



# Comparative vocational education and training research: What purposes does it serve?

Karen Evans<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Significant overlaps and creative tensions occur at the interfaces of comparative education and development studies, as distinctive bodies of theory inform and shape competing strands of research and discourses of scholarship. Within comparative education, there are long-running debates over the pursuit of generalisable scientific principles or contextualised understanding; between the purposes of policy borrowing, problem solving or helping educators in the ‘imagination’ of different ways of doing things. Some leading comparative scholars argue that comparative education is quite distinct from any notion of development towards more desirable states. Others contest the ‘development-free’ view, arguing strongly that development assumptions are deeply embedded in much comparative education work. Furthermore, the communicative domain of inter-cultural education, with a focus on mutual learning and exchange, has very significant overlaps with the ‘global dimension’ of comparative education, in focusing on education that links researchers, teachers and often students internationally in analysing common problems affecting individuals and communities across borders. How, within these overlapping domains, are we to locate the work of those who carry out cross-national studies in vocational education and training (VET), as research priorities increasingly focus on influences of globalisation, decentralising tendencies, cultural diversification and previously under-researched dimensions of gender, ethnicity and society? This paper, based on the opening lecture given at the third international conference on comparative education and training, explores the challenges of finding ‘common cause’ in defining the field, while seeking a dialogic approach in comparative VET in which traditions and perspectives can enrich and illuminate each other and, ultimately, what scholars do in practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Karen Evans, UCL Institute of Education, University of London,  
e-mail: karen.evans@ucl.ac.uk

## 1 Introduction

The best light is obtained in the mingled region of interferences between two sources and this region vanishes if the two flows have no common intersection. So at least two sources of light are necessary, if not what is presented is simply a position, which rapidly becomes a directive that is imperialistic, necessary, obligatory. If each centre claims to be the sole source of light outside of which there is nothing but obscurantism, then the only compass readings or pathways obtained are those of obedience. (Serres 1995, p. 178)

The intersections of the fields of comparative education, international development studies in education and the communicative domain of inter-cultural education are waiting for trail-finders, rather than pathway followers, to explore them to the full. My argument is that these intersections create both a space and a natural territory for the creative development of comparative VET research. Comparative VET research, far from being semi-detached or an annex to the broader field of comparative education, can lead the way in modelling a dialogic approach, driven by renewed purposes. Keeping the intersections of comparative education, international development and inter-cultural education in view enables us to bring into focus the challenges and the promise for re-imagining and energising future comparative VET research.

My point of departure is my own initiation into the field of comparative inquiry. Everything we know or think we know has a context in which it was originally developed. My engagement with comparative research did not start until post-doctoral level. My doctoral studies had focused on young workers' learning and development in 1970s Britain. I remember my literature review initially being far too large, as my efforts to be comprehensive led me in ever increasing circles as I engaged with international literature in the English language (which gives expression to voices globally, as a scientific lingua franca, with limitations that I return to later). I learnt about diverse structural and cultural affordances for post-school learning that challenged all my prior assumptions and set me off on various tracks that I was unable to pursue within the confines of the degree. I managed to get my study under control eventually and to finish the PhD with its mainly British focus, but my appetite for the international and comparative dimensions had been whetted. Moving beyond the confines of doctoral study, I was ready to start exploring research questions trans-nationally, but where to start? I discovered the work of Edmund J. King, who wrote *Post-compulsory education in Western Europe*, generating what he termed a framework for the analysis of newness in edu-

cation. In an article marking the end of King's term of office as Chair of the Research Committee of the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) Edmund J. King (1989) captured the global comparative education debate of the time. Addressing the question of the purposes that comparative education should serve, he issued a challenge to the high priesthood of comparative education and their uses of power and authority to create exclusive spaces. The debate revolved around the search for a universal method of comparative education. Based on a delineated process of description, explanation and prediction, a key purpose was to map the educational systems of the world through existing data with the aim of predicting the effects of changes and therefore the prospects for specific types of reform.

King (1989) equated attempts systematically to map the features of education to attempts to 'pin and box the butterfly', urging comparative scholars instead to develop pluralistic methods and embrace uncertainty: "At all costs we should avoid circumscribing our enterprise by defining it too conservatively" (King 1989, p. 379).

For King and other 'contextualists' of the time, the defining purpose of comparative education should be to understand the *actualities* of education 'from the inside', in an array of different contexts. These understandings were to play their parts in theatres of educational decision-making: if comparative education could not contribute constructively to decision-making in those theatres, King (1989) argued, there was something wrong with it.

This thinking had generated the 'framework for analysis of newness in education' as a product of a large-scale comparative inquiry *Post-compulsory education: A new analysis in Western Europe* (King et al. 1974), focusing on the education and training of young adults (16–20 year olds). The study was funded by the U.K. Social Science Research Council and implemented in collaboration with comparative education societies across Western Europe. For a new generation of post-doctoral researchers seeking to internationalise their work, this framework provided a springboard into the comparative education field. The framework's engagement with post-school education and training pathways and the 'life-work-learning' interplay was, and remains, powerful. I advocated use of the framework to others (Evans 2003) and kept its central tenets in mind in constructing my own ensuing comparative inquiries. Using approaches first outlined in Evans and Heinz (1993), exploration of systemic questions has, for me, always entailed a process of embracing the actualities of the participant's experiences, in the contexts of shifting norms and cultural languages of life.

My subsequently appointment as joint editor of *Compare*, the official journal of the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE), extended my horizons and led me look afresh at how the scope of the journal embraced 'newness in education', in its criteria for selection of articles and the

mingling of comparative education and development education perspectives that seemed to differentiate the publication from the other mainstream international comparative journals. I noted that, in topics in schooling (even the most esoteric) were accepted as being in scope whereas even mainstream topics in international VET had often been directed elsewhere, labelled as ‘specialist’. Working through the logic that has positioned comparative VET as a kind of semi-detached, specialist annex led me to review the intersecting domains of comparative education, international education and international development studies in education (Figure 1) and to bring the interplay of life-work-learning, whether in lifelong learning, work-based learning or vocational education, more fully into the journal’s scope. This rebalancing process stimulated renewed, critical attention to the wider relationships between comparative education and international development and the ways in which scholars are positioned, and position themselves, in relation to these overlapping fields.

## 2 Exploring intersecting domains

Comparative education has often been characterised as primarily interested in examining and explaining the characteristics and effects of education systems in different national, historical and cultural contexts, driven by (competing) purposes of generalisable scientific principles or contextualised understanding; policy ‘borrowing’, problem solving or helping educators in the ‘imagination’ of different ways of doing things. According to Colclough (2010) international (educational) development studies are differentiated from comparative education by the intensity of their focus on understanding the role of education in economic and political change, with reference to the agendas of international bodies and donor agencies, particularly in contexts of changing relationships between lower/middle income countries, emerging economies and the rest of the world.

These enduring distinctions are exemplified in two contemporary publications, a special issue of *Compare* on the legacy of Jullien (Wolhuter 2017), and a new report on skills development in Africa (Walther and Carton 2017). The former revisits the purposes articulated by Jullien, in proposing a scientific approach to comparative education that creates comparative tables that are used to generate comprehensive generalisations in the form of scientific laws. The debate, captured in the 2017 special issue, turns on newly available and unprecedented access to ‘big data’ that some see as creating conditions for Jullien’s plan to be realised (Turner 2017). The continuing debate about different avenues to generalisation and interpretations of what is truly scientific surface in ways that resonate with the 1989 debate between E. J. King and Oliveira at the World Congress of Comparative Education. Generalisation from empirical data, extensive in its coverage but

detached from its context and packaged in comparable boxes is set against contextualism, and the ability to generalise that comes from ‘Verstehen’, in which historical and cultural forms of knowledge are generative of deeply informed insights and subjective interpretations (Epstein 2017). The latter approach, coupled with a degree of agenda setting from the global South, is found in the Walther and Carton (2017) study in 18 African countries, covering the analysis of schemes, which highlights prevalence of non-linear pathways of young people. The aims to make it possible to better understand necessary changes in these three worlds (education, training, work) according to multiple, segmented, temporal, spatial variations in pathways (Walther and Carton 2017). Diverse experiences and understandings are brought together to challenge dominant assumptions and envision new ways of tackling problems.

Leach, another former journal editor, characterises distinctions between the fields of comparative education and international development as matters of emphasis rather than fundamental difference, with comparativists “more interested in the theory of the system and the model” (Evans and Robinson-Pant 2010, p. 697) as a means of understanding what happens in practice. International development specialists also regard theory as important but tend to have a grounded approach that emphasises new ways of thinking and conceptualising problems that help to challenge erroneous policy assumptions and reframe development activities.

The differences of emphasis are generated by different understandings of the role of theory, in this view, and allow for large areas of overlap and common enterprise between comparative education and international development studies in education. Comparativists who argue for differences of essence distance themselves from this view by arguing that comparative education is fundamentally distinct from the notion of the development towards more desirable states (Cowen 2009) although this stance appears somewhat at odds with Jullien’s defining purpose of the philanthropic ideal (Wolhuter 2017).

As a former President of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), Arnove (2010) has entered the ongoing debate by offering three defining dimensions for comparative education: scientific, ameliorative, global. Arnove’s stance contributes to the case for exploring and expanding work in the intersections of the domains. The scientific dimension, he argues, is crucial since the better the theory and the more inclusive the levels of analysis, the more robust the insights and conclusions. The practical and ameliorative dimension comes with the responsibility to inform and improve educational policy and contribute to greater international understanding. The global dimension encompasses ethical and aesthetic sensibilities, tolerance of diversity and the desire “to contribute to the well-being of others not only at home but across the globe” (Arnove 2010, p. 829).

For comparativists, therefore, the intersections of the domains of comparative education and international development studies in education are judged to be limited or expansive, and the benefits of boundary-crossing in pursuit of shared purposes are perceived as few or abundant, desirable or undesirable, according to how they position themselves in their scholarly endeavours. Such positioning often reflects tribal academic affiliations, and the struggles for power and authority that contribute to the creation and maintenance of territories and bounded spaces (Milana 2018).

So far, my account has been constructed from the standpoint of my early experiences in the British-based scholarly community and comparative education society. Other comparative education societies each have their own development trajectory as well as interconnections through, for example, the Comparative Education Society of Europe and the World Congress (WCCES). Yet the resonances between them in the ways in which they recount power and status struggles in the field are notable. For example, Lauterbach (2008) refers to the comparative research scientists who claimed a monopoly on the field in Germany as being “put into the defensive” (p. 87) in ways that recall E.J. King’s (1989) challenge to those who have overplayed their claims to the scientific high ground. Many scholars continue to focus on how to bolster the status of the comparative education as a ‘discipline’, and comparative vocational education as ‘sub-discipline’. I argue that instead of agonising about the barriers to recognition of the discipline, embracing an element of Deleuzian nomadism can lead us to celebrate the mutability of existing structures and their intersections.

The discussion so far has focused on the intersection of comparative education and international development studies. Where does ‘international education’ fit in? International education is often seen as the communicative domain of intercultural education, with a focus on mutual learning and exchange. Yet international education, in its larger sense, has very significant overlaps with the ‘global dimension’ of comparative education identified by Arnove (2010): education that links researchers, teachers and often students internationally in analysing common problems and sometimes in action to combat “social ills affecting individuals and communities across borders” (Arnove 2010, p. 829).

Through their commitment to international education, participants in a wide range of international partnership projects have potentially productive overlaps with those committed to comparative education and development studies. They also have much to contribute to ‘sharing best practices’, and possibly also to stimulating greater interest in pedagogical research. In VET research and development, mutual learning between these domains is already an established feature of many European VET projects and the UNESCO International Centres for Technical and Vocational Education (UNEVOC) where the focus is on the pedagogical approach

that integrates and concentrates the divergent interests of researchers from a multiple of different disciplines (Rauner and Maclean 2008, pp. 27–28).

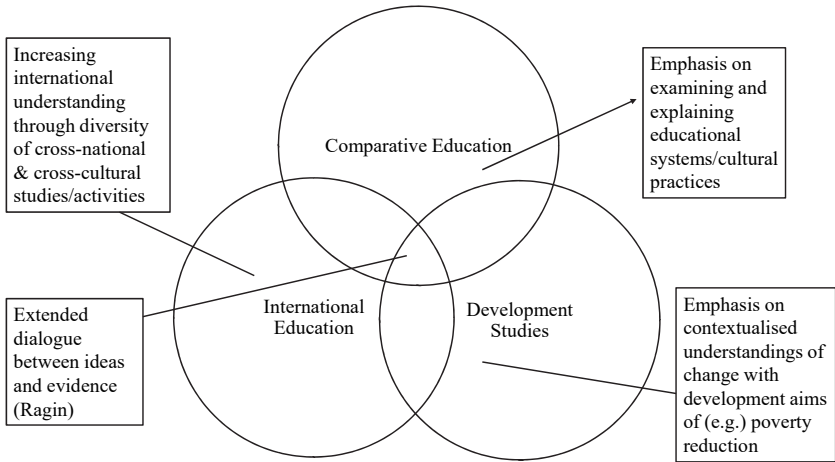


Fig. 1: Intersecting domains of comparative education (Evans and Robinson-Pant 2010)

The enduring nature of debate about definitions and boundaries of the intersecting domains shows that the distinctions between them matter. But to whom do these distinctions matter, and why? What are the unintended consequences? And, most importantly for future development, to what extent do the intersections suggest potential for improvements?

### 3 Can we find common cause in the advancement of VET?

The distinctions matter to scholars concerned with how they are positioned and recognised. They matter for identities, status and careers, as these are forged in relation to academic ‘tribes’ and their power plays. The barriers, and the struggles they engender, are enduring. They are apparent, for example, in the accounts of I-Hsuan Cheng (2010), who, as an early career researcher with a background in researching the contributions of non-governmental organisations to development, perceived the potential for the conjunction of international development and comparative education studies in East Asia to be better positioned to contribute to the transformation of regional relations as well as increased well-being across the region. Yet she observes that international development has not been a dominant and popular

field of study in East Asia. The lower popularity of international development studies she argues is reflective of an imbalance in the research stance whereby the body of knowledge of comparative education has been “generated, mapped and conveyed with an overt and salient preference for industrial countries” (Cheng 2010, p. 832). This bias is compounded by ‘conventional thoughts’ that block the way of many early career researchers and research students in East Asia to the praxes of embedding international development research in the discourse of comparative education.

The unintended consequences of the disconnection of comparative education and international development studies are profound; mutual understanding, sustainable leverage for international justice, and reciprocal and equal relationships among the developed and developing nations are adversely affected by this disconnection. Embedding the research practices of international development in the discourse of comparative education requires, as Cheng (2010) argues, mutual respect. It can facilitate shared visions and supports the search for compatibility in achieving socially desirable improvements, through education and training, in an interconnected world.

The disconnections between comparative and international development studies are similarly highlighted in the VET field. Supra-national organisations such as the EU, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have given a fresh impetus to comparative VET research, leading Lauterbach (2008) to propose that multi-level programmes of interdisciplinary, comparative inquiry on the international development of vocational education should be supported by improved communicative structures and practices between disciplines and domains.

The search for common cause (Colclough 2010) can be approached through the identification of the shared practices of international development and comparative education scholars, focusing on what scholars in each of these fields actually do in their day-to-day work. An exploration of the activities of international educational development and comparative education practitioners reveals that there are ‘no monopolies’, according to Little (2010). Comparative scholars, self-evidently, do not have a monopoly on systemic and scholarly comparison. In fields of endeavour ranging from pre-school education to continuing vocational education and training, practitioners of comparative education and international educational development engage in change and advocacy activities; and all participate in communicative practices in the pursuit of intercultural understanding. Common cause can be found in these shared activities.

Another approach in the search for common cause is found in the identification of shared challenges. The Handbook of Technical and Vocational Education and Training Research published in 2008 (Rauner and Maclean) captured the



methodological challenges posed by the growing diversification of topics, the expanding scope of valid research questions and changing views of what counts as valid answers. As supra-national and global reports proliferate and become increasingly influential in steering policy debates (Kirpal 2008), those who produce them increasingly look to VET researchers to be able to provide evidence not only on effectiveness of pedagogies but also on the consequences of diverse cultures and traditions of VET. Kenneth King (2011) articulated the challenge: ‘The time has come for comparative VET research to tell a story — does it have a story to tell?’ The story that VET research can tell is not just about ‘skills development’ but must also be about the pedagogical approach.

The story of international VET has shown how policy learning is more realistic than policy copying, and the policy learning has to include an appreciation of pedagogical approaches. The popularity of ‘products’, such as national vocational qualification frameworks, competency-based and demand-led education and training, has been achieved despite the lack a rigorous evidence base. They provided apparent solutions for reform VET agendas, but the VET research story also problematises those solutions, as VET solutions, to have any chance of success, have to be recontextualised according to cultures and traditions of VET. These vary within as well as between countries. Within Europe, the drive for research to capture ‘convergence/divergence’ has given way to the search for better understandings of how hybrid structures grow from multiple roots, particularly since post-communist countries joined the European Union. Beyond Europe, Kenneth King (2011) notes, in the case of African countries referred to earlier, marked similarities between informal apprenticeship in Francophone and Anglophone West Africa that are ‘light years’ away from systems in Eastern and Southern Africa, with South Africa experiencing unique challenges. These variations have profound influences in attempts to introduce VET products such as qualification frameworks. Yet, according to King (2011), national frameworks have more amenable to successful implementation across much of South Asia, where training on-the-job to become skilled is widespread and culturally embedded.

The task of capturing the consequences of these diverse VET cultures and traditions is daunting, who are paying more attention than previously to framework conditions and the avoidance of wrong assumptions. Comparative research combined with insights into the locally situated processes of educational development can help them in this. The expectation of improved insights into how policies can be recontextualised and reliable evidence on the framework conditions that determine how they can function demand greater sophistication and a renewed sense of purpose from comparative education. The resurgence in perceived relevance of comparative education can be contrasted, in the VET field, with former times when relevance of comparative scholarship was questioned and often rejected on

the basis that there was little to be learnt from it. This applied particularly in Germany where the dual system was held to be pre-eminent internationally; the argument being that, if Germany provides the gold standard, what of value was there to be learnt from international comparative studies? The lack of attention to German comparative VET research prior to 1990 (Gonon 1998; Grollmann 2008) reflected a view that there were no adequate counterparts to the dual system that could form a useful basis for comparative scientific discourse (Georg 1995).

The greater sophistication and renewed sense of purpose can come, I argue by re-engaging comparative education with international development studies, not by blurring the boundaries but through a dialogic approach.

#### **4 Towards a more dialogic approach**

So, where do we find the common causes that can energise dialogue and cooperation? At the highest level of abstraction, all the domains of Figure 1 are concerned with the human condition. Many who identify with these fields in different ways do find common cause in the practices of analysis, advocacy and activity, as Little (2010) has observed. There is a perception that over-differentiation of domains has cursed rather than benefited the endeavours of those who work within them.

One response to this is to seek a portmanteau definition of international education that embraces all. A different response, which is prefigured in Figure 1, is to celebrate differentiation in traditions and perspectives while seeking a more dialogic approach in which mutually respected traditions and perspectives enrich and illuminate each other and, ultimately, what scholars do in practice. An extended dialogue between ideas and evidence, discourses on cases as well as variables, can be constructed, inspired by Ragin's (1991) approaches, with or without the use of the truth tables methodology. Case studies, prevalent among academic comparative studies, can generate better interpretations of findings both from policy related studies and from large scale international surveys of educational outcomes, when drawn on systematically as part of a dialogic approach. (Guenther and Falk 2018) A dialogic approach recognises times, cultures, values and ways of learning as units of comparison (Bray and Thomas 1995). This mode of engagement also recognises that definitions of comparative education, international education and international development are evolving, in relation to each other and in response to wider societal shifts.

The overlaps, between comparative education, international development studies in education and the intercultural domain of international education, are considerable, whether they are acknowledged or not. In each of the domains there are robust (and less robust) lines of research inquiry. A dialogic approach is pursued not for its own sake but because of the promise it offers for strengthening and

improvement of all the domains, maintaining robust lines of research inquiry, while developing more holistic frameworks; improving methods through sharing, mutual testing and innovation; greater critical depth that comes through questioning of dominant assumptions and enhanced awareness of cultural diversities and ethical practices.

Researchers engaged in the comparative investigation of VET are potentially ahead of the dialogic game, in the sense that many are already working productively in the intersections of the fields of comparative education, development studies and international education. Comparative VET is already strongly positioned to work productively in the intersections, which are the natural territory for comparative VET research.

Why do I argue that this is the case? I do so because I believe comparative VET research to be advanced in several key respects. The field is advanced in addressing the centrality of organised work for human functioning and the relationships between VET and societal processes (Lauterbach 2008). Keeping in view the centrality of organised work for human existence, comparative VET research carries out internationally and interculturally comparative studies of specific phenomena of VET in different countries, and also focuses on VET in the context of social and economic development particularly in economy and labour market — keeping multiple levels in view, macro political and governmental, institutional and individual specific environments and social practices/cultural practices and expectations — connections complex and interdisciplinary. In these respects, comparative VET research is already advanced in showing how the phenomena and framework conditions associated with VET are structurally and organisationally embedded/mediated/differentiated (Pilz 2012). Comparative VET research is also advanced in connecting the two human processes of working and learning, able to explore aspects of ‘life-work-learning interplay’ transnationally. In these respects, it meets Sawchuk’s (2010) criteria for robust lines of research inquiry in the field of work and learning, moving beyond the self-referential debates and adapting criteria, embrace ‘more whole’ rather than ‘less whole’ models of education-society interactions.

Moreover, comparative VET research is advanced in forging intercultural communications, establishing relational ties and networks, enabling mutual learning (Beech and Rizvi 2017). Countering uncritical assumptions of uni-linear modernisation perspectives and dominant discourses is also a priority. One aspect of this is language. Mazenod (2018) for example, is active in challenging the language practices in academic knowledge production that limit visibility of non-Anglophone conceptual frameworks that are important in understanding distinctive differences in apprenticeship in local fields of research.

We should continually remind ourselves to question the export of western assumptions, a stance that also has strong implications for the languages in which we work. Williams (2010) draws attention to the ways in which language, and proficiency in only one language, can come to dominate thinking about education and culture. As in other academic fields siloed, self-referential research communities fragment the field, yet they are also productive in generating sustained discussion and challenging perspectives. Sustaining productive differentiation while generating greater cross-fertilisation through dialogue avoids the undifferentiated melting pot or the ‘pot pourri’ feared by Broadfoot (1999) and many others. The overlaps are considerable, whether they are acknowledged or not. In all domains there are robust (and less robust) lines of research inquiry.

I have argued that the natural territory for comparative VET lies in intersection of the fields of comparative education, development education and the inter-communicative domain of international education. Comparative VET, far from being semi-detached or marginal to the field of comparative education, can lead the way in modelling a dialogic approach. In this de-territorialised territory for comparative VET research, a triadic conception of purposes emerges.

## **5 A triadic conception of purposes in comparative VET research**

The trans-national investigation of educational phenomena associated with VET embraces three purposes that are interdependent. The three dimensions, represented in Figure 2, can be interpreted as opening a space for an evolutionary process in which expert methods, ideas and evidence are brought to bear on new questions, uncertainties and decisions rather than seeking a focus to be sharply defined and universally agreed.

The intersections of the domains open up the comparative investigation of vocational education as a space and evolutionary process, overcoming self-limiting preoccupation with defining an exclusive focus. Comparative VET research shares with the wider VET field commitments to the specialist theories, topics or themes of the VET field, according to Lauterbach (2008). Moreover, VET researchers need to recognise the temporary nature of periodic ‘settlements’ over what it is important to know more about at any particular time. A given inquiry or research endeavor may be positioned anywhere in this de-territorialised territory, but in this triadic space the inter-dependent dimensions are always in play.

Improvement projects always involve interlocking social relationships and are supported by mutual appreciation of different concepts and ways of seeing problems. They are more likely to be sustainable when they are informed by deep understandings of the social processes involved, exemplified in the example above (Walther and Carton 2017) and in the case increasingly made for moving agenda-

setting away from the global North in effort to engage with educational priorities and development goals conceptualised and set by people from the South fundamentally, they rely on actors being able to take critical stances on what actually counts as 'improvement'. Comparative VET is differentiated from other fields of inquiry by the way it achieves 'criticality', which lies at the heart of the triadic conception of purposes. It is also differentiated by the combinations of intellectual tools it brings to bear on problems. Comparative VET inquiry is uniquely positioned to uncover the ways in which the assumptions of dominant discourses become embedded in development of work practices and the conditions of working life, not only at local level and within national frameworks but also through the international flows of reform ideas and change agendas over time. The capabilities of VET researchers to conduct these inquiries are considerably strengthened in networked, collaborative projects that connect detailed studies of the local to the global. Networks that are designed principally to promote mutual learning are more likely to be effective when they can undertake collaborative inquiry to deepen understandings, evidenced in EU framework projects that incorporate VET development and, for example, in the Asia-Europe network on workplace learning and competence development (Ostendorf and Permpoonwivat 2017). Moreover, they are more likely to be sustainable when they support socially desirable improvements.

Our pressing task is to strengthen comparative theories, methods, ideas and evidence that are brought to bear on new questions, uncertainties and decisions that matter to users of VET research ('seeking the stones from other hills to polish the jade in our own'). Comparative VET research should be able more clearly to articulate theoretical frames of reference and traceable genealogies in previous work. In meeting social scientific criteria for robustness (Sawchuk 2010), our inquiries into work and learning should be informed by empirical evidence which offers challenges to mechanistic or partial views of reality; and engage with the inherently value-laden or political nature of education.

A dialogic approach means constructing extended dialogues between ideas and evidence in the intersections and overlaps, recognising, respecting and learning from robust lines of inquiry where they conflict as well as where they converge. Our task is to continuously re-appraise knowledge, rework and recontextualise it in culturally sensitive ways. In seeking stones from other hills, the proverb also reminds us not to overlook the jade in our own. It is remarkable how few comparative researchers cite each other's work, looking most often to a theoretical framing drawn from one of the foundational or reference disciplines of sociology, psychology, political economy. Thus, references to Bourdieu, Vygotsky, Schumpeter et al. abound. Comparative VET borrows in a way which undoubtedly enriches the field, but how can it also go beyond borrowing, in developing a body of

canonical work? Building working hypotheses from case study research that rarely cross-references others in the field. Many argue that potential for generalisation from qualitative and case study research in VET is often too readily dismissed, often by the researchers themselves. They show how the qualitative and quantitative research, both using theory and evidence to create, refine or reject normative statements of truth has implications for the use of qualitative research for informing policy, including in the vocational and adult learning space. The reluctance of many policy advisors to use qualitative research is explained at least in part by “the self-deprecating limitations that qualitative researchers impose on their own work” (Guenther and Falk 2018, p. 16). The iterative nature of qualitative research lends itself well to theory development, and confirmation or rejection of normative truth statements. The more we can connect our qualitative, case-study based VET inquiries with each other, connecting, exploring and building results iteratively, the greater the probability that those truth statements will hold generally, and form the building blocks for the next steps in theory generation.

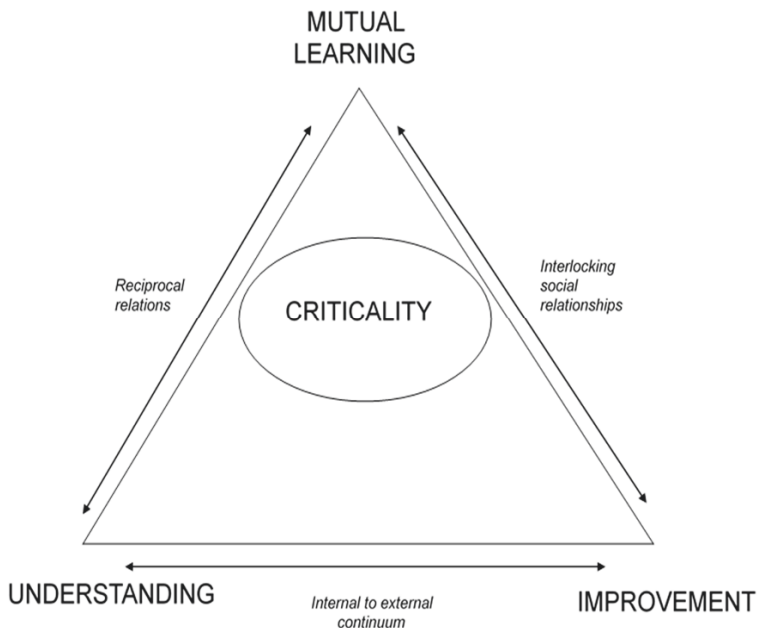


Fig. 2: Triadic conception of purposes in comparative VET research  
(Author’s own compilation)

In advancing the trans-national investigation of educational phenomena associated with VET there are some enduring challenges for comparative researchers that require renewed energy, vision and leadership in the field. We need now, more than ever, to sustain an evolutionary approach in the comparative investigation of vocational education and training. We try to ‘pin and box the butterfly’ at our peril.

Note: I acknowledge and thank all my colleagues and collaborators in VETNET, ASIA-EUROPEAN HUB, COMPARE and BAICE for their inspiration.

## References

- Arnove, R. (2010). Reflections on comparative education and international development. *Compare, 40*(6), pp. 827–830.
- Beech, J., & Rizvi, F. (2017). Revisiting Jullien in an era of globalisation. *Compare, 47*(3), pp. 303–433.
- Bray, M., & Thomas, R. M. (1995). Levels of comparison in educational studies: Different insights from different literatures and the value of multilevel analysis. *Harvard Educational Review, 65*(3), pp. 472–490.
- Broadfoot, P. (1999). Stones from other hills may serve to polish the jade of this one: Towards a neo-comparative ‘learnology’ of education. *Compare, 29*(3), pp. 217–231.
- Cheng, I. (2010). Embedding research on international development in the discourse of comparative education in East Asia. *Compare, 40*(6), pp. 831–835.
- Colclough, C. (2010). Development studies and comparative education: Where do they find common cause? *Compare, 40*(6), pp. 821–826.
- Cowen, R. (2009). Editorial Introduction: New thinking. In R. Cowen, & A. Kazamias (Eds.), *International handbook of comparative education* (pp. 961–964). United Kingdom: Springer.
- Epstein, E. H. (2017). Is Marc-Antoine Jullien de Paris the ‘father’ of comparative education? *Compare, 47*(3), pp. 317–331.
- Evans, K. (2003). Uncertain frontiers: Taking forward Edmund King’s world perspectives on post-compulsory education. *Comparative Education, 39*(4), pp. 415–422.
- Evans, K., & Heinz, W. (1993). Studying forms of transition: Methodological innovation in a cross-national study of youth transition and labour market entry in England and Germany. *Comparative Education, 29*(2), pp. 145–158.
- Evans, K. & Robinson-Pant, A. (2010). Exploring a 40-year journey through comparative education and international development. *40*(6), pp. 693–710.
- Georg, W. (1995). Probleme vergleichender Berufsbildungsforschung im Kontext neuer Produktionskonzepte. In G. Dybowsky, G. Heidegger, & F. Rauner (Eds.), *Berufsbildung und Organisationsentwicklung: Perspektiven, Modelle, Forschungsfragen* (pp. 67–84). Bremen: Donat.
- Gonon, P. (1998). Das internationale Argument in der Bildungsreform. Die Rolle internationaler Bezüge in den bildungspolitischen Debatten zur schweizerischen Berufsbildung und zur englischen Reform der Sekundarstufe II. Bern: Lang.

- Grollmann, P. (2008). Comparative research on technical and vocational education and training (TVET): Methodological considerations. In F. Rauner, & R. Maclean (Eds.), *Handbook of technical and vocational education and training research* (pp. 253–259). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Guenther, J., & Falk, I. (2018). Generalizing from qualitative research: A reconceptualization based on vocational learning examples. In S. McGrath, M. Mulder, J. Papier, & R. Stuart (Eds.), *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work* (pp. 1–19). Cham: Springer.
- King, E. J. (1989). Comparative investigation of education: An evolutionary process. *Prospects*, 19(3), pp. 369–379.
- King, E. J., Moor, C. H., & Mundy, J. A. (1974). *Post-compulsory education: A new analysis in Western Europe*. London: SAGE.
- King, K. (2011). *Towards a new global world of skills development? TVET's turn to make its mark* (Norrag News 46). Retrieved from Norrag website: <https://www.norrag.org/fileadmin/Full%20Versions/NN46.pdf>. Accessed: 08 August 2019.
- Kirpal, S. (2008). National and international reporting on VET: Case study of OECD, ILO and the World Bank. In F. Rauner, & R. Maclean (Eds.), *Handbook of technical and vocational education and training research* (pp. 305–317). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lauterbach, U. (2008). Steps towards international comparative research in TVET. In F. Rauner, & R. Maclean (Eds.), *Handbook of technical and vocational education and training research* (pp. 82–89). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Little, A. (2010). International and comparative education: What's in a name? *Compare*, 10(6), pp. 845–852.
- Mazenod, A. (2018). Lost in translation? Comparative education research and the production of academic knowledge. *Compare*, 48(2), pp. 189–205.
- Milana, M., Webb, S., Holford, J., Waller, R., & Jarvis, P. (2018). Introduction. In M. Milana, S. Webb, J. Holford, R. Waller, & P. Jarvis (Eds.), *The palgrave international handbook on adult and lifelong education and learning* (pp. 1–8). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ostendorf, A., & Permpoonwiwat, C. (Eds.). (2017). *Workplaces as learning spaces: Conceptual and empirical insights*. Innsbruck: University of Innsbruck Press.
- Pilz, M. (Ed.). (2012). *The future of vocational education and training in a changing world*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Ragin, C. C. (1991). Introduction: The problem of balancing cases with variables in comparative social science. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 32(1–2), pp. 1–8.
- Rauner, F., & Maclean, R. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of technical and vocational education and training research*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Sawchuk P. (2010). Contemporary lines of research inquiry: A comparison of themes and representative models. In M. Malloch, L. Cairns, K. Evans, & B. O'Connor (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Workplace Learning* (pp. 165–180). London: SAGE.
- Serres, M., & Latour, B. (1995). *Conversations on science, culture, and time*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Walther, R., & Carton, M. (2017). *From the education-training continuum to the education-training-work continuum: Prospects for future developments based on the analysis of*



- schemes in 18 African countries*. Retrieved from ADEA website: [http://www.adeanet.org/sites/default/files/continuum\\_compendium\\_2017\\_en\\_29.12.2017.pdf](http://www.adeanet.org/sites/default/files/continuum_compendium_2017_en_29.12.2017.pdf). Accessed: 08 August 2019.
- Williams, G. (2010). A personal reflection on comparative and international education. *Compare*, 40(6), pp. 841–844.
- Wolhuter, C. (2017). The legacy of Jullien’s work for comparative education. *Compare*, 47(3), pp. 303–433.