Promoting understanding in education across Europe. Study visits and the contribution of Comparative Education

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More than one and a half centuries ago, Marc Antoine Jullien de Paris, a French intellectual and educator, a cosmopolitan and friend of outstanding personalities like Napoleon, Jefferson, Pestalozzi and Humbold was among the first to appreciate the contribution education could have in the well-being of people and in the progress of European societies. He firmly believed that if backward European nations could only get acquainted with successful educational practices abroad, they would benefit from their example and progress (Jullien, 1817). To that end he constructed a detailed questionnaire[1] to systematically collect information and he recommended that study visits of education officials to other European countries should be organized. In a sense, he was a pioneer of many contemporary E.U. programmes, among which ARION.

Although his project had only limited success, education officials did follow some of his recommendations. They traveled abroad, they visited schools and other institutions, they observed and took notes, they collected data and issued reports to their national authorities. Their aim was to discover in the foreign systems of education the optimum solution to their educational problems. It was the era of nation building through the construction of national systems of education (Green, 1990); an era comparative educationists usually refer to as the period of selective education borrowing (Noah and Eckstein, 1969), as it was firmly believed at the time that successful foreign institutions and practices, once

carefully observed and studied, could be transplanted and duplicated at home. Nation states could only benefit from such a process[2].

Yet, by the end of 19th century, it was quite evident that the newly established national systems of education had very different characteristics. Despite extensive educational borrowing, they had failed to converge. They differed in some of their fundamental values, in their structure and organization, in their administration and so on. Perhaps more significant were their differences in the way peoples in Europe had been guided to perceive each other, a fact that allowed bloody confrontations to take place among them twice in 30 years during the 20th century.

Europe is a peaceful place today. Age long hatred has given way to co-operation and compromise. The vision of a united Europe is gradually and on occasions grudgingly being realized. Education, still being *de jure* the exclusive responsibility of nation states, is once more called upon, this time not only to serve exclusively the national interest as in the past but also to develop the European identity by promoting mutual understanding, by benefiting from each other's experience and by generally removing every obstacle that stands in the way of European integration. To this end more purposefully, more systematically and more openly an attempt is being made on the part of EU authorities to help educationists grasp the essence of other peoples' way of thinking as this is being developed through education. To meet this clearly political objective a number of programmes –among which the study visit programmes are reminiscent of the relevant 19th century practices– have been developed. To be efficient in fulfilling this noble cause the EU study visit programmes, on which this paper exclusively focuses, should make the best of the valuable experience and of the conventional wisdom of comparative education. In what follows the main elements of this

valuable experience are presented and the ways they may be utilized in making study visits effective instruments of mutual understanding across Europe are suggested.

The conventional wisdom of Comparative Education

Comparative Education is one of those academic disciplines that have had a turbulent and vicissidinous life (Bray, 2003, Wilson, 2003, Cowen, 2000, Crossley, 2000, Mattheou, 2000, Holmes, 1965, Hans, 1949). It started as an endeavour to reveal and understand the reasons that lied behind the differences observed among the newly established in 19th century systems of education, despite the extensive and long-lasting cross-national influences in the field. It then aspired to disclose the causative relationship which allegedly existed between society and education, as part of the discipline's considerate contribution to the noble cause of preserving peace during the mid-war years. In the early post war decades it focused upon the study of problems related to the democratization of education and to development education. Later on, reflecting conjectures of the day, it grappled with contemporary issues, from globalization and the knowledge society to social exclusion and the learning process, presently featuring in the education agenda. In any of these cases, even when it pledged its allegiance to the cause of pure theory, to explanation and understanding, comparative education has never actually renounced its political aspirations. Thus, dealing for decades on end with the realities of decision making in education it has accumulated over the years rich and precious experience which is codified in a number of "articles of faith". Three out of them are outstanding and useful for the purpose of this paper.

The first article of faith for comparativists states that education is a "living thing" (Sadler, 1964). You can not extract selectively one of its

parts, an institution for example, transplant it into a different national context and expect it to grow and bear the fruits it used to bear in its formal environment. It is as if one would expect to develop an orchard in the arctic zone out of the date palms that he had transplanted from the torrid zone or to grow an orange tree out of some leaves and flowers he had gathered from his neighbour's garden. The disillusionment of those foreign advisors who attempted to transplant western institutions into the Third World countries in the sixties (Arnove, 1980) or of those reformers who are presently involved in the importation in their own education systems of the Anglo-Saxon managerialism (Cowen, 1996) bares witness of the truthfulness of this assertion.

The second article of faith states that things outside education, i.e. in its broader social context, matter more than the things inside the education system itself (Sadler, op.cit.), in the sense that the social context is mainly responsible for every major development in it. The values that govern our education are social values; educational concerns and priorities are basically social concerns and priorities. Even ourselves as individuals have been moulded by the society in which we have grown up; we are creatures of our time and circumstances, prisoners in a web of social meanings and assumptions we do not ourselves recognize, as one of the prominent comparativists used to say (King, 1976).

The movement for equality of opportunity in education has been the direct expression of the social equality movement. The plea for further democratic reforms in education reflects contemporary social concerns for the deepening and the strengthening of democratic citizenship, especially in those countries that have suffered in the near past under autocratic regimes. Respect for otherness in schools is an expression of the broader social consent for cultural pluralism and for political-cum-religious tolerance. Concerns for strengthening the school labour market

relationship bare witness on the significance attributed by the society to the economic role of the school.

The last of the three articles states that social contexts, and hence education, differ among themselves as they have developed differently through history, under the influences of different forces and factors, and as present circumstances and future prospects entail and prescribe different priorities and agendas of political action in education. Compare for example the Irish and the French society and then look at the place of religion in the school curricula; or compare the English and the Greek society and then contrast the managerial autonomy of the English school to the complete administrative dependence of the Greek from the ministry of education; or compare the Swedish and the German society and then observe the comprehensive organization of the former and the multi-partied system of the latter. Compare American individualism and pragmatism to Japanese corporativism and paternalism in the business world and you will discover their relationship to social and educational values –to the protestant ethic and the pioneering spirit of early immigrants in the USA and to the family values of respect and of concern for its members in Japan. Look at all these examples and you would readily appreciate the role of history and tradition. Look also at the entrepreneurial culture that has been introduced into the English and the Dutch universities and compare it with the Greek university's adherence to the notion of higher education as a public service and you will readily get an idea of how differently perceived in these societies are the issues of globalization, international competition, modernization etc that currently pervade public discourse on future developments.

The relevance of Comparative Education to the study visit progammes

To the education policy maker the important question is not however the validity of the above three articles of faith, with which he is probably ready to agree. The crucial point for him is how he could make use of them in constructing and successfully implementing study visits in practice. To provide a convincing, yet a certainly tentative, answer we should start with identifying the main aims of these programmes; ARION constitutes a good representative case in this respect. According to the Commission: “The main aims of the study visits are: a) to enable those exercising important educational responsibilities … to renew and modify their work in the light of direct experience of educational structures and reforms in other member states and b) to increase the amount of high quality, selected and up-to-date information about education developments throughout the Community which is available to policy makers” (European Commission, 2003).

It is crystal clear that the ARION and other similar study visits, like those of Leonardo, have a distinct reformist and melioristic outlook. Participating policy makers, administrators and educators are expected to gain first hand and trustworthy information that could and would then be utilized at home, in reform projects and in education policies that will capitalize on other European countries’ relevant experience. It is an assumption and an approach to policy making on the part of EU authorities which is reminiscent of the noble intentions of the founding fathers of state systems of education, which have never been actually renounced as instruments of policy making. For years on end politicians have continued to come back home from ministerial meetings –now perhaps more than ever before, as the meetings are more formal, frequent and multilateral– impressed by the education successes of selected

countries and ready to embark in yet another reform project (Phillips, 1989, 2002). Should we remind ourselves of the enthusiasm social-democrat politicians have shown in the 60s over the Swedish comprehensive reform? Or should we remind ourselves of the reform excitement across Europe about technical-vocational education that would relieve the pressure on general education and that would propel economic development? Should we also remind ourselves of the impact English education policies in the 80s had upon neo-liberal politicians across Europe? Or the present obsession with life long learning, adult education or quality assurance? Similarly how many times technocrats, administrators and educators of all kinds at the local, the national and the international levels have brought with them in decision making committees their frequently misconceived wisdom on foreign systems of education? A scrappy mixture of circumstantial evidence, inadequate information, naive interpretation, unsustained generalizations, wishful thinking and prejudice. Every comparativist that has participated in policy-making committees can readily cite examples of unfeasible proposals based on various misconceptions of the realities of foreign institutions. Thus, in the face of all these what Comparative Education has to offer?

Well, the first piece of advice Comparative Education has to offer to study visit officials has already been hinted. By underlining the historical-cum-contextual character of educational institutions and the subsequent limitations to education borrowing, Comparative Education warns national policy makers against a naive and superficial interpretation of EU suggestions for national policy modifications "in the light of direct experience of educational structures and reforms in other member states" (European Commission, op.cit.) as precepts for an inconsiderate adoption of foreign education practices. It also exposes to pervasive criticism all

those convenient assumptions and unsubstantiated certainties frequently prevailing in several decision-making committees. Thus, from the very beginning policy makers- prospective study visitors are made aware of the difficulties pertaining their task.

The second important contribution of Comparative Education to a study visit programme consists in pin-pointing to all agents involved the fundamental inherent difficulties of their task. The first is of an epistemological character. Our observations can never be truly objective, even if we try hard. This is not so much because "things that really matter most in life and in education, and the social situations in which they have their real meaning are far too complex to lend themselves to any kind of supposedly objective observation" (King, op.cit: 14). It is mainly because we see what we have learnt to see. Whenever we observe we bring with us all our history, our personality, our present emotions and our acquired intellectual equipment (ibid: 15).

This is equally true for the layman as well for the expert. He too, especially when he looks at a particular aspect of a foreign system of education, he looks at it differently, according to whether he is an academic researcher, a consultant to foreign education authorities, a study visitor or a partner in a reform project and of course according to its academic background and research priorities and skills.

Our limited objectivity places a number of restrains and obligations upon us. First, we should get familiarized with this idea and be always on the alert for limitations in our observations. Secondly, we should systematically cross check our data by comparing them with other reliable data or by consulting others, more familiar with the specific educational system and its social context. We should, thirdly, try to develop our comparative skills by studying relevant methods and techniques. Finally and on any

occasion we should remain open-minded, down to earth, moderate, circumspect, prepared to put to the test all information and points of view, and ready to reconsider our views in the face of new evidence. Perhaps today more than ever before, we should be prepared to put to the comparative test and to our critical judgment all this information about foreign educational developments and all the relevant advice from international organizations that keep pouring in our national contexts.

The second difficulty is conceptual in character. It reminds us that every valid and reliable study should be based on a clear understanding of the concepts, and of the ideological assumptions behind them, that underpin our perception of the world and of education, especially when it comes to the study of foreign systems of education. As already explained concept formation is a process that takes place in a certain society and it is therefore culturally defined. Actually, even within a single society people do not attribute the same meaning to the same concept. This is more evident with modern concepts like «globalization» or «knowledge society» in which different meanings are attributed even by academic analysts. Parenthetically, this calls for a greater circumspection on our part when we are told that we have to abide by the rules set by the inescapable forces of globalization, international competition or technological innovation. But, let us return to the comparative dimension. When we attempt to study a foreign system of education we must be fully aware that people abroad may attribute different meanings to some of our concepts. The «public school» for example has a totally different meaning for the Englishman than for the continental European. «Gastarbeiter» and his education is peculiarly German. Greek

teachers have only recently got acquainted with the concept of curriculum in its anglosaxon version, although many of them still perceive the curriculum or the «analytical programme» as most of them still call it, as a list of the school textbook chapters that should be taught. And the same is true for the concept of «professional autonomy» which in their eyes has more to do with the limits of their obligation to abide by the central directives than with their full participation in decision taking at the school level.

Indeed every student of Comparative Education has, in taking his first steps in the field, undergone the cultural shock of approaching a foreign system of education with the conceptual outfit his cultural background had provided him with. A Greek student, for example, carrying with him the basic concepts of a centralized system of education, centralism, structural uniformity, legalism etc, would find it very difficult to perceive the function of a system which is characterized by structural, administrative and curricular diversity. By the same token the English student would find it equally difficult to perceive the character of instruction in Greek schools –where the content, organization and teaching method are prescribed by the State– if he approaches it by using the concept of professional autonomy in its English version. The moral of all these is that unless we approach foreign systems of education with the proper conceptual outfit it is almost certain that by the end of our study we would have gained the wrong impression, that we would have reached the wrong conclusions and, hence, that we would have certainly failed to benefit from other peoples' experience.

Finally the third contribution of Comparative Education to the success of a study visit programme relates to the fact that education, as already explained, is a living thing which functions and operates within a certain social context which is constantly forged by

tradition and by the vision of an aspired future. Our study can not therefore be complete and fruitful if we fail to understand and appreciate this context. You can not simply go out and visit schools –normally the cream of the education system host authorities are offering for visitation– attend lectures, talk with teachers and administrators and then be sure that you have grasped a comprehensive view of the system or of its part and of the policy you are interested in. More significantly you can not sense and appreciate the intangible forces that lie behind and explain its function and the dynamics of change in this specific education system. Yet, without it, neither understanding can be achieved nor useful lessons can be drawn out of a study visit. Let me illuminate my thesis by citing a couple of examples from the Greek context.

Suppose that the topic you were interested in during your study visit to Greece was European Dimension in schools. It is most likely that in visiting Greek schools you would come across enthusiastic teachers working with highly motivated pupils in a number of well designed projects in which a variety of creative approaches were utilized. Yet, the success story you would have heard and seen would not be of great significance to you as an exemplary lesson for reform at home, unless you were able to take into account the specific social context of the situation you had observed. Greek society as a whole has always been inclined to strengthen its links with Europe and the European Union both on cultural and on political grounds. Greeks have always prouded themselves to have offered Europe the fundamentals of its civilization and to have been themselves the children of the European Enlightenment. At the same time

accession to European Union has always been seen as a shield against external threat and internal political instability. Without this kind of political support European dimension in education would not perhaps have stood the same chances of success. And without such understanding on their part study visitors of the European Dimension in Greek schools would not have the chance to get the useful lessons and experiences they were looking for.

By the same token it would be difficult to fully appreciate the measure of success of policies related to the education of immigrants and refugees in Greece and to draw useful lessons out of them without taking into consideration the fact that almost half of the Greek population descends from Greek refugees from Asia Minor in 1922 and that Greeks have shared themselves the pains of emigration for many generations.

A final example will suffice to illuminate this thesis. Despite some progress, ICT has not yet been successfully introduced to Greek schools. A study visit will perhaps reveal some of the obstacles and difficulties. These would be perhaps related to the state administrative inertia, to the inadequate initial and in-service training of teachers or to the lack of proper infra-structure. Yet, one would have failed to get a fuller and a clearer picture of the situation, from which to draw useful lessons for himself, if he was not in a position to also appreciate the relevant intellectual and ideological factors that underpin Greek education.

For historical reasons Greek education has been traditionally devoted to the cultivation of the mind and of the moral sense. Accordingly theoretical rather than practical was the genuinely worthwhile school knowledge and teachers have learnt over the years to respect these principles in their work . Hence for

technology to set a strong foot in the curriculum or in teaching it should not only overcome the institutional obstacles but also change the traditional school culture.

Certainly, some among the most optimistic and enterprising reformist circles would object to my emphasis in the role of tradition and of the social and cultural forces. Their basic argument is that education in the post-modern world is basically about skill provision, adaptability and flexibility in a rapidly changing chaotic and globalized world, about individualism and cultural preference, about *vivere* rather than *philosophare*. States and individuals, so the argument goes, which tend to ignore the realities of globalization, of technological explosion in informatics and biology, of the multicultural character of post-modern societies and of cultural relativity, of the decline of the nation state and of the downfall of the Enlightenment project and which in general fail to appreciate the omnipotence of international forces and the inevitability of the changes they incur, are likely to end up at the fringe of the world society and the rearguard of history. Hence the persistent and pressing advice to educators to go with the stream and the taunts against those who fail to comply.

The answer to such remarks is twofold. The first point is that all these accounts of international forces and of their corollaries are simply inaccurate. The nation state still remains strong and the sole frame of reference for the political legitimation of supra-national formations (Mattheou, 2001), despite some losses in its economic and political responsibilities. Globalization, disputed and detested on various grounds, is neither a new nor an all - embracing phenomenon (Hirst & Thomson, 1996, Ashton & Green, 1996). Contemporary technological explosion, impressive and of

an unprecended perhaps strength, is nothing more than yet another step in the long series of relevant explosions, which on the other hand has not yet made its creative impact felt all over the world.

The second point is that most of the aforementioned arguments are a-historical, positivistic and to some extend deterministic. They do not take into consideration man' s capacity to reject and confront omnipotent forces and his willingness to give direction to history. The long intellectual history of the European continent speaks for itself as to the dialectical character of history and of human progress. And Europe's great contribution to the world's civilization has demonstrated beyond doubt the significance of active political involvement in the writing of history.

From principles to action: Preparing study visits in a comparative perspective

Translating theory into practice is undoubtedly a difficult task –a course in aeronautics and the plane's manual are certainly not enough to make a safe flight. By the same token Comparative Education provides the guidelines to make the study visit more effective; it cannot exorcise the evils of misunderstanding altogether. It is in this spirit that the following remarks should be understood and considered.

A study visit is basically an act of communication and for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of a study visit it should be regarded as such. The visitor gets in touch with a number of people working in or related to an organization and/or an institution. They are supposedly ready to satisfy his interest by explaining the situation and by providing answers to his queries. In this sense they send out a message encoded in accordance with their assumptions as to what the interests of the visitors are and as to what they themselves consider fundamental in

and representative of their organization or institution. The hosts make use in this respect of certain concepts that are familiar to them –and expectedly familiar to their visitors– while on some occasions they take contextual aspects of their message for granted.

Visitors on their part are interpreting –or in a more technical sense decoding– the message in accordance with their own assumptions, conceptual outfit and personal preferences and interests. And as visitors come from different national and/or cultural backgrounds, the variety of their assumptions, interests and conceptual outfits lead them to different interpretations of the message; they understand the situation differently.

Finally between the visitor and the visited a double administrative layer is responsible for bringing the two parts together; the host authorities decide on what programmes to offer and organize study visits while the visitors' authorities select among applicants in accordance with certain criteria, provide background information prior to the visit and receive reports after that. Both layers are of great significance in the communication process in that they are those who decide who the "sender", the "receiver" and the topic –and hence to a great extend the message and its interpretation– would be.

Having discerned the participants in the communication process we are now in a position to pass on to the description of the phases of a study visit and to pin-point the areas in which Comparative Education may be of help. For purposes of analytical convenience we would divide the whole process into five distinct phases. First, the selection of the theme, the content and the structure of the study visit on the part of host authorities. Second, the selection of prospective visitors in accordance with certain pre-specified criteria. Third, the preparation and support of prospective visitors on the part of the visitors' authorities. Fourth, the realization of the visit itself, which includes both visitors and a number of

hosts selected by the host authorities again in accordance with certain criteria. Reporting back, both to the visitors authorities and to a broader audience of educationists, is the final phase of the process.

Phase one is to a great extent dependent upon two determinant factors. Study visits should respond to the specific priorities of the Socrates/ Leonardo Programmes and to the realities of education in contemporary Europe; they should also take into consideration the potentialities of the host country. Although most education problems and policies are quite similar for EU countries –the inescapable outcome of, among others, the forces of globalization, European integration and knowledge society/ economy– there are certain education issues peculiar to the various countries in terms of either the prevailing circumstances there or the innovative character of the adapted policies. The transformation of educational institutions in the ex-communist European countries –under circumstances certainly peculiar to them– and the policies of managerialism in English schools –an innovation consistent with English organizational traditions– come under this category. Thus the distinction between "similar" and "peculiar" problems/ policies rises questions as to the relevance of the topic of a study visit to foreign educators (esp. when it comes to "peculiar" circumstances) and it certainly poses different demands upon visitors as to their knowledge of the prevailing in the host country circumstances. A Greek educator, for example, would rightfully wonder whether studying the Local Management of the English School is of any relevance to him, working as he is in a highly centralized education system; and in case he finds this study visit theme interesting, he would certainly have to learn more about the decentralized traditions of the English school, about the professionalism of English teachers, about the liberal character of English

politics, about public faith in scientific management etc. than if he had to study, say, special needs education.

Comparative Education at this stage can thus provide the means to distinguish between the "similar" and the "peculiar" –this has been from the very beginning one of the main aims of the field– and to reveal the character and the relevant significance of similarities and of peculiarities in policy making. This is a contribution of obvious importance to the selection and to the structure of study visits. Provided that authorities do not follow the rule of thumb of offering to visitors what is simply startling and at hand, only to meet their conventional obligations, and that they have the necessary comparative expertise, they can select a theme and organize the study visit around it in a way that would underline the important contextual elements of the policy and that it would stress the peculiar *vis a vis* the similar. By the same token –because even within a society there are always different perspectives and points of view– host authorities should allow for adverse/ minority views to be presented as well as for defective institutions to be also visited and observed. This will not only provide a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the situation but it will also rise the level of creative confusion on the part of visitors which, as a core element of genuine interest and of participatory involvement, will lead to a deeper and a more accurate understanding of the situation, which is after all the ultimate goal of the visit. All in all, the first phase is not merely a matter of organizational and procedural technicalities. On the contrary, it lays the foundations for a successful study visit and thus national/ regional authorities should not at this level hesitate to ask for help both from comparative education experts and to co-operate with their counterparts abroad.

The second phase is the responsibility of the visitors' authorities. They normally select prospective visitors on the basis of language skills

(they should speak the language of the study visit at a high level), of their interest in or pertinence to the theme and of their rank in the educational hierarchy. One can hardly argue against these criteria. Yet they are not enough. Taking into account that a study visit is a communication exercise in which observation, decoding and understanding really depend on the visitors' conceptual outfit, their value system, their assumptions about good education, their real motivation etc. authorities should be in a position to acquire a more comprehensive and accurate view of the prospective visitors' profile. Experience has shown that for some educators participation in a study visit is merely a matter of curiosity or an opportunity to travel abroad and to meet other people (a useful thing in itself but not a top priority in the relevant programmes). For some others internalized predisposions prevent them from fair observation; there are always those who, for example, see in the German system of technical-vocational education the perfect model or those adherents of encyclopaedism who despise the essentialist GCE-A level curriculum and who are, all, inclined to look only for verifying evidence during their study visit. Profiling prospective visitors on the basis of certain descriptive qualitative characteristics is thus a useful exercise and the perquisite for the next phase.

The third phase lies in the heart of the whole process. It is during this phase that prospective visitors are coached for a successful visit. Relying on detailed and accurate information about the theme, the content and the structure of the study visit –information passed on from host to home authorities during the first phase– and having established individual profiles (phase 2) authorities are now in a position to organize *ad hoc* seminars which could include: a) short courses on the comparative study of education. Irrespective of the specific study visit theme all prospective visitors would be warned against the pitfalls of biased observation, of

decontextualizing issues, of confusing the general and with the peculiar, of ignoring the significance of circumstances and traditions and so on. To this end case studies from the extensive bibliography of Comparative Education on misunderstandings and misjudgments which led to real blunders in policy making could be of great help. They would also be given background information about the host country education system and its socio-economic, cultural and political context not in a piecemeal and scrappy manner but in a systematic way which would allow the prospective visitor to appreciate existing relationships between the observed institution on the one hand and the intangible forces and the realities of life that influence its function on the other. It is only in this form that information about the host country or about one of its institutions –normally provided in other ways by home and host authorities today– makes real sense and becomes useful. These short courses could culminate in developing a flexible general flow-chart or observation grid that could allow the participant to focus only on the important institutional aspects, to discriminate the general from the peculiar, to appreciate the innovative and the useful and so on b) Short courses that would update prospective visitors (for the novice in the field this might be a preliminary introductory course) on the state of the art, both in scientific and in policy making terms, in the field in which the study visit theme belongs. This is of crucial importance mainly in newly developed interdisciplinary areas like ICT education, special needs education, or multicultural education esp. in countries where relevant experience and expertise is limited c) A final course could also aim at couching prospective visitors to communication techniques and to overcoming the difficulties related to applying these techniques, especially at the international/ cultural level where communication codes normally differ. To cite only a couple of indicative examples on the

cultural character of these codes, it suffice to mention that "private education" excludes state financial involvement for the Greek, something which is certainly not the case for the Western European or that secular education bares different connotations in France, Ireland or Greece.

The fourth phase refers to the actual materialization of the visit. It is in this phase that the quality and the efficiency of the previous planning and preparation activities are tested. This refers to the structural and organizational aspects of the visit, to the personnel involved, to the selection of the sites and/ or the events of the visit, to the time management etc, all of which set the scene for a successful study visit, as well as for its educational quality and its usefulness in policy making terms. It is worth emphasizing here the central role of the personnel involved. As they are key figures in the communication process they should be fully aware of the significance of coding, their own and that of their visitors, and thus prepared to be continuously in tune with their visitors' interests and modes of thinking. It is quite essential in this respect that the whole process of realizing the visit should be systematically evaluated both by hosts (authorities and participants) and by visitors on the basis of agreed objectives and criteria and that to this end every valid and reliable instrument of evaluation could and should be used.

Finally, the conclusions of the evaluation should be recorded on a structured and well-documented report. The different perspectives will thus reveal the misunderstandings and weaknesses as well as the strong points of study visits that could be then utilized for the continuous improvement of the whole programme.

One could expect at least two major reservations and/or objections to the above process. The first refers to the amount of effort demanded from all agents and persons involved (authorities, educators, host

institutions, organizers). The second underlines the lack of expertise on their part, especially in profiling, couching in comparative education and communication techniques and in project evaluation. It is certainly true that the process just described is really demanding. Yet one should set his policy priorities right. Maximizing results of a highly appreciated –and quite expensive– action does certainly worth the greater effort. After all – and this brings us to the second objection– the whole project in its proposed new form counterbalances additional workload with the involvement of expert human resources and with the introduction of a more rational and efficient organization structure which excludes duplication of effort and maximizes state functional assets. In this context administrators will continue their organizational and co-ordinating work, visitors will keep on reporting only in a more structured and systematic way. Profiling, seminars in Comparative Education and in communication techniques will obviously be the realm of experts (e.g. academics) from the relevant fields. All together they are expected to bring coherence and efficiency in the system and thus to come up closer to the expectations of the founding fathers of study visit programmes.

Coda

Learning from others in education through study visits and direct observation has a long history. It has always been conforting to expect that you may avoid mistakes and enjoy a safe tack in education policy making by simply following the neat steps of others and by taking advantage of their experience. This expectation is even stronger today that we endeavour to integrate Europe and deepen our understanding of each other. Yet, the exercise has not always been successful. Education institutions are far too complicated in themselves and closely interwoven

with society to allow for an easy and clear understanding on the part of its students.

Comparative Education may be of great help in this respect both by increasing awareness on the importance and the pitfalls of the task and by providing the proper approaches and techniques for its successful accomplishment. This implies a reconsideration of the procedures followed thus far in the several EU study visit programmes as well as of the active involvement of other agents and experts that would be prepared to work in close co-operation with administrators and educators. No matter how upsetting the proposed new arrangement may seem at first sight it is worth trying. After all international understanding is the bedrock of continuous peace and prosperity, the ultimate goals of European integration.

Notes

1. The English version of the questionnaire is in Steward Fraser (1964). The Greek translation can be found in D. Mattheou (2000). See also Kalogiannaki, P. (2002).
2. Horace Mann, for example, reported to the Board of Education of the State of Massachusetts in 1844 that "… if we are wise enough to learn from the experience of others… we may yet escape the magnitude and formidableness of those calamities under which some other communities are now suffering. On the other hand, I do not hesitate to say that there are many things abroad which we, at home, should do well to imitate;" and Victor Cousin in his report (1833) insisted that "The true greatness of people … [consists]… in borrowing everywhere what is good and in perfecting it while appropriating it for oneself… We can assimilate what there is good in other peoples without fear of ever ceasing to be ourselves".

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