

**A General Introduction
to Comparative Approaches
in Evaluation of Education and Training**

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Plenary Session

Mesdames, Messieurs,

Bien que mon français soit moins bon que mon anglais, qui est déjà loin d'être parfait, je suivrai la coutume des réunions de la CESE en commençant dans la langue du pays hôte, pour remercier très vivement les organisateurs, ainsi que le Comité directeur de la CESE et son président. Ils ont bien voulu me faire l'honneur de m'inviter à donner l'un des trois brefs discours d'ouverture sur le thème général, un "key-note address". Cela me conduit à un problème, non des moindres parmi ceux que je voudrais traiter: les différentes langues possèdent toutes des termes difficiles à traduire. Il n'existe pas, à ma connaissance, en français (ou même en italien) d'expression tout à fait équivalente pour l'anglais "key-note address".

Si nous comparons par ailleurs la formulation en français et en anglais du thème général du Congrès ("Conference" en anglais), nous découvrons des différences non sans intérêt. Les termes qui se réfèrent au domaine éducatif ont en général dans les diverses langues des différences sémantiques importantes, même s'ils ont la même racine latine ou s'ils ont été transposés d'une langue à l'autre. Le pluriel français "formations" correspond ainsi à l'union des deux termes anglais "education and training"; le terme français "points de vue" au terme anglais "approaches". Ces différences s'expliquent peut-être par le fait que les anglophones préfèrent les modèles opératoires, dynamiques aux modèles visuels et statiques. Par ailleurs, les termes allemands "Erziehung" et "Bildung", qui ne sont pas, eux, d'origine latine, ne correspondent pas exactement il me semble aux termes français "éducation" et "formation", ni aux termes italiens "educazione" et "formazione". Et assurément "Bildung" ne peut être traduit par "training".

Toutefois, je n'ai pas la compétence requise pour soutenir un discours de linguistique comparée. J'ai seulement voulu saisir l'occasion de souligner que les obstacles linguistiques posent très probablement des difficultés considérables dans le discours pédagogique, plus encore que dans d'autres domaines.

Now I go on speaking in English, also because I would like to refer briefly to a general epistemological hypothesis concerning the essential role of linguistic mediation in the construction of scientific theories, which has been

advanced in its more radical form by two American authors, Sapir and Whorf¹ and utilized by important American epistemologists included Willard Ormon Quine.

Even Karl Popper recognizes the basic validity of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, but accepts it only as a very important warning against some methodological shortcomings. If this is important in outlining the scientific theories in general, it is particularly relevant in the human sciences and in educational research, and probably even more relevant in comparative education. Here not only the linguistic framework of the conceptual statements can present hidden tricks, but even the objects of inquiry, the educational systems, can do so, as we have just exemplified.

But the central factor of unity and consistency in the most advanced scientific areas has been, historically, the very nature of the problem studied, and the large agreement on their common significance based on the similar operative goals shared eventually by even very different cultures. Then a consistent "universe of discourse" develops, more or less rapidly, in relation with one single well structured scientific domain. A carefully designed set of equivalences between different languages is established, often using a single natural language as checking reference criterion, and chiefly a system of universal abstract symbols. In some cases, as in physics, English is practically the only language employed in research, even by Japanese, Russian or Italian scientists (a little less by French researchers, if I am correctly informed).

It is far from my intention to suggest that educational research, comparative or not, should follow the same line, and much less that it should privilege English as communication tool all over the world.

My main point is that the basic condition for overcoming the epistemological constraints of the cages linguistiques, or linguistic cages, is to be engaged, beyond most cultural differences, in important problems of common concern. This is the Key-note I would like to suggest you for our work:

¹ Edward Sapir had already presented this hypothesis in 1921 (Language: an Introduction to the Study of Speech, New-York, Harcourt Brace) and Benjamin L. Whorf developed it decades later in several essays, finally collected in the volume Language, Thought and reality (edited by J.B. Carrol, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1956).

worldwide education is rapidly developing as a common concern of mankind, and this very fact represents the "royal avenue" toward the solution of our epistemological problems. Not only of those, of course: research first of all aims at getting cognitive results viable also for useful applications. But where the primary common problem seems to be, as in educational progress, just mutual understanding, it is particularly important to avoid the danger of misunderstandings just in the structure of the new knowledge we try to develop for common benefit.

Professor Henk Van Daele, in his opening address to the last CESE Congress held in Madrid, quoted the founder of comparative education, Marc-Antoine Jullien, who in his Esquisse d'un ouvrage sur l'éducation comparée (1817) made the following statement: "Reform and improvement of education, true foundation of the social building, first source of habits and opinions exercising a strong influence on the whole life, are a generally need perceived, as for an instinct, in Europe".

How to satisfy such an "instinct" was the problem to be solved at that time and for a Europe yearning for peace just after the Napoleonic wars. But now, even for Europe, the key-problem is much wider and much more difficult and complex, as Van Daele was pointing out briefly, mentioning our concerning "education for all" and "education for the XXI Century".

Allow me to develop a little the interconnected dimensions of a worldwide culture of peace we need to promote as Europeans aware of our duties (but at the same time realistically concerned about our own future too). Such a new culture should be chiefly grounded on a new kind of creative education. The 43rd UNESCO World Conference on Education will be held in Geneva next September, and its general theme is just "The Contribution of Education in Cultural development". Invited to discuss in a small group of experts coming from both the North and the South of the planet, I found myself largely in agreement with most of them on the fact that education has to cope rather directly with a set of dramatic problems mankind has to face. I say "rather directly" because all the dimensions of the new culture humanity needs for its own survival, and chiefly for its own dignity in a short term future, demand themselves rapid changes and improvements. The usual time-lag between culture and education, traditionnally conceived as a process of "transmission" of consolidated beliefs, is now reduced to a minimum. The rethoric instilling accepted values is now functioning less and less. The common values mankind urgently needs to radically reshape and even the

necessary new scientific and technological competences are not developing rapidly enough for coping with the hyper-complexity of problems like the promotion of a "sustainable development" of mankind and chiefly of the less developed countries. This does not mean that "education for all" is not a good aim to be pursued everywhere. It is the basic condition for human equality, but it should produce not only high level skills but also attitudes for utilizing them for saving human life and improve its quality all over the world. This means, for the highly developed countries and, of course, for Western Europe, to become seriously capable to devote a good share of our surplus to the international aids. We should also become capable to develop scientific and technological innovation rather in a co-operative than in a paternalistic (or neo-colonial) way: we should be attentive to local needs, respectful as far as possible of local cultures and traditions, as well as seriously concerned about local and global environmental constraints.

But in these fields educators cannot get ready-made certainties easy to utilize, from outside: they have to search for them in the same time in which they act as educators, trying to give answers to the pupils' questions which in these fields are often original and embarrassing. Sometimes invited experts may honestly confess of not having well-grounded solutions. Even in discussions among specialists there are disagreement on such important problems as the "greenhouse effect", chiefly about its timing in the future. The dramatic perspective is that waiting to get practical certainty before taking decisions, we risk to take them probably too late, in order to avoid planetary disasters.

In a discussion paper I was invited to prepare for the Geneva World Conference, I made the following synthetic considerations about the interrelations between education and culture, chiefly the strongly updated culture humanity eagerly needs.

"The few issues debated so far are emblematic instances of several changes (and enrichments already taking place in our culture, but not fast enough, I am afraid, to ensure the survival of humanity. Culture and education are strictly related, Greek and Hellenistic humanism unified them under the same term, paideia, and even the Latin term cultura means cultivation of minds. But traditionally education, chiefly in its formal and institutionalized versions, follows cultural innovation after some time-lag, with the exception of higher education (but not always everywhere).

Very rarely education is an heuristic function of activity, jointly carried on by teachers and students and producing really new knowledge, new not only for the pupils. This is, of course, one of the highest ideal goal of progressive education, but it can be very seldom attained."

Now it seems to me what the heuristic function of education might be stressed very much if the problems discussed in the classrooms reflect the problems humanity has to face as a whole: problems of peace, of a new (but democratic) world order, problems of ecology in relations with the needs of development of a majority of people on the earth surface, problems of how to fairly control the demographic explosion in the South of the world, problems of intercultural understanding and multicultural appreciation, problems of language education, and so on. They are all problems of highly interconnected between them, and anyway to be treated with an interdisciplinary and/or multidisciplinary approach. They are just aspects, hardly separable, of the global problem of how to survive, in dignity and peace, on this planet.

We know that in a majority of countries a high number of new curricular or extra-curricular cross-disciplinary activities are developing, devoted not only to peace education in general, but also more particularly to environmental education, development education, intercultural education, and so on. In Europe there already exists and grows a good number of associations, chiefly of teachers of different schools levels, aimed to promote co-operation within and outside schools, in these different but convergent directions. Even educational authorities have in several cases officially prescribed or suggested innovations along the same lines.

We should study them comparatively, and analyse the hardest difficulties they are facing. It would surely be a challenging enterprise, but let me just briefly mention the main points of interest it deserves.

1) Directly, for what Europe is concerned, and indirectly collecting the rich information the interested circles can afford about similar programs developed elsewhere, we might outline a landscape of the educational concern similarly oriented in most countries of the world.

2) At the same time it would be important to study how the main educational difficulties involved tend to be solved: I mean in which way such inter- or multidisciplinary problems are grounded on the strictly necessary disciplinary

competences, and hence how such innovations influence the general curriculum construction. This point is highly relevant in relation with the theme of this Conference, Evaluation of education and training, chiefly if it is not taken as exclusively concerned with basic cognitive competences, but also with attitudes, problem-solving, critical thinking, and so on, as it has been for decades and it is presently too the approach of the worldwide IEA surveys (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement). But we should go further in the field of universally participated values. Between brackets, I must add that the IEA study have never been only quantitative, and perhaps mechanical. They always include qualitative analyses of school settings and country systems. Harry A. Passow, utilized the Six Subjects survey materials (1968-72) for a rich comparative study of education in 18 countries, developed chiefly in qualitative of education in 18 countries, developed chiefly in qualitative terms.

3) Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and comparative methods represent a general tendency in first-hand research in several fields as well in new educational approaches. Anthropology, chiefly cultural anthropology, but also sociology and more recently history became more and more comparative for intrinsic reasons. A well-known German historian recently stated that even the real understanding of "who the Greeks were... can only result from comparaisons"². The same author states that the sciences "are also families", and I shall add that they are not only families compounded by close relatives, but more and more, in the advanced researches, they connect disciplines across the gap traditionally separating the Snow's "two culture". A "third culture", the comparatively new human or social sciences like economy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, stress the need of such an epistemological strategy. The sociologist Marvin Harris has gone very far in this direction, which seems extremely fruitful in supporting the common aims and common values of humanity³.

Such a virtual coincidence of educational and epistemological approaches, when they are confronted with the most urgent needs of the present human condition, is in my opinion something to be carefully studied and analysed

² Christian Meier, Die Welt der Geschichte und die Provinz der Historiker. Drei Überlegungen. Berlin, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1991, ch. 2.

³ Cfr. Marvin Harris, Our kind, New-York, Harper and Row, 1991.

by comparative education experts.

4) In spite of the complexity or hyper-complexity⁴ of the problems we have to face, both in border-line research and in education, all such problems are strictly linked together, they constitute a global unique problem. Environment, development, equality, world order are subjects continuously interwoven even in the mass media popularization, but chiefly in all the most important scientific reports.

Surely, we have, as citizens of an enlarged Europe, our own "local" problems of mutual understanding, cultural and economic mutual aid, educational harmonization, as my friend Wolfgang Mittner explained so well in the Madrid conference. But the European dimension cannot be isolated from the universal one: even our urgent action in the Balkans cannot be exerted outside the United Nations' frame.

5) The Rio conference on the planetary environment problems has shown that most political leaders want to have a base of scientific certainty before agreeing on austerity measures, and that they prefer to care the short-sighted views of the present majorities of voters rather than the vital interests of the next generations. But public opinion is changing, even if unfortunately too slowly. This stresses the role of education which might become the main potential factor of a change of attitudes by the voters of tomorrow. Of course, even adult education should urgently be prompted. But in general, only regular sequential education can promote a critical thinking capable to accept uncertainty, but also to take decisions on the ground of probabilities carefully weighted. Reasoning in terms of probability is one of the main traits of modern sciences, of course not easy to become common sense. But this is just what a far-looking democracy needs, even in order to avoid the dangers of some ecological fanaticism (publicly criticized in a recent document signed in Paris by 264 scientists including 52 Nobel prizes).

My central point, the Key-note I modestly submit to your attention, is therefore the urgency that "education for all" should go so far as to be able

⁴ I use the term hyper-complexity on the line of Edgar Morin's methodological contributions, but stressing as distinctive character the interaction between a natural complexity and a human, evaluational, decisional complexity.

to largely diffuse both scientifically grounded critical thinking and serious concern for the future of all human beings. Comparative education should utilize as far as possible such a basic problem both to overcome its main epistemological difficulties and to clarify the actual possibilities of moving towards such a common goal. But not in a unique generic way: people are different around the world, they have different urgent needs, they cannot succeed too quickly in seeing the forest behind the trees, but even more for the rich people which pro capita produce fifty times the quantity of carbone dioxide produced by the poor ones.

The only positive novelty is that now we see such a diversity of myopic attitudes is becoming a set of conflicting elements of a common problem: how to save the Earth. That the planet is in danger, and humanity persists in its egoistic sectarianisms, is becoming more and more evident almost everywhere, even through the mass media.

But such a confused and contradictory awareness of the planetary situation might be settled only by an educational action unique in its central inspiration and carefully diversified according to the different cultural (and economic) settings.

Which more noble and urgent task might be assumed by comparative education in Europe as well in the whole world ? But this is surely the main ideal task for education in general, not for comparative education only. I agree on this possible objection, but only in the sense that I believe that education (or pedagogy) should become, more and more, like history, comparative and multidisciplinary in its very essence.

This means that the key-note I so warmly support even if centered on universal values, cannot be interpreted as a universal passe-partout for comparative education. All the best tested methods and successfully experienced approaches to general and chiefly specific problems must be retained, but also developed and refined according to a general reorientation towards a "conversion" of our culture to up-dated universal values.