Although many studies in the field of comparative adult education contain no comparison, the essential purpose of all work in that field should be to stimulate it. Useful comparison does not stop at identifying differences and similarities, its true value lies in their interpretation. Methods of comparative study should aim to make the latter possible. They should be adaptable to the varying purposes and circumstances of comparative research. To that end what is proposed here is a basic framework from which planning may start. It includes consideration of goals and objectives, data selection and collection, description, juxtaposition, identification of similarities and differences. Particular attention is given to an approach to interpretation.

Comparative adult education: field and method

As is the case of comparative (school) education, much of what is published under the name of comparative adult education contains no comparison. Such are the studies of a single phenomenon in one country, for example, the paid educational leave legislation in Italy, called the 150 hours law (Risk and Crossman, 1979), and the frequent juxtapositions of studies of phenomena in different countries, such as Erwachsenenbildung in Fünf Kontinenten (Leirman & Poggeler, 1979). Nevertheless, in order to serve a useful purpose they all require that just as much comparing be done as is to be found in works in which the comparison is explicit. They merely require that it be undertaken by the reader, instead of by the author. The latter needs to plan and conduct his/her study in such a way that valid comparison is possible. Therefore all work in the field of comparative adult education should be informed by an adequate understanding of how to undertake comparison, even if one is going to stop short of doing it oneself.

Comparison as method

How to do it may constitute a subject of much debate. As is well known comparative (school) educationists argued for years over appropriate methodologies for their activities. Although the heat has died down, they have not arrived at an agreed solution. Despite the impatience of some pragmatists, who believed time could better be spent on comparing than on quarrelling about how it should be done, it was not an arid debate. Writers such as Bereday, Noah and Eckstein, Holmes and King, have drawn on a variety of disciplines, which have usually reflected their own basic education before they became comparativists, to offer valuable insights. Like theories of learning, however, each of their methodologies is open to criticism and none appears to be universally applicable, even in the field of schooling. They are even less likely to prove so to adult education.

In this paper I do not believe it would be useful to undertake a systematic critical review of these methodological writings in comparative (school) education in order to assess their relevance to adult education. That might be an instructive exercise for another occasion, although one may feel that its utility has been obscured by a certain confusion of aims among comparative (school) educationists. In their desire to establish comparative education as a distinctive academic field with accepted status in the social sciences, they frequently give the impression that a simple quest for workable methods is not sufficient, they need to construct an edifice of methodology peculiar to the field. Not being burdened here with such heavy academic responsibilities, I shall try pragmatically, on the basis of my own understanding of the field of comparative adult education, of my own experience of comparative study, to suggest a purely practical outline approach...
Although many studies in the field of comparative adult education contain n..., the essential purpose of all work in that field should be to stimulate it to comparison in adult education.

A serious weakness of most of the debate about methods in comparative (school) education has been that the protagonists have, for the most part, given the impression of being exclusive. Only their own approach, it seems, has been acceptable, all others have been rejected. I would be more eclectic. According to purpose and goal most of the main approaches have something to offer at some time. I would start from the one I shall suggest in the following pages, but recognize that circumstances may demand that it be considerably modified. It is inevitable that my thinking will be marked by acquaintance with methodological writings on comparative (school) education where they seem applicable. If it turns out that my outline differs very little from an approach or approaches proposed for the study of school education, so be it; I am not committed, as some people are, to the belief that we should not seek assistance from recognized disciplines until we have clearly understood the structure, functions, problems and purposes of adult education itself (Boyd and Apps 1980). Nevertheless I am convinced that the differences between adult education and the education of children and adolescents are so substantial that one should never adopt unquestioningly concepts and practices from the latter field. This applies to research method too.

The need for interpretation

I have already expressed my contention that the only justification of activities in the field of comparative studies is that they lead to meaningful comparison, for whatever one of a number of purposes that comparison may be undertaken. I also believe that comparison which simply identifies similarities and differences between the phenomena under examination is of very little value in itself. It is the next stage, that of interpretation of these findings, which counts. What are the reasons for and the consequences of the differences and similarities? Why, for example, do Japanese teenagers perform better than English ones in mathematics and what are the consequences, if any, for the comparative economic performance of the two countries (Prais 1986)? All the steps of study, therefore, should be designed and performed in such a way as to make that interpretation possible.

Stages in comparison

The process of comparative study can be broken down to a number of stages, including, but going some way beyond, the four proposed by G.Z.F. Bereday, whose scheme I found too simple (Bereday, 1964). I suggest the following:

- Statement of general goal;
- Formulation of specific objectives;
- Selection of data to be sought;
- Obtaining of data;
- Description, interpretation of phenomena under study in each situation;
- Juxtaposition of descriptions, interpretations, etc.;
Although many studies in the field of comparative adult education contain n..., the essential purpose of all work in that field should be to stimulate it - Identification of differences and similarities; - Interpretation of differences and similarities.

The process is not to be perceived as a simple linear progression of stages in chronological order, but as a network of interlocking loops, as depicted in Figure 1, in which each of the stages interacts with the others and is subject to modification as a result of continuing feedback. For the purpose of the present paper, however, I will take each stage in turn.

Goals

It is noticeable that frequently when methodologists of comparative (school) education propose certain methods they also seek to prescribe certain areas and purposes for study; macro or micro investigations, quantitative or qualitative ones, for example. They are, not surprisingly, ones to which the methods they favour seem adapted. It is not certain whether these scholars' methodological interests help to determine their research goals, or vice versa, but there is almost certainly an interaction, since the methods available may set limits on the goals that may be achieved. Nevertheless, unless one's primary concern is with process rather than outcome, common sense suggests that one chooses what one wishes to do (goal) and then studies how to do it (method).

General goals and specific objectives

The distinction between broad general ends (goals) and specific operational ones (objectives) is too much a commonplace of educational and other purposeful human activities to need explaining here. One formulates the goal in terms of precise, concrete objectives, the achievement of which means also the attainment of the former. There has been debate, however, in comparative (school) education about the desirability or practicality of formulating goals in terms of precise objectives before proceeding to data collection. It is still a relevant issue in comparative adult education, on which one's stance will largely be determined by one's opinion of the purpose of comparative studies.

There are those who believe that a major, if not primary, purpose is to further the development of a body of general theory about the nature and function of adult education. People working with that aim may well follow an inductive approach, collecting data widely over the field and deriving hypotheses from the information obtained. They are likely to be sympathetic to ideas of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1968) and synchronic induction, as developed by Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox (1975). They will not decide from the start of their study what they are likely to find, nor limit themselves by setting precise objectives.

Others may arrive at the same approach for different reasons. It would be widely if not universally agreed that any phenomenon of adult education can only be understood in relation to the field as a whole. One needs, according to this view, to have an overall map and understanding of the field before proceeding to a detailed examination of aspects of it. Since, some people would argue, adult education is still largely a terra incognita, for knowledge of which one has to rely to a large extent on travellers' tales, then one is still at the mapping...
Although many studies in the field of comparative adult education contain n...n, the essential purpose of all work in that field should be to stimulate it
stage. One should begin from a broad, unspecific goal, to admit as wide a range of data as possible for
subsequent classification and analysis. They are, in effect, saying that comparative adult education is not yet
ac the stage at which precise comparison between individual practices is feasible.

There are those, however, who reject the possibility or utility of developing a general theory of adult
education, are sceptical of the value of general mapping of the adult education field, or think that enough has
already been done. Their concern may be the investigation of limited aspects of adult education, through the
pursuit of precise pre-determined objectives, perhaps formulated as hypotheses to be tested or problems to
be solved. This approach has been much touted in comparative (school) education (Holmes 1981).

It is not my brief in this paper to discuss these arguments, but it will be clear that whether one requires from
the beginning to formulate specific objectives or to proceed on the basis of general goals will depend largely
on one's purpose. It would, however, be my contention that, since a researcher needs a broad knowledge of
adult education before engaging in comparative study, he or she cannot completely avoid a priori
assumptions about the outcome of a piece of research, based on his/her experience of the field. I would also
argue for reasons exposed in the following sections, that one should formulate one's objectives as precisely
as is compatible with the purpose of the research.

Selecting data

However widely one sets one's goal, one still must confront the issue of data selection. The phenomena under
examination or comparison, whether they be total national previsions of adult education, or single parts of
them, such as the curricula of basic literacy courses in specific situations, have no doubt an objective and
comprehensive reality. It is, however, generally agreed that description, analysis, or interpretation, which is all
research can achieve, cannot replicate it. It will not even be universally agreed what it is. One cannot be sure
of recording all the data which constitute the phenomena or serve to explain them. It would almost certainly
be too large a task anyway. Completely unselective collection of data, which has been recommended as an
aid to greater objectivity, will not only fail to achieve the desired aim, it cannot be done. Even less is it feasible
to gather unselectively the contextual data which is essential to the understanding of the phenomena one
intends to study.

Data selection is inevitable, whether it is done consciously or not. Since one stands more chance of
controlling what one knows one is doing, selection had better be conscious and purposeful. It will be selected
for its use in achieving the goal, therefore the more specifically the objectives can be formulated, the more
precisely one can decide what data is needed. If one's goal is to understand better the learning needs of
participants in adult literacy classes, then it will help to know whether this particular project has as its
objective all participants in literacy classes of all kinds, or participants of a defined age group, social class, or
occupational group, taking part in one to one or other learning situations. Needless to say, in order to
facilitate comparison one needs to seek comparable information about each of the phenomena to be
compared, or, if it is not comparable in its raw state, it must, by acceptable manipulation or interpretation, be
capable of being made so. Essential to the resolution of this problem is a clear understanding of the
terminology, concepts and categories in each of the states and/or languages involved.

The specification of precise objectives and of data to be sought in order to achieve these concentrates the
mind, but may exert a blinkering effect, as I have argued elsewhere (Titmus, 1985). An unreserved assumption
Although many studies in the field of comparative adult education contain
n...n, the essential purpose of all work in that field should be to stimulate it
that only data selected in function of predetermined objectives should be taken into account can only be
valid if one can be sure of knowing in advance what data will be needed to attain those objectives. One can
never be certain of this. Therefore, although the practicalities of investigation may oblige one to limit one's
effort to searching for pre-determined kinds of data, there should be a place in one's operation for the
recognition and appreciation of Element X, the incidental occurrence of relevant information of a kind
unprovided for in one's planning.

Obtaining data

In adult education there has been little empirical experience of obtaining data for comparative purposes, little
experienced, indeed, of gathering quantitative information at all. There is, however, no reason in principle to
suppose that the techniques to be employed should be any different from those used in other social sciences,
particularly those used in comparative (school) education. Adult education does have, however, certain
characteristics, peculiar in kind or degree, which may create difficulties.

As we all know, for a multitude of reasons adult educators have been much more inclined to act than to
record. Moreover the lack of uniformity, continuity or repetition of many of their initiatives, justified by the
diversity and continual change of adult learning needs, has made systematic and consistent recording of
quantitative data much more difficult than in school education. Certainly the spread of formal structures at
national level is making the collection of statistics easier and more widespread in some parts of the field, but
by no means in all. It may even be argued that some initiatives are unique in the nature of their participants,
content and purposes, so that they are incomparable and insignificant beyond themselves. It may even be
that a general classification of adult education statistics on the lines attempted in the Unesco International
Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) will always remain impossible. It is, incidently, an indication of
school comparativists' lack of knowledge of adult education that so well-informed a scholar as Holmes can
write of ISCED that it “would allow a very complete profile of information if it were required to be gathered
about any national system of education” (Holmes 1981). Its classification of non-compulsory adult education
(the only one given) is quite inadequate.

The comparative researcher has therefore a peculiarly acute problem. It is not a matter of collating existing
figures, but of doing the counting oneself or getting it done. That means deciding in advance for each
research project what statistical information is relevant, in what form, given that one is seeking to compare
several different phenomena, and how it is to be processed and interpreted. Unless one has the means for
this, quantitative methods are out and so are objectives which require quantitative measurement. There has
been. quite reasonably, a move in comparative (school) education away from the positivist approach, which
tended to
give the impression that only that which could be quantified was of value. It would, however, be an error to
ignore quantification altogether. One has to devise some meaningful way of counting heads and expenditure
and measuring performance, if much necessary knowledge of adult education is to be brought within one's
grasp. It may be necessary, by complex means to devise indicators (Johnstone, 1981). 'There has been some
discussion of
this problem in the CROASAEE project (ECLE., 1983), but little concrete action.
Once obtained, data has to be marshalled to give a description of the phenomenon under study. In order to facilitate juxtaposition and then comparison a common pattern of classifying and ordering information needs to be adopted for all the phenomena being compared. To a large extent the broad guidelines of this will have been determined by the process of setting objectives and selecting kinds of data to be sought. The description should include situating the phenomenon in its societal context, data for which will have been obtained. It should also be analytical. If one is comparing methods of adult literacy teaching in several countries, then as far as possible one should go beyond simply labelling one approach as ‘one-to-one’ teaching and break it down, in each country, into its essential components and identify the interplay between them.

At this point it is appropriate to undertake the first interpretation of the elements of the phenomenon in terms of itself and its individual context, that is, for example, to look to the parts of literacy work in country A to see what they are and how they interact and to examine the forces in that society which influence literacy work and which are influenced by it, in order to comprehend the why and how and to what extent it is as it is. To avoid later confusion for oneself and for the future reader it is necessary, as far as possible, to distinguish information from interpretation. An absolute distinction is not, however, possible since, by the process of selection of objectives and data, one has already entered into the realm of interpretation.

A flexible approach to interpretation is required, because of the multiplicity and the changing nature of the forces which play upon any social phenomenon. On the other hand, because of the vastness and complexity of the possibilities, it is desirable to select for initial consideration those which, on the evidence of one’s own experience and of prior research, appear most likely to offer convincing results. It is, I suggest, helpful to proceed in a series of widening contexts, beginning with the interaction of forces within the phenomenon under study, then successively between the phenomenon and adult education, between it and education as a whole and then between it and the rest of society (this may be subdivided if desirable).

In the context of the phenomenon itself, whatever it might be, factors relating to purpose, personnel (teaching, organizational and learning), organization, facilities and finance are not only essential elements in the description, but are probably mutually significant for interpretation. An extended exercise in identifying the elements necessary for locating phenomena and interpreting them within the context of adult education has been undertaken in CROASAEE (Besnard & Lietard, 1986). Factors likely to have an interpretative value in the context of education as a whole and of the general societal environment may be derived from my article, The Modelling of Systems of Adult Education (Titmus, 1983).

Whatever the immediate goal of any individual piece of research may be, the ultimate, if indirect, purpose of comparative adult education must be to improve the provision and experience of adult education. Therefore interpretation of phenomena in their context must be diachronous, presenting a time dimension which includes not only the past, but also the future. One wants to know how the present came out of the former, in order to influence the latter. A simple snapshot of what is under study, taken at a single instant, will be of little use to the comparativist. It will probably be necessary to select a common period in locations A, B, C etc for comparison, but if the subject of study is to be understood and to provide utilisable knowledge, then one must go before and after that time.
Although many studies in the field of comparative adult education contain ..., the essential purpose of all work in that field should be to stimulate it.

The process of interpretation is not objective, since it is carried out in the interpreter's mind and influenced by his/her values. As has often been said before, however, the fact that one cannot be completely objective is no excuse for failing to be as objective as possible, or for failing to make one's initial viewpoint clear.

Interpretation cannot be anything but approximate. One can often be sure that a certain practice owes something to a certain force. It is generally agreed, for example, that many of the characteristics of popular education in France since World War II have to a large degree been products of a reaction against the perceived failings of the formal education system. One does not know precisely how much this has been so, both because the power of that reaction cannot be measured in quantitative ways and because, among other things, one cannot exclude the possibility that other factors have come into play. In many cases the situation is such that the factors which help or have helped to bring it about are not generally agreed, but a matter of individual interpretation. Whatever the picture one has, it and therefore one's interpretation of it are almost certainly incomplete.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is the process of setting side by side all the phenomena being studied in order to permit the identification of differences and similarities. The construction of a common framework of description and interpretation is undertaken to facilitate this and subsequent stages. It should, perhaps, be emphasized that the term, juxtaposition, is not necessarily to be interpreted literally. It is rather a metaphor. Physical juxtaposition of descriptions on paper may be helpful, but the essential place for it is in the researcher's brain.

Identification of differences and similarities

This process may be more difficult than it appears. Differences and obscurities of concept, terminology, classification of data and organization may conceal both substantive differences and similarities. These matters should be clarified at least when the choice of data to be sought is made, because of the extent to which they may distort later stages, such as collection of data, identification and analysis of phenomena. It may well be useful to have decided beforehand the nature of the differences and similarities one is seeking for the goals one has in mind. If one just searches, without being guided by some idea of the essential elements in the phenomena being studied, one runs a risk of missing something important. Not only differences and similarities of information, but also of interpretation need to be identified.

Interpretation of differences and similarities

Previous interpretation exercises should be reviewed in the light of the differences and similarities identified. This second stage of interpretation should be undertaken on the same lines as the first and take into account what is revealed both by juxtaposition and identification of differences and similarities. One should also at this stage reconsider the interpretations of each phenomenon, setting them now within the supra-national context, in which all those phenomena being compared are situated. That context may, unless controlled, become too vast to be conceptually encompassed. It will be supra-natural, if one is comparing phenomena in different states, but it may be less than global, depending on the phenomena and the purposes for which the research is being undertaken.

A synchronous method
Although many studies in the field of comparative adult education contain n...n, the essential purpose of all work in that field should be to stimulate it

As has already been said, the elements of the research proposed should not be undertaken in a simple linear progression through time. They are to be taken in chronological order only to the degree that each one will normally be started before the subsequent one in the list. I am not even certain about that, because in beginning any stage it may be useful to look forward to subsequent ones as well as back to previous ones: No stage should be considered completed until the end of the whole project, as it is liable to revision throughout the research process under the influence of all the other elements and may itself influence them. Experience in selecting data to be sought and the exercise in obtaining data may cause one to review one's objectives and even one's goal. For example, by revealing gaps in knowledge the process of description and interpretation may send one back to questions of data selection, or, if the data required proves unobtainable, to a reformulation of goals and/or objectives. Juxtaposition and identification of differences and similarities may indicate the need for a similar re-examination. In return that will call for a revision of description, analysis and comparison. Indeed the elements of the research process should be organized so that they are ultimately all in play simultaneously.

The completion of the second stage of interpretation should bring a comparative study to its end, albeit always to a provisional one. With luck and good judgment one will have advanced by comparison one's understanding of some aspect of adult education. As I said at the beginning, I have suggested only a starting strategy, which may well be subject to significant changes, imposed by any one or more of a number of variables in the nature, purpose and conditions of the project. I have only had the time to consider a few possible ones here: What I have proposed is hardly a strategy, more an approach. I make no claims for its originality. It may sound somewhat dogmatic. It was not intended to do. If it does, I apologize, for I have fallen into the trap that opened up under so many methodologists of comparative (school) education.

REFERENCES


King, E.J. (1968) Comparative Studies and Educational Decision, Bobbs-Merril, New York

Although many studies in the field of comparative adult education contain n...n, the essential purpose of all work in that field should be to stimulate it


