The Greek Society of Comparative Education:
Promoting understanding across borders

Dr Dimitrios Mattheou

Professor of Comparative Education

University of Athens

The historical context

From its early national period in the late 1820s, Greek society has been open to the outside world. In the first place, many of its most prominent members (intellectuals, statesmen, merchants) had lived, worked and/or made their fortune in foreign lands before coming back and settling down in the new nation state. Many merchants were willing to support the floundering nation state not only in economic terms but also by engraving their cosmopolitanism into the traditional and backward Greek society of the time. Intellectuals who were influenced by the European Enlightenment and had made a name for themselves abroad before returning home, brought new ideas and inspiration that contributed to the development of the national institutional infrastructure. There were ordinary men too, mainly displaced farmers, who were traveling abroad to seek their fortune in the communities of the Greek Diaspora thus bringing back new experiences and a fresh and diverse cultural outlook (Tsoukalas, 1975; Svoronos, 1978).

In the second place, the frailty of the new nation state had made it dependent on the then big European Powers, e.g. England, France and Russia. They had imposed its first King (1832) and his successor (1864), and they had repeatedly intervened to impose their will and to protect their interests. The first Greek political parties were actually named after these powers, as the English, the French and the Russian parties (Hering, 2004). The upper social classes on their part were imitating European ways of life, university professors were studying in Germany and France, while the Munich School of Art was the cradle of modern Greek painting (History of the Greek Nation, 1977; Kokkinos, 1971; Markezinis, 1966). Following the 19th century fashionable practice of educational borrowing, the nascent Greek education system itself was built by the Bavarian regency in the 1830s in the image of the German prototype (Bouzakis, 1991; Dimaras, 1973, Mattheou, 2001, 1997).
It is not surprising, therefore, that the Greek society continued to keep its eyes on developments in Europe and that educationists and state education authorities retained an uninterrupted interest in educational matters in Europe. To confine ourselves only to the post World War II period, there has been no major education report, education reform act or public debate that has not included arguments or references related to education trends and policies in Europe. This is especially true of the important 1958 Report on Education, the 1965 Education Reform Act, the 1976 Education Act as well as of the reform “episodes” in the 80s and the 90s (Kazamias, 1995). International organizations, on their part, did not fail to keep an eye on Greek education. For example, the World Bank was the main proponent of the Centers of Advanced Technical and Vocational Education (KATEE) in the late 60s, while OECD was responsible for the Mediterranean Regional Project in the 60s, the financial sponsor of the post-secondary education study by Andreas Kazamias and George Psacharopoulos in late 70s and the National Reviews in Education in 1979 and 1995. It should be noted however that by 1981 when Greece joined the European Union (E.U.) this interest took a qualitative turn. Despite the fact that education in the E.U. is de jure the prerogative of member states (the so called subsidiarity principle), decision making in Brussels could not but affect public and governmental interest in education developments abroad. In the Greek context, the European Commission, rather than certain European member states, became the focal point of concern. Its guidelines and programmes attracted more attention than education developments in countries like France, Germany and England which traditionally pervaded reform debates in Greece. On the other hand, the process of European Integration brought into play education policy making in smaller European countries, like Ireland, Sweden and more recently –in view of its successful performance in the economy, that has been attributed mainly to education– Finland. Thus, increasingly, interest in the education developments in Europe became more unswerving and widespread, providing at the same time alternative reform initiative to that of introvert education considerations. For all these changes, public interest in the foreign systems of education retained however the primarily political character it had always had. Evidence from abroad continued to be used as the staple of the comparative argument, with least attention being paid to its contextual dimensions or to the reliability and the validity of the method used in the collection of relevant information.
The development of the Greek Comparative Education Society: Context and protagonists

It was against this background that the Greek Comparative Education Society (GCES) was established in 1991. The general circumstances were favourable at the time. Reference has already been made to the continued interest in education in other countries and to the significance of the role of the European Commission. European Union programmes, like Erasmus and Comenius, were already well in progress, while the preparation for the first “Operational Program for Initial Education and Training” (OPIET) –a support national plan for education subsidized by E.U.– was at its final stage. All these initiatives underlined the significance of the systematic comparative study of education, and made educationists more aware of the need for the development of a professional body of experts in the field. On the internal front, extensive education reforms in the 80s were maturing, and these too were calling for a comparative reassessment of their course in view of the emerging knowledge society and the wave of globalization. In this context, one specific reform was perhaps the most influential. In 1985, two new Departments were established in all nine universities in the country: the Department of Preschool Education and the Department of Elementary Education. It was in these Departments that for the first time Comparative Education became part of an academic course. A number of professors of Comparative Education were gradually appointed so that by the mid 1990 at least ten were already in place. Soon afterwards the first M.A. programme in Comparative Education in the Department of Elementary Education of the University of Athens enrolled its first post-graduate students. Around the same time at the initiative of Professor Dimitrios Mattheou the University of Athens Centre of Comparative and International Education, Education Policy and Communication was established. Thus, the academic infrastructure, both human and organizational, allowed for and indeed called for the creation of a society of comparativists in the country.

The initiative was taken by two prominent comparativists, Professor Andreas Kazamias of the Universities of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Athens, and Professor Maria Eliou, first of the University of Ioannina and then of the University of Athens. With the help of the newly-appointed Professor Dimitris Mattheou, Kazamias and Eliou established the “Greek Comparative Education Society”. Its first Governing Body included Andreas Kazamias as president, Maria
Eliou as vice president, Dimitris Mattheou as secretary general, Christos Saitis as treasurer and Alexis Dimaras as member. The majority (80%) of its founding members were professors in five out of the twelve Greek universities that specialized in Comparative Education as well as in History, Sociology, Political Science and Economics. Other prominent researchers were also included. The composition of the Founding Body was symbolic in at least three respects. First, it demonstrated the initiators’ intentions to develop a professional organization of high academic standards that could contribute (article 2 of the Constitution) (a) “to the advancement of Comparative Education and comparative research” in Greece, (b) “to the study and the scientific analysis of the problems of Greek education (c) “the articulation of alternative education policy proposals by making use of relevant international experience”, (d) “the development of cooperation schemes with relevant foreign scientific institutions”. Second, it recognized the inter-disciplinary character of Comparative Education, and third, it made clear that all regions in the country and all qualified sectors of public life should be represented in the society.

**Ideological, epistemological and methodological considerations**

On the other hand concern for retaining high professional standards found formal expression in article 5 of the Society’s constitution. According to it to become a member of the society one should either hold an M.A. degree or have substantial published work in the broader field. In addition, to be eligible he/ she should be recommended by two members of the society (Article 6). This last provision of the constitution was largely debated among the founding members from the very beginning as it was raising issues of elitism and of closed shop. After all, by adopting loose participation criteria the Society would become massive and hence more influential in public life. It was finally agreed on that quality rather than quantity should determine the Society’s public recognition and influence. On the other hand, high academic standards in comparative research was the only safeguard against the prevailing arbitrariness in the use of comparative evidence in public discourse and hence GCES, together with universities, should become the guardian and guarantor of genuine comparative work in the country.

Another issue that was raised at the time and has critically been discussed internationally since, was the interdisciplinary character of Comparative education
and of its epistemological and methodological foundations was also raised and has actually being discussed ever since. A matter that attracted attention from the very beginning, as it was directly linked with the name of the society, was the relationship of comparative education to pedagogy. Should the new field (and hence the Society) be called (in Greek) “syngritike pedagogiki” (comparative pedagogy), as it was known in Greek universities, or “syngritike ekpedeusi” (comparative education) which was the term that prevailed internationally. Superficial as it may sound, the difference was not a matter of sheer terminology but it bore important conceptual and epistemological connotations as well. For those who preferred “pedagogy” to “education”, pedagogy was a broader term signifying the aims, the principles, the content, the organization and the means of guiding the child to his/her intellectual, moral and aesthetic maturity both through formal schooling and through the family and the society as a whole. Reflecting the central European traditions, esp. those of German pedagogues, the cultivation of the mind and of the soul was seen as an autonomous phenomenon less dependent on, for example, the social context, in the sense that the aims of education themselves were perennial, settled and shared by the society as a whole. To their way of thinking, “Education” codified the institutional realization of pedagogical aims and was in this sense equivalent with schooling and instruction while it gave undue emphasis to the parochial and the timely, rather than to the general and the perennial. Those who preferred the term “Comparative Education” considered this appellation to be broader than Comparative Pedagogy. When the latter is used it should always be made clear whether it refers to “didactics” or to the comparative study and analysis of the educational reality as it is constructed in different social, economic, political, historical and cultural contexts” (Eliou, 1984: 13); a distinction much closer to the traditions of comparative education in the Anglo-Saxon world.

It was finally agreed that the term comparative education should be used in the title of the Society. The field itself, in teaching and research, moved away from the traditions of Greek educationists with their emphasis on the pedagogical principles and theories of the great pedagogues of the past (e.g. Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel) and their modern counterparts (e.g. Dewey, Delmouzos, Papanoutsos), with their prime concern for instruction and learning and with their preoccupation with psychology and moral philosophy. Comparative research, instead, should look closer into the relation of education to its broader context, the social, political, economic and
cultural factors that have been influencing the Greek and other systems of education over the decades. It focused on policy making and decision taking, on the politics of reform, on the political economy of education reform episodes and on the interplay of tradition with change. A deeper understanding and the explanation of the various education phenomena were at the centre of all this comparative investigation. The long-drawn-out misuse of comparative evidence and the down grading of the broader field of social studies at the university were paving the way, indeed they were calling for this type of research orientation. To recapitulate, comparative education gradually acquired a more theoretical and explanatory character adopting at the same time a critical stance on actual policy making, although many members of GCES have on several occasions worked in policy making committees and have held high posts in State education agencies and organizations.

Despite the general agreement as to the overall orientation of the field in Greece, it cannot be said that there has been a prevailing school of thought. Differences have been evident on issues of methodology, epistemology and the relation between Comparative Education, history and the social sciences. On various occasions at fora and in several conferences organized by GCES between 1993 and 1998 such issues were extensively debated. For example, Kazamias has all along argued for comparative historical approach and for the need to combine the historical approach in comparative education with the social scientific approach, for the disentanglement of comparative education from political exigencies and expediencies, for the an emphasis on humanistic foundations the field itself –indeed for Liberating comparative education from the epistemological shackles of scientism– in the spirit of the liberal arts and the humanities. At the opposite side George Psacharopoulos, an economist, advocated a “social scientific” applied form comparative education, the type of comparative work that deals with real contemporary education problems in an attempt to find practical solutions to them rather than for the purpose of explaining and understanding them. Defending middle grounds Mattheou considers understanding not only as an end in itself but also as a precondition for successful policy making. By the same token history keeps in stoke precious evidents for understanding and explain not only the past but also contemporary circumstances and developments as well –and to some extent to appreciate the possible short term outcomes of policy decisions– as the latter are influenced by the past through long-lasting traditions and habits; an understanding so precious for the success and the
longevity of reform. Apart from universities GCES has been the professional body that has hosted and encouraged a fruitful debate on such important matters.

The present

Since 2002, a new form of discourse has been added. The GCES, together with the newly established Centre of Comparative Education, International Education Policy and Communication, have been publishing the biannual journal Comparative and International Education Review (CIER) which hosts articles in Greek and in English by prominent scholars, and book reviews. It also provides information with critical comments on major education developments in selected countries and keeps its readers informed on the activities of the Greek and other international Comparative Education Societies. Although new, CIER is highly esteemed among the Greek academic community for its high standards.

GCES has its own homepage (http://elese.uoa.gr), the English version of which is presently under construction and is also making use of the telematic and publishing facilities of the University of Athens Centre which is its closest academic partner.

Since 1994, the GCES has been member of the WCCES. Many of its members are also active members of Comparative Education Society of Europe (CESE), while its president, professor Dimitris Mattheou, is currently vice president of CESE. GCES has hosted the XVII CESE Conference in Athens in 1996. The theme of the 1996 CESE Conference was identified as “Education and the Structuring of the European Space: Centre-Periphery, North-South, Identity-Otherness”. More than 300 comparativists from 33 countries took part and A. Kazamias in collaboration with M. G. Spillane has published its proceedings (Kazamias & Spillane, 1998).

Presently GCES has over 90 members and its Governing Body consists of D. Mattheou (professor, University of Athens) as president, P. Kalogiannaki (professor, University of Crete) as vice president, E. Fyrripis (assistant professor, University of Athens) as secretary general, K. Fasoulis (lecturer, University of Athens) as treasurer and E. Prokou (lecturer, Panteion University) as member. A very active GCES is looking at the future with optimism.
References


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