the Philippines, as across Asia, the legacies of colonialism and of anti- or post-colonial developmental statism (or its absence) continue to cast a long shadow.

Some may detect such a shadow in the contours of this special issue itself: published in English in one former colonial entrepot (Singapore), consisting largely of work by contributors based in another (Hong Kong), and edited by a British scholar working in that other great instigator of Asian colonialism: Japan. Looked at another way, however, this issue is reflective of the diversity of Asian voices – Chinese, Japanese, Bangladeshi, Filipino – and exemplifies how established institutions, whatever their origins, can and should reach out to embrace and foster that diversity. The CESA itself – with its origins in Japan, but now headed by a Chinese President – represents one attempt to transcend the legacy of Asia’s difficult and divided past. Now working together, the CESA and the APJE aspire to promote in the field of educational research, and ultimately through education itself, a diverse, open and internationalist vision rooted in the experiences of all Asian societies.

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Edward Vickers
Kyushu University

 vickers.edward.645@m.kyushu-u.ac.jp