

Comparative Adult Education: The Nature and Approaches

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ABSTRACT Adult Education is a field of study and educational practice whose scope and significance are poorly understood. To most people even the educators, the term adult education evokes an image of night classes at the local high school or perhaps another activity prominently labeled as such. The purpose of this article is not to dwell on what people perceive adult education to be, but rather to look at the nature and the approaches that are used in the study of comparative education. It is important to explain first the following concepts: Comparative, Adult Education, Comparative Education and Comparative Adult Education. After defining these concepts, the paper proceeds to discuss some of the approaches that are very relevant to the study of comparative education. These approaches are by nature historical, scientific, sociological, philosophical and methodological. The paper then concludes with a discussion on what comparative adult education is, and what it should aim at in the years ahead.

INTRODUCTION

Comparative Education, like other sciences, is based on facts and observations, which should be arranged in analytical tables. These facts and observations can easily be compared in order to deduce principles and definite rules. When a particular educational system(s) of one nation is related analytically to another nation's then a 'comparison' of the two nations' educational system is made. Therefore, the word 'Comparative' involves comparison of one thing or one system with another. For example, an educator may decide to conduct a comparative study of a particular country (e.g. Nigeria educational system) with another country (e.g. United States of America's educational system) so as to deduce the principles and policies guiding the two systems of education.

ADULT EDUCATION

The term 'adult' can be defined differently from country to country depending on the biological and social roles of adults in each country.

Shoukhanova, (1984) defines an adult as someone who has attained maturity or legal age. Some educators such as McNeil 1974; Grinder 1978; and Anderson 1979 have defined an adult as an individual who has attained one or more of the characteristics of adulthood such as (marriage, parenthood, full-time employment, and economic independence).

There are difficulties in explaining the word 'adult'. Depending on the purpose, the term 'adult' can be defined biologically, legally, psychologically, or socio-culturally. However, educators of adult education have long agreed that the most useful and appropriate way of defining an adult or adulthood, as Alkin (1992) puts it, is socio-culturally with respect to social rules. An adult, therefore, is a person who is supposed to have terminated continuous formal education (that is, where this is available and he has access to it) and has assumed the roles characteristic of adult status in society. In industrialized societies however such roles include worker, spouse, parent and retiree. Adult education can be defined both as a process and as an entity or enterprise. Each type of definition is useful because each complements the other Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) have offered a process definition that is widely accepted when they proclaimed that:

Adult education is a process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status, undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values or skills (p.33).

In keeping with current thought, this definition allows self-teaching or self-directed learning to be included within the purview of adult education. Computers are increasingly taking the place of human teachers. Also too, are videodisc, audio and videotapes, various

modes of television, and mass-produced distances learning packages, which generally include audio-or-videotapes along with print materials.

The most comprehensive definition of adult education as an entity or enterprise was suggested in 1976 by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

This organization defined adult education as:

The education which denotes the entire body of organized educational processes, whatever the content, level, and method, whether formal or otherwise, whatever they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications, or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behaviour in the two-fold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development (p.67).

This explanation continues by stating that adult education should be conceived as an integral component of a global scheme for lifelong education and learning. UNESCO's inclusion of social goals (the two-fold perspective) is controversial in Western industrialized countries, where adult education is usually, but not always, viewed in individualistic terms and considered to be self-justifying that is, and end in itself. In most of the West, both policy and practice more often reflect an emphasis on the individual. In the Third World, however, the opposite is often the case. Community and national development are crucial societal priorities and adult education is an important means of addressing them.

Comparative Education

The first comprehensive scheme of comparative study of educational system was devised by Marc-Antoine Jullien De Paris in 1817. Jullien was the first to formulate the purpose and methods of comparative study in education. Several authors see comparative education as an instrument of educational planning. For example, in an introduction to a report on comparative education organized for a group of Nigerians. Skapski (1963) explains that "the main

and most important task was to find out what particular features observed in foreign educational systems might be profitably adopted in Nigeria". In his own view, Hans (1964) looks at the purpose of comparative education as that type of education which examines comparative law, comparative literature or comparative anatomy in order to discover the differences in the forces and causes that produce the differences in the educational systems. Lewis (1965) approached the issue of comparative education in terms of an Island formation. Lewis stated that, 'no country is an island; that each is a part of the world; therefore, no educational system anywhere in the world is worth anything unless it is comparable to some other systems in the world.' Blishen (1969) perceived comparative education as that branch of educational theory concerned with the analysis and interpretation of educational practices and policies in different countries and culture.

From those various definitions and explanations of comparative education, it is revealing that comparative education enables us to learn from the achievements and mistakes that other nations have made in the process of solving similar educational problems. It should be noted that the starting point of comparative study in education, is the collection and classification of information, both descriptive and quantitative about a particular system. The purpose for such an information classification is to explain why things are as they are as regards the system(s), so as to guide policy-makers.

Comparative Adult Education

Comparative adult education started in the 19th century. Bereday (1964) stated that Comparative adult education started in the 19th century with the desire of educational administrators who planned to advance reforms in educational systems so as to contribute ideas and principles, which could be woven into the prevailing philosophy of national education.

Hans (1967) viewed comparative adult education as a method of comparing the differences between the various systems of adult education. Hans pointed that the purpose of 'comparison' is that which leads to the discovery of the underlying principles governing the development of all national systems of education.

Mallison (1975) defined comparative adult

education as the education, which classifies problems according to their importance and shows the relations of the proposed solutions to the problems identified in adult education. Ragins (1987) explained that comparative adult education could be in various kinds of spatial units such as comparing the adult educational system of one country to another or it could involve comparing any social related adult inquiry of one nation to another.

In his own view, Alkin (1992) defined comparative adult education as the kind of education, which promotes the interest of national system of education, which is able to clarify adult education's social, political, cultural and economic issues.

In addition to the various concepts of comparative adult education, this education should promote desirable international attitudes among those who study it. It should also be noted that comparison in adult education naturally should start with information on practices with which the enquirer is not familiar within his understanding of the subject. Precisely, comparative studies in adult education should involve a process of comparing related issues and problems (either political, social, economic or cultural) from one nation to another nation so as to identify the differences between the various systems of adult education.

Approaches to Comparative Education

There are various approaches that are used in the study of comparative adult education. Some of these are: The Historical approach; The Scientific approach; The Sociological approach; The Methodological approach; and the Philosophical approach.

The Historical Approach

Historical approach to comparative adult education was developed by university scholars during the first part of the twentieth century. The scholars (Butler, 1927; Kandel, 1957; Deighton, 1971 and Mallison, 1975) who all looked for the antecedent causes of educational theory and practice. They stressed the then powerful influences of ideas on comparative adult education and tended to ignore other causes. Society develops its own pattern from its roots and experiences, based on the uniqueness of its culture. For example, Mallison (1975) proclaimed from Kandel (1957) as follows:

That history may be based on the formation of hypothesis to find out about the present. Such investigation may be done by applying method of social sciences such as the questionnaire, the interview, participants' observation or the survey. That experiences in the past may be utilized to further hypothesis formulated in the present; and that the knowledge of the past may help an observer who is engaged in obtaining first-hand observation of the present. From the historical approach, the investigator may decide to look at the review of literature so as to compare adult educational system of a nation with that of another nation. Such historical review of literature has an advantage of exposing the shortcomings of the nations being studied as regards their practices and policies guiding the adult educational systems of both nations.

Although, history does not easily lend itself to testing hypothetical issues, Mallison in 1975, explained that "in order to appreciate and evaluate the real meaning of comparative adult education, it is essential to know or investigate its history (hypothetically), and know the tradition of the forces governing its organization so as to determine its development and be able to compare the system with other nations".

Since every society is a product of its own history, the nature and growth of every society is largely based on what history makes it. As far as comparative adult education is concerned, the historical approach ought to be a process of investigating on concerned issues (e.g. political, socio-cultural, economic or scientific educational issues) of a particular nation with another to detect the similarities and differences between the two systems.

For example, comparing the socio-economic backgrounds of Nigeria and Ghana respectively, it could be discovered that in spite of the poor economic conditions and of the two countries debt burdens to the industrialized nations, that one of them is still allocating enough resources to her educational system than the other.

The Scientific Approach

Scientific approach in the study of comparative education is based on comparison. Making comparisons among adult education issues (either political, social, economic) is one of the crucial aspects of scientific analysis.

In making a comparison of one issue with

another, one has to be able to think logically and reasonably. According to Swanson (1971) “thinking without comparison is unthinkable”.

The use of the word ‘comparison’ by scientists as a point in reference to the study of comparative adult education was also stressed by Almond (1966) when he emphasized that, ‘whether it be in experiment, in the analysis of the results of quantitative surveys of educational issues, or in observation of process and behaviour in different context, the use of the word ‘comparison’ is unavoidable.

According to Smelser, the sociologist, (1976) all scientific methods in all areas of education are comparative. The anthropologist, Geertz (1983) has also observed that, ‘it is through comparison that whatever heart we can get to, can actually be reached’. While many social scientists and other educators would agree that nearly all scientific methods are comparative in the broad sense of the word, the term ‘comparative method’ is usually reserved for a more specific category of research project (e.g. experimental projects).

In adult education however, it seems no comparative method can be specifically reserved for any particular research like that of scientific methods. This is perhaps, the majority of research projects in comparative adult education are non-experimental and therefore, do not lend themselves to experimental and hypothetical testing. Comparative adult education research projects are either on political, socio-cultural, or economic issues. For example in adult learning education, two laboratory methods can be used (that is, the paired-associated learning method, and the serial-anticipation method). In each method, how rapidly one learns verbal responses depend critically on how the experimenter presents materials used in the laboratory but neither of the two methods can be specifically reserved for other.

Sociological Approach

Generally speaking, comparative method in social science research is a method of analysis that focuses on several objects of study in order to identify similarities and differences. Also, comparison in sociological studies (e.g. comparative adult education research) could be in various kinds of spatial units such as comparing the educational systems of one country to another, or it could involve comparing

specific social phenomenon of one nation with another.

In clear terms, a sociological approach is a method in which an educator compares the behaviours of attitudes of teachers in one or more countries towards the educational system of their country in relation to other country or countries.

In the sociological approach, Hans (1967) explained that the individual child is more important than any consistency in educational method or curriculum, than any ulterior motive of the teacher or the state. That schools and society generally should aim at allowing maximum freedom to the individual child, including the freedom to learn from his mistakes.

Mallinson (1975) submitted his views on sociological approach to comparative education as that which is based on the individual’s ability to make up his mind. According to Mallinson, when it comes to comparative adult educational issues, an individual should be able to make up his mind on what exactly his attitudes are towards conserving, transmitting and renewing culture. In addition, the individual must be able to distinguish between (conservative function of education and the creative function) which can be defined as that of producing critical and creative individuals capable and willing to initiate social change.

Referring to the sociological approach to comparative education, Vaught (1989), wrote that all higher education systems are identifiable. That researchers could classify them as having a self-regulation or national planning strategy and then examine the degree to which the systems works with self-regulations.

In comparative adult education, such higher educational systems for example could include (political, socio-cultural and economic issues) which are identifiable through research. In addition, comparative adult education could focus on educational values, which could be compared at all levels of higher education.

Philosophical Approach

Philosophical approach is very close to National Character approach but it is delimited to philosophical issues particularly the epistemological aspects of education. Two outstanding thinkers in this field are the Americans, Stanley Hall and John Dewey. What they did in their different ways was to note that

human beings live much longer period in infancy when they depended on protection from their elders than any other members of the animal kingdom; And also, they noted this longer period is vital in the full developmental process of human beings (Mallinson, 1975, p.66).

Precisely, Stanley Hall the biologist claims that throughout infancy, the child recapitulates in his own play and activities including the past states in the evolutionary growth and development of man. John Dewey on the other hand, believes that the task of philosophy is not to find out how we know the world but rather how we can control and improve it. He influenced to a greater extent, the whole of the theory and practice of education when he stated that:

Life is a self-reviewing process through action upon environment; that nothing is fixed and nothing is permanent, and that the universe itself is in state of flux, and therefore, if man is to survive, he must struggle, in his creative intelligence (Mallinson, 1975, p.67).

John Dewey concludes his philosophical thesis on the view that society itself exists through a process of transmission quite as much as biological life. Also to John Dewey, education in the broadcast sense is a means of living through social community life.

Generally speaking, as the philosophy approach to comparative education (e.g. comparative adult education issues), educators examine philosophy issues and look at them as being educational practices. Then, they try to establish the educational practices and interpret the relationship between them and support every related argument to every issue.

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach used in comparative education is related to John Stuart Mills' presentation of Canon's experimental inquiry. Mills (1943) in his system of Ratiocinative and Inductive Study offers a set of research strategies for making experimental generalization. For comparative analysis, two of Mills' methods are of particular relevance to comparative adult education: (1) The method of agreement; and (2) The indirect of agreement is the simplest and most straightforward of Mills' under study methods. Simply stated, the method argues that if two or more instances of phenomenon under study have only one of

several possible causal circumstances in common, then the circumstance in which all the instances agree is the cause of the phenomenon. Essentially, the method of agreement is a research for patterns of invariance.

Relating this method to comparative adult educational issue (e.g. an innovation in adult education curricula) can be compared with another constant (e.g. the existence of a governmental strategy of self-regulation) when all cases that are being examined agree to only this cause. The indirect method of difference, attempts to approximate an experimental model as closely as possible. This method consists of a double application of the method of agreement and have a phase in which competing explanations are rejected through paired comparison. An example of this method goes thus: Suppose a researcher believes that the governmental strategy of self-regulation causes a high level of innovativeness in adult education curricula; to investigate on this supposition, the researcher will first identify the instances of high innovativeness in the curricula to see whether they agree in the presence of the governmental strategy of self-regulation. If it does agree, then instances of the absence of high innovativeness in the curricula are examined to see if they agree in the absence of the governmental strategy of self-regulation.

Thus, the presence and the absence of the governmental strategy of innovativeness in curricular is cross-tabulated against the presence and absence of the governmental strategy of self-regulation. If the cases investigated show that the presence and absence of the governmental strategy are related to the presence and absence of innovativeness in curricular then the argument that the governmental strategy of self-regulation is the cause of innovativeness in curricular is supported. Of course, the methodological approach appears complex. In its simplest term, an educator may wish to compare some methods and reasons that are needed for the improvement of adult education. If at the end of the investigation, the methods and reasons for curricula improvement are in agreement with the methods and reasons for proper funding of adult education, then the argument that proper funding for adult education programmes for the improvement of adult education curriculum becomes valid.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of any form of comparative approach to educational problems lies in the analysis, comparison of the differences between the various systems and the identified reasons underlying them. Comparative adult education, however, contributes to the promotion and development of national systems of education. In addition to this goal, comparative adult education overall objective should be focused towards stimulating research and discussion on issues that are related to adult education. These can facilitate the immediate application of education to national technological advancement effort.

In conclusion, comparative adult education should promote interest in supply information about particular national systems of education. Second, it should facilitate the practical reform and planned development of school system. Again, it should also promote desirable international attitudes among those who study it.

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