

# COMPARATIVE EDUCATION IN A MICROCOSM: METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS SECTOR IN HONG KONG

MARK BRAY AND YOKO YAMATO

**Abstract** – Many studies in the field of comparative education take national education systems as the basic unit of analysis. The present paper has been conceived within this tradition, but has a different angle of approach. It focuses on 47 international schools in a small territory. Some of the international schools were grouped into larger systems but others were free-standing institutions. The focus of the paper thus lies at an intersection between cross-national and intra-national comparisons. It makes methodological observations on the nature of comparisons that are possible within such a microcosm, and on the conceptual lessons that can be derived from such analysis.

**Zusammenfassung** – Viele Studien im Bereich der vergleichenden Bildung nehmen nationale Bildungssysteme als Basiseinheit von Analysen. Der vorliegende Artikel wurde im Rahmen dieser Tradition erstellt, hat aber einen unterschiedlichen Ansatzwinkel. Er konzentriert sich auf 47 internationale Schulen in einem kleinen Gebiet. Einige der internationalen Schulen wurden in größere Systeme zusammengefasst, andere waren freistehende Institutionen. Schwerpunkt dieses Artikels ist somit eine Mischung aus internationalen und nationalen Vergleichen. Es wurden methodologische Beobachtungen über die Art von innerhalb eines solchen Mikrokosmos möglichen Vergleichen durchgeführt, sowie über konzeptuelle Lehren, die von einer solchen Analyse abgeleitet werden können.

**Résumé** – De nombreuses études sur l'éducation comparée prennent comme unité de base de leur analyse les systèmes éducatifs nationaux. La présente contribution a été élaborée selon cette tradition, mais sous un angle d'approche différent. Elle se concentre sur 47 écoles internationales situées sur un périmètre limité. Certaines d'entre elles appartiennent à des systèmes plus vastes, d'autres sont des institutions autonomes. L'accent de cet article porte donc sur l'intersection entre les comparaisons transnationales et nationales. Les auteurs émettent des observations méthodologiques sur la nature des comparaisons possibles à l'intérieur d'un tel microcosme, et sur les enseignements conceptuels pouvant être tirés de cette analyse.

**Resumen** – Muchos de los estudios que se realizan sobre la educación comparativa toman el sistema de educación nacional como unidad básica del análisis. El presente trabajo se ha concebido dentro de esta tradición, pero desde una óptica diferente al enfocarse en 47 escuelas internacionales en un territorio limitado. Algunas de las escuelas internacionales se han agrupado en sistemas mayores, pero otras se han considerado instituciones independientes. Así, este estudio vendría a presentar una intersección entre las comparaciones internacionales e intranacionales. Realiza observaciones metodológicas sobre la naturaleza de las comparaciones posibles dentro de un microcosmo de esa clase y sobre las lecciones conceptuales que se pueden deducir de ese análisis.



**Резюме** – Во многих исследованиях в области сравнительного образования национальная образовательная система принимается за основу в проведении анализа. Данная статья была задумана согласно такой традиции, хотя в ней присутствует и другой подход. В статье ставится акцент на 47 международных школах, расположенных на небольшой территории. Некоторые международные школы были сгруппированы в более крупные системы, а другие оставались автономными учреждениями. Таким образом, акцент в данной статье ставится на пересечении межнациональных и внутринациональных сравнений. Приводятся методологические наблюдения относительно природы сравнений, которые являются возможными внутри такого микрокосма, и относительно концептуальных уроков, которые можно извлечь из проведения такого анализа.

The field of comparative education is strongly dominated by cross-national perspectives. Most comparative textbooks reflect this emphasis, and some textbooks do not even mention the value of comparing patterns within a single country.

One cause of this separation is the common use in comparative education of the system as the focus for analysis. Rust (2001: iii) remarked that most comparative educators “would likely feel comfortable with the notion that comparative education deals mainly with the analysis of educational systems and problems in two or more national contexts”. Education systems in different countries are an explicit unit of analysis in many comparative education studies (e.g. Ignas and Corsini 1981; Postlethwaite 1988; Le Métais 2001).

In some respects this paper is framed within this tradition, but it takes a rather different approach from the mainstream literature. The paper lies at an intersection of cross-national and intra-national studies. It focuses on systems of education, but some of these systems are single institutions or even parts of institutions. The paper does make some cross-national comparison of education systems, but only through consideration of institutions which are geographically detached from their parent systems in other countries.

The arena on which this paper focuses is the international schools sector in Hong Kong. In 2000/2001 the sector had 47 institutions which could be grouped into 36 systems. Hong Kong has an area of just 1,097 square kilometres, and the paper shows wide diversity among the systems operating within this small area. Thus, the paper takes Hong Kong as a microcosm, and explores the nature of the systems which operate within it. The paper shows how the tools of comparative education can be used to enhance understanding of the existence, operation and evolution of the large number of education systems in this small space.

In some ways, the focus of the paper resembles that by Raffe et al. (1999), who compared the education systems of the United Kingdom (UK) and, using a metaphor from football, made a case for study of “home internationals” in comparative research. As the authors explained (p. 9):

The UK is represented by four “national” football teams, those of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Matches between these teams were once called “home internationals”. Each home country of the UK has its own education and training system; this paper presents the case for “home international” comparisons of these systems.

The authors added (p. 10) that the differences among the UK systems

are not just a nuisance and a problem to be coped with. They are also an opportunity for research . . . [and] a source of empirical and theoretical challenges and of lessons for policy and practice.

Similar observations might be made about the international schools sector in Hong Kong.

## Definitions

Two terms require definition in order to set the framework for this paper. The first is “system”, and the second is “international school”.

Allport (1955: 469) defined a system as:

any recognizably delimited aggregate of dynamic elements that are in some way interconnected and interdependent and that continue to operate together according to certain laws and in such a way as to produce some characteristic total effect. A system, in other words, is something that is concerned with some kind of activity and preserves a kind of integration and unity; and a particular system can be recognised as distinct from other systems to which, however, it may be dynamically related.

This area of scholarship is complex, and has been debated extensively in the decades since Allport wrote the definition (see e.g. Lockett and Spear 1980). Nevertheless, the definition is adequate for present purposes. Specifically in the domain of education, Archer (1984: 74) noted that education systems are created when the component parts cease to be disparate and unrelated sets of establishments or independent networks and instead become interrelated to form a unified whole.

On this definition, Hong Kong has a territory-wide education system which primarily serves the local Chinese population, is supervised by the government’s Education and Manpower Bureau, and is distinct from education systems elsewhere. For many years, official publications (e.g. Hong Kong 1981; Education Commission 2000) have explicitly referred to it as a system; and comparative analyses would readily expose differences between the Hong Kong education system and those of neighbouring jurisdictions such as Macau and mainland China (Bray and Koo 1999; Law 2000). The international schools on which this paper focuses operate within the territory of Hong Kong but are outside the Hong Kong education system. In 2000/2001, the international schools comprised approximately 4 per cent of the total number of