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ISCAE's publications and activities

1. The way to “International Comparative”

An ongoing interest in international aspects has been a notable feature in the evolving history of andragogy — the ‘Wissenschaft’ or science of adult learning and education. Over the century between Grundtvig (Denmark) and Freire (Brazil), several figures and ideas gained international recognition. From its early years, the adult education movement showed interest in international travel and exchange, which allowed key educators from different countries to shape their global understanding. For example, Lindeman (USA) traveled to Denmark, Mansbridge (Great Britain) journeyed to Holland, Australia, the USA, and Canada, while Borinski (Germany) visited Scandinavia, and Dziubinska (Poland).

While many educators documented the educational practices of foreign countries, a distinct scientific-comparative approach emerged in the work of only a limited number of authors. To select just some:

The earliest author - as far as we know - dealing explicitly with the international comparison in education may be Marc-Antoine Jullien (**‘Jullien de Paris’**) (1775–1848). Gautherin (1993) values his work: “The *Esquisse d'un ouvrage sur l'éducation comparée*, published in 1817, has always fascinated its readers by its wide scope and apparent modernity: its aim was nothing less than to compare educational establishments throughout Europe, to set up a ‘Special Commission on Education’ and an ‘Educational Institute’, and to found an ‘Educational Newsletter’. It was thanks to Jullien that the science of education became comparative.” But despite their basic character, Jullien’s works were ‘largely forgotten’: “When in 1883 a course on the science of education was officially introduced at the Sorbonne, no one seems to have remembered that he was the first person in France to have attempted to construct such a ‘science’” (Gautherin 1993, 767). That means that Jullien’s work remained more a historical oddity, not a beginning of an academic discourse.

Bereday (1966), in systemizing the development of comparative education, calls the nineteenth century the first phase of comparative education, “inaugurated by the first scientifically minded comparative educator, Marc-Antoine Jullien de Paris 1817. This phase might be called

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the period of ‘borrowing’: to make available the best practices of one country for transplantation to others” (p. 7) – Kaepplinger critically calls this “never ending attempts to discover educational miracles abroad ... and to bring them home” (2017, p. 34).

The second phase of comparative studies, following Bereday, took place in the first half of the twentieth century. This phase “interposed a preparatory process before permitting any transplantation. Its founder Sir Michael Sadler worked at the turn of the century for the acceptance of the principle that each educational system is not readily detachable but is instead intricately connected with the society that supports it ... This era might be called the period of ‘prediction’ because the purpose of comparative study was now not primarily borrowing but predicting the likely success of a system of education in one country on the basis of the observation of precedents and similar experiences of other countries” (Bereday 1966, p. 7-8).

Michael Sadler's (1861-1943) much-quoted lecture on comparative education at the Guildford Educational Conference in 1900 addressed the issue of educational transfer. Sadler's perspective on the value of studying foreign education systems emphasizes understanding and improving one's own educational system rather than copying others. His notable quote, “It is a great mistake to think, or imply, that one kind of education suits every nation alike” (p. 312), highlights his belief in the uniqueness of national education systems and the need to adapt education to the specific cultural and social contexts of each country “.

Sadler's work mainly addressed school education, but his insights are also applicable to adult education. This reflects a critical view on educational transfer, suggesting that understanding and respecting the uniqueness of different educational systems are more valuable than direct adoption or replication. In his reports, starting in 1898, Sadler examined the educational systems of various countries, including England, Wales, Ireland, France, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, Canada, Newfoundland, and the West Indies, providing a comparative framework that influenced future educational studies.

While in this phase authors mostly referred to school education, partly transferable to adult education, the next phase moves gradually and explicitly into adult education. Bereday (1966, p. 8) calls this third phase - from the mid of the 20th century on - the period of “analysis”. This third phase, marks a shift from descriptive studies to a more critical and theoretical exploration in the field of adult education. This progression indicates a deeper understanding and more sophisticated methods for comparing educational systems globally, moving beyond merely describing systems to analyzing and interpreting them in various contexts.

George Zygmunt Fijałkowski Bereday (1920-1983), a prominent figure in this analytical phase of comparative education, was a researcher of Polish origin. After World War II, he chose to remain abroad, initially in the UK, and later moved to the US. From 1955 onwards, he served as a professor at Columbia University. Bereday was a founding editor of the *Comparative Education Review* and a co-editor of the *Yearbook of World Education*. Like many comparatists, he was an international traveler, drawing on diverse global experiences.

Bereday's primary area of interest was the comparison of school systems ("comparative education"). However, his insights are also relevant to comparative adult education, with some adaptation. One of his key assumptions - highly transferable to adult education - is that educational phenomena must be analyzed within a broad social and political context. He also cautioned against cultural bias, stating: "Can cultural bias be avoided? Probably it cannot, but it can be minimized" (Bereday 1966, p. 166).

Bereday is best known for developing the four-step model of comparison in education: description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison. He emphasized that "these four steps point the way to the future for comparative education" (Bereday 1964, p. 28). His book, *Comparative Method in Education* (1964), remains essential reading for both new and experienced comparatists. It is also engaging, filled with numerous examples and personal experiences.

The beginning of a scholarly approach to comparative adult education, as noted by many scholars, is marked by the "**First International Conference on Comparative Adult Education,**" held in June 1966 in **Exeter, USA**. The "Exeter Papers" (Liveright & Haygood, 1968) documented the conference in 141 pages, detailing its background, purpose, reflections, and outcomes. The conference featured national reports from only five countries, and outlined areas of agreement, important themes, and suggestions for further research and study.

The report reveals two distinct approaches: as might be expected in an initial phase, the theoretical section is overly ambitious, claiming a wide range of aspects. In contrast, the country reports are primarily descriptive, often presented in simplified quantitative lists and charts. Throughout, the document consistently emphasizes the importance of connecting adult education to the cultural, social, and political contexts of each country.

Another outcome of this conference, even though the number of participants was small (26 persons, seven from overseas, five from Canada, and 13 from the U.S.A.) became influential for the future development of comparative adult education: an international network of comparatists in adult education came into existence. This development in the second half

of the 20th century also is illustrated by the growing number of conferences and institutions:

- 1949 International Conference of Adult Education (UNESCO) held at Elsinore, Denmark
- 1960 World Conference on Adult Education (UNESCO) held at Montreal, (Canada)
- 1960 Founding of the International Congress of University Adult Education (ICUAE)
- 1966 First International Conference on The Comparative Study of Adult Education at Exeter, (NH), USA
- 1968 Founding of World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES)
- 1972 International Experts' Meeting "An Agenda for Comparative Studies in Adult Education", Nordborg, Denmark
- 1972 Third International Conference on Adult Education (UNESCO), held in Tokyo, Japan
- 1972 World Congress of Comparative International Education Societies, Ottawa, Canada
- 1973 International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) founded
- 1985 Fourth International Conference on Adult Education (UNESCO) held in Paris, France
- 1987 Comparative Adult Education Conference (Open University), held at Oxford, U.K.
- 1987 Founding of the Committee for Study and Research in Comparative Adult Education (CSRCAE)

2. ISCAE: ideas, activities, and publications

Alexander Charters, participant of the Exeter conference and many other gatherings, founded the "Committee for Study and Research in Comparative Adult Education (CSRCAE)" in 1987.

At the 1992 annual conference of the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education in Anaheim, Los Angeles, the society was renamed the "International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE)"¹. Jost Reischmann, University of Bamberg, Germany was elected for president and Marcie Boucouvalas, University of Virginia, USA for secretary.

This occasion led to an intense discussion: What is the specific, distinctive focus of ISCAE, and how to enhance international comparative adult education?

The agreements reached narrowed the focus of ISCAE:

¹ Notes of the meeting of the Society for Comparative Adult Education (1992). In: Reischmann, Jost (2024): *Andragogy: Contributions to an Emerging Discipline*. BoD-publisher, Norderstedt, Germany. P. 137-138.

1. **Academic, Research- and Theory Orientation:** With the new name the explicit mention of “Study and Research” was lost. But it was clear to all: This is an academically-oriented society, not an organization focused on practical intercultural education.
2. **International Comparison:** While neither the old nor the new name explicitly restricted comparisons to those between countries, there was a suggestion to name the society the "International Society for International Comparative Adult Education." However, this was considered overly complex and impractical. Instead, the new name was shortened, with the unanimous agreement that ISCAE would focus on cross-country comparisons. Although intra-national comparisons - such as those between regions, participant groups, or institutions - are also valuable in adult education, it was decided that these would be better addressed by other organizations.
3. **Comparison, not just Country-Reports or Juxtaposition:** It was agreed that ISCAE would promote the method of comparative analysis between countries. This involves more than merely describing or placing countries side by side; it requires the “explicit attempt to identify the similarities and differences between the aspects under study” (Charters & Hilton, 1989, p. 3).
4. **Comparing for Understanding:** ISCAE aims to encourage projects that seek “to understand why the differences and similarities occur and what their significance is for adult education in the countries under examination” (Charters & Hilton, 1989, p. 3).
5. **Reflecting on the Comparison Process:** ISCAE expects that, in addition to comparing and explaining or understanding, the methods, strategies, and concepts used in international comparative projects are explicitly and critically examined - just as is standard in all scientific research.
6. **Focus on Education:** Adult education phenomena can be studied from various disciplines through an international comparative lens. However, all studies should ultimately aim to enhance the understanding and improvement of adult education issues. If contributions come from other fields (e.g., comparative sociology, politics, law), they should clearly address the implications for adult education.
7. **“Building on the Shoulders of Giants”:** This principle is fundamental to all scientific work. Consequently, ISCAE aims (a) to compile foundational knowledge in comparative adult education through its publications and (b) to encourage the ISCAE community to read, utilize, and appreciate foundational literature in the field.

It was clearly acknowledged that the focused scope would restrict the size of the society. There are many international organizations dedicated to

adult education (practice-oriented) and andragogy (the scientific study of adult education), and national associations often have task forces or divisions that address international topics. Thus, papers that do not meet ISCAE's specific criteria can be presented at other conferences. Nevertheless, it was hoped that these stringent standards for ISCAE's work would provide an opportunity to advance a more ambitious and rigorous field of international comparative adult education.

General purpose

The general purpose of ISCAE - as described in ISCAE's homepage (www.ISCAE.org) - is "to increase the awareness and value and quality of comparative adult education. In particular, the Society wants to encourage the growth of comparative adult education studies by:

- promoting research in this area;
- supplying a network of contacts to other comparatists;
- documenting and sharing the developments and standards in publications;
- facilitating the publication and distribution of comparative adult education studies;
- organizing conferences and meetings for members and others interested in this area;
- fostering thematic networks;
- co-operating with other societies with similar aims."

ISCAE's understanding of "international comparison"

ISCAE focuses its access to "international comparison" on two specific types of comparison:

1. "A study in comparative international adult education ... must include one or more aspects of adult education in two or more countries or regions. Comparative study is not the mere placing side by side of data ... such juxtaposition is only the prerequisite for comparison. At the next stage one attempts to identify the similarities and differences between the aspects under study ... The real value of comparative study emerges only from ... the attempt to understand why the differences and similarities occur and what their significance is for adult education in the countries under examination ..." (Charters/Hilton 1989, p. 3).
2. Additionally, reflections on the field and methods are considered integral to international comparative adult education. This includes critical analyses of the methods, strategies, and concepts used in international comparisons, as well as comprehensive reports on developments within the field, both at the substantive and meta-levels.

ISCAE's conferences

The first conference organized by ISCAE was held in 1995 in Bamberg, Germany, with 31 members from 14 countries in attendance. The conference focused on discussing the methods, challenges, and pitfalls of international comparative research.

The second conference took place in 1998 in Radovljica, Slovenia, and was attended by 35 members from 16 countries. The third conference followed in 2002 in St. Louis, USA; and the fourth in 2006 again in Bamberg, Germany. 2012 the fifth conference convened in Las Vegas, USA; and the sixth conference in 2017 in Würzburg, Germany.

The next planned conference, scheduled for 2020 in Vancouver, Canada, was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was postponed to 2021 and held digitally. 2024 the conference meets in Florence, Italy (<http://iscae.org/conferences/conferences.htm>).

These eight conferences have brought together a significant number of researchers, thereby contributing to the overarching goals of ISCAE as outlined above.

ISCAE's publications

In the early days of ISCAE, locating publications on international comparative adult education was challenging, as they were dispersed across various countries, locations, and languages. This difficulty led to the decision to document and share standards and experiences through ISCAE's own publications.

The first such publication was *Comparative Adult Education 1998: The Contribution of ISCAE to an Emerging Field of Study*, which included 24 contributions spanning 394 pages. These contributions were selected from the two conferences held in Bamberg (1995) and Radovljica (1998). The topics ranged from "Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations" to "Problems and Pitfalls in International Comparison," as well as significant UNESCO papers. Contributors included prominent scholars such as Joachim Knoll (Germany), Colin Titmus (UK), Alexander Charters (USA), and Barry Hake (Netherlands). This book is available for download at <http://iscae.org/publications.htm>.

The second book in the series, *Comparative Adult Education 2008: Experiences and Examples*, was published in 2008, ten years after the first. It features 25 contributions across 282 pages, selected from presentations at two conferences: one in St. Louis (2002) and another in Bamberg (2006). The contributions are organized around three key themes: Comparative Adult Education: Developments and Potentials, Culture as a Challenge: Experiences from the Field, and International Organizations in Comparative/International Education. Notable contributors include Mark

Bray (UNESCO-IIEP), Katarina Popovic (Serbia), John Henschke (USA), and Alan Tuckett (UK).

The proceedings of the Würzburg conference (2017) are available online at this link:

<http://iscae.org/conferences/2017conf/ISCAEProceedings2017.pdf>.

The third book, edited by Reischmann and published in 2023, takes a different approach. *Essential Readings in International and Comparative Adult Education* is not a compilation of conference papers but a thoroughly selection of classic, foundational texts that highlight the long history and outcomes of the international and comparative perspectives. The 32 contributions range from Michael E. Sadler (1900) and George Z. F. Bereday (1964) to The Exeter Papers (1966), Colin Titmus (1981), Peter Jarvis (1992), and Michał Bron Jr. (2008). This collection, described as “standing on the shoulders of giants,” provides a well-grounded retrospective while offering a reliable, experience-based perspective for the future. It also makes otherwise difficult accessible texts available for citation.

Problems

As mentioned earlier, the primary aim of ISCAE is “to increase the awareness, value, and quality of comparative adult education” and to avoid “re-inventing the wheel.” The conferences and publications are intended to support this mission, but they also serve as a reality check against the idealized vision of what “comparative adult education” should be.

A positive development observed during the preparation for the Florence conference was that 20 out of 30 proposals involved research from two or more countries, a significant increase compared to previous conferences.

However, the experience of preparing these conferences and publications has often been frustrating. Nearly half of the proposals had to be rejected; the argument for rejection always was the same: “all about the described topic, but only marginal or even no reflection on comparison, no comparative literature, not even referring to the ISCAE-homepage and its statements/definitions/discussions, no ‘building on the shoulders’ of comparative knowledge.” Accordingly, no benefit for comparative knowledge.

Even the proposals that seemed acceptable often required further guidance to align with ISCAE’s standards. A common issue was that many papers followed a simple structure: ‘Topic X is presented as it exists in country A, and as it exists in country Y’ (comprising 90% of the text). The selection committee (Michał Bron and Jost Reischmann) dedicated significant effort to reviewing these submissions and advising authors: referring them back to the Call for Papers, pointing them to the ISCAE

homepage, directing them to specific ISCAE publications, and attaching related texts for reference.

Despite these efforts, the results were often disappointing. When the full papers were submitted, many had not incorporated the suggested revisions; some authors were either unable or unwilling to revise their papers in line with the established ISCAE knowledge and standards. As a result, another round of consulting and coaching ensued. Some authors did not accept the feedback and could not be included in the conference proceedings. Others attempted to follow the guidance, with varying degrees of success in adapting their papers to the suggestions. Consequently, readers of the conference proceedings in hand will find contributions of varying quality and levels of engagement with the comparative framework.

3. Summary

Comparative education and comparative adult education have a long-standing tradition. A wealth of knowledge and support is available, including foundational statements, research reflections and methods, well-documented experiences, theoretical and research-based literature, and internationally respected scholars. An educational subdiscipline has emerged.

However, the issues described above indicate that the awareness, value, and quality of comparative adult education still need further development and broader dissemination. This underscores the ongoing importance of ISCAE's work. ISCAE conferences and publications provide both newcomers and experienced researchers with valuable methodological and theoretical guidance, serving as crucial resources for advancing high-quality research in international comparative adult education.

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- www.iscae.org – Homepage of the International Society for Comparative Adult Education.