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## Knowledge of the Traveller: Case Study Research and the Problem of Generalisability<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

One of the rationales behind international comparative research in education is the idea that a country may be able to learn from other educational systems, policies and practices. In order for that to happen, we need both general theories of educational development and insight in how particular systems function. Most of the work in comparative and international education has in fact been the study of one specific system or phenomenon. The methodological frameworks of comparative education have valued such case studies very diverse. In this paper two principal definitions of case study research are distinguished: an ethnographic definition and a non-ethnographic definition. It is shown that in particular the latter offers the possibility to generalise from individual cases. As comparative educationists we should travel between the general and the particular. Such a journey would result in the kind of 'general' and 'particular' knowledge much needed in comparative and international education.

### 1 Introduction: the basic question of 'comparative education'

When intending to solve educational problems in a number of diverse education systems, basic issues arise around the extent to which general insights about educational development and innovation processes are valid for a single education system. One may argue that any case is unique and therefore a unique solution should be sought for a unique problem. However, if this is true, how can education systems actually learn from each other? Does comparative education, obviously the most appropriate academic 'discipline' to answer this question, provide us with relevant answers? This paper deals with how comparative education has valued the use of case studies and how we can reach a much needed general body of knowledge by making our theoretical reasoning about them explicit.

In any description of the development of comparative education as a discipline, reference is made to the tradition of 'travellers' that gave account of the educational practices they encountered. The next stage in the development of the discipline is considered to be the journeys of nineteenth-century school-administrators, looking for foreign examples for domestic education policy. Notwithstanding the probably appropriate description of this development, one may actually question whether 'com-

comparative education' should be conceived as a separate discipline. In particular within the social sciences, there is a tendency to divide social reality between a number of academic disciplines, sub-disciplines or fields of study. Boundaries between such disciplines have emerged due to often historically valid reasons, but have meanwhile resulted in rigid divisions, whereas contemporary social issues are increasingly multi-faceted and require a more holistic approach. Each academic discipline has been engaged in its own methodological discourse. Also, much intellectual devotion has been put into the struggles between or within paradigms and schools of thought. Little or no attention being paid to concepts and discussions in neighbouring or remotely related other fields.

Even if comparative education may not easily be justified as a separate discipline or field of study, what has existed is a practice of comparative international inquiry, which I would like to describe as an endeavour towards educational innovation by employing comparative perspectives. One of the rationales behind international comparative research in education has been the idea that a country may be able to learn from other educational systems, policies and practices. Early comparativists such as Cousin, Mann and Arnold intended to improve their own education system by borrowing practices and ideas from abroad. Ever since, a main goal of cross-national research has been to learn lessons for education policy and teaching practice. Comparative education has therefore, most of all, the characteristics of applied scholarship, the basic question to be answered being: how can knowledge of education abroad responsibly be utilized to improve education?

Concern about educational innovation processes in diverse countries thus leads to the question what epistemology is suitable for our applied scholarship. Such an epistemology should be involved with what knowledge is needed to reach the goal of educational improvement. In other words: what is the travellers' knowledge and how can it be utilized?

This paper has three parts: firstly, a number of methodological frameworks within comparative education are described, focusing on how these have valued the use of case studies. The ethnographic definition of case study is analyzed here. Secondly, a non-ethnographic definition is introduced, by discussing the work of Yin and Bromley, which has hardly been consciously reflected in comparative education. Their contributions are associated with organization theory and clinical psychology respectively. Both, although from different backgrounds, have developed a view on the use of case studies that seems highly relevant to comparative education. The possibility of building comprehensive theories on the basis of single cases has appeared as doubtful. The third part of this paper addresses the concept of 'generalisability'. A number of case study design choices for comparative educationists, looking for generalisation, are presented here.

## 2 The case study and some methodological standpoints

### 2.1 A tradition of studying single educational systems

It is with great ease that comparative educationists use the term 'case study' or 'case'. The sub-titles of articles in journals such as *Comparative Education* and *Comparative Education Review* reveal the well-established practice of employing this term. For comparative educationists 'case study' refers to the description of a foreign educational system, policy or phenomenon. It is indeed no exaggeration to state that the bulk of educational studies undertaken by comparative educationists in fact are such descriptions of

foreign education. Bodies such as the International Institute of Educational Planning, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa and the World Bank publish series of case studies, many edited volumes compile descriptive cases and most articles report on an educational phenomenon in one system. In comparative education, such studies of single educational systems often are simply referred to as country studies.

In general, such studies have not been regarded as being 'comparative' of nature, as they do not contain two or more systems. Concerning the problem of what exactly constitutes 'comparative' in comparative education Halls claims that actually only a limited number of studies within comparative education contain straight comparisons of two or more countries. According to Halls though, studies of only one country may well be regarded as comparative education studies papers written by non nationals about other countries often give rise to implicit comparisons (Halls 1990: 27). A similar point is made by Spolton, who thinks it is impossible to conduct a study of a foreign educational system without making such implicit comparisons, and therefore any study of a foreign system of education must be a comparative one (Spolton 1968). In this view, studying a single foreign case in fact means the comparative study of two cases: the own system is, albeit implicitly, compared with the foreign. The pitfall of such a comparison, however, is that it can only be a very asymmetrical one, as was remarked by Campbell.<sup>4</sup> For a viable use of case studies, we need to go beyond implicit and asymmetrical practice and move towards explicitly reasoning about them. For this, there is no difference between employing one, two or many cases.

In contrast with the ease with which comparative educationists employ the term 'case' or 'case study', and the common practice to conduct descriptive studies of a single educational system, stands the minor attention that has been given to case study methodology. The methodological debates of comparative education have hardly addressed the use of case studies. How have positivists, relativists and phenomenologists assessed the use of case studies?

## 2.2 Positivism

By positivists, the particularity of phenomena has primarily been seen as a problem, since the goal of social science is to generalise. In mainstream comparative education, positivism has, in line with this goal, undefined the importance of developing, through comparison, general theories of education. According to positivists it, (exclusively) by means of the comparison of educational phenomena from various settings, is possible to formulate generalised statements or laws about the universal functioning of education.<sup>6</sup>

To arrive at such general theories, positivist comparative educationists aim to obtain knowledge of international educational phenomena in a way similar to the natural sciences, by formulating, testing and adopting or rejecting law-like statements. They have a strong adherence to objectivity and use in particular quantitative methods and statistical techniques, at the same time displaying a low confidence in history and culture as explanatory factors, or as summarized by Noah:

'The modern tendency in comparative studies is: (a) to place primacy on the careful identification, validation, and measurement of variables; (b) to show the relationships among those variables within each country; (c) to compare cross-nationally the direction, size, and confidence levels of statistics measuring these relationships; and (d) to rely upon such factors as

‘national character’, or ‘historical background’ for explanation and generalisation only when the introduction of additional variables yields no gain in explanatory power’ (Noah 1988: 12).

When looking for a general theory, the study of one specific phenomenon is hardly considered significant and positivists have therefore little or no interest for the unique characteristics of a particular situation, studied at one particular point in time. The conventional response to the ‘problem’ of particularity is to draw a representative sample from a larger population, followed by statistical generalisation. It may come as no surprise that the use of case studies as a scientific strategy has not found much support of positivists. Lijphart remarks that case studies are ‘intensive but uncontrolled examinations of single cases that cannot directly result in empirical generalisations and cannot even be used to test hypotheses’ (Lijphart 1975: 160).

For positivists the case study method merely can be useful as an exploratory instrument in order to uncover factors that may be worthwhile to include as variables in subsequent explanatory research. This notion can be found for example in Fidel’s definition of the case study as a research method: ‘As a research method, case studies seem to be appropriate for investigating phenomena when (1) a large variety of factors and relationships are included, (2) no basic laws exist to determine which factors and relationships are important, and (3) when the factors and relationships can be directly observed’ (Fidel 1984: 273).

### 2.3 Cultural relativism and phenomenology

The aim of developing general theories has not been shared by cultural relativists and phenomenologists. They have little interest in the nomothetic exertions of positivism. Instead, they focus on idiographic explication: for them the unique attributes of educational phenomena deserve consideration. Especially cultural relativists in comparative education have underlined the need for comparison of foreign educational systems in order to reveal the uniqueness of educational systems and the larger historical and cultural surroundings of these systems (see for example Mallinson’s view in Mallinson 1975). Epstein has recapitulated Mallinson’s views on this and describes his definition of comparative education as:

‘(...) a process of gaining knowledge about foreign schools in order to gain a better understanding of one’s own system. Only by seeing the *uniqueness* [italics added] in the way others carry on education can one genuinely appreciate the *distinctiveness* [italics added] of education at home. But (...) focus must not simply be on schools, but [on, added] the particular cultural contexts that account for their distinctiveness’ (Epstein 1988: 9).

So, according to cultural relativists comparative education should involve itself with the distinctive, unique, particular features of education. Phenomenologists share this focus on the particularities of educational phenomena. But, stronger than cultural relativists, they object to the study of educational ‘facts’. To phenomenologists education is a truly human enterprise. It, as other human activities, requires inquiry that is appropriate for the nature of this object. The proper study of social phenomena can not be deduced from that of the natural sciences. Social ‘reality’ is constructed by participants in social interaction, based on subjective interpretation. It therefore can not be studied as a ‘real’ object, separated from this interaction:

'Unlike physical objects social phenomena are 'real' only insofar as we organize our activities in such a way as to routinely confirm to their real existence; they have no innate 'real' properties, no real parts, experience no real changes and no causality' (Epstein 1988: 11).

As a consequence the 'availability' of social phenomena for inquiry becomes less complicated. Phenomenology 'rejects the positivist assumption of an empirical social world constructed essentially of a preconstituted field of objects awaiting explication and whose existence is independent of the processes through which it is studied and understood' (Epstein 1988: 12). In other words: social reality itself and knowledge derived of this reality are both human constructs. Therefore, instead of aiming at an 'objective' and 'scientific' comparative education, phenomenologists have concentrated on 'interactionist' or 'interpretative' contributions.

Heyman, for example, underlines that comparative education should concentrate on detailed analysis of social interaction, being the source of the social reality of education' (Heyman 1979: 248). Instead of macro-analysis of educational systems, the attention of comparative educationists should shift to the analysis of everyday school life. This view is supported by Masemann who proposes ethnographic studies, which would use an anthropological, qualitative, participant-observer methodology<sup>7</sup>. In general, studies of this type, written from a cultural relativist or phenomenological perspective, have commonly been called case studies. The case study method, in this definition, refers to the ethnography of schooling.

#### 2.4 The ethnography of schooling

In education the 'case study method' has usually been connoted with the 'ethnography of schooling'<sup>8</sup>: the study of particular educational phenomena mainly through participant observation. The aim of such ethnographic inquiry is to describe the essential features of education, as experienced by the actors involved. On a theoretical level Stenhouse (1979) as well as Crossley and Vulliamy (1984) have dealt with this use of case studies in comparative education. Stenhouse underlines that:

'Comparative education is not (...) a science seeking general laws; nor is it a discipline of knowledge either in the sense that it provides a structure to support the growth of mind, or in the sense that it has distinctive conventions by which its truths are tested. (...) General principles are (...) not the characteristic products of the study, but rather means towards *the illumination of the particular* [italics added]' (Stenhouse 1979: 5).

Clearly, for Stenhouse the conduct of case studies does not lead to the formulation of general principles. Rather, such principles function as the background which serves to throw the individual into clear relief. Stenhouse's preferred strategy in conducting case studies is extensive observation and description of contemporary, real-life educational processes. He suggests that comparative educationists should leave the abstract level and conduct case studies based on ethnographic field work, employing participant observation and interviews, in order to understand day-to-day educational reality. The knowledge resulting from case study research, in this ethnographic definition, is insight in the particular, not general law.

Crossley and Vulliamy agree with Stenhouse that case study research should have a dominant position in comparative education. They distinguish between three traditions of case study research in education: the anthropological tradition, the sociological tradition

and the use of case studies in curriculum and programme evaluation (Crossley & Vulliamy 1984: 193). The first two traditions share a focus on ethnographic field work, in particular classroom interaction, whereas the third is concerned with studying the process of curriculum innovation rather than merely assessing outputs.<sup>0</sup> All three traditions aim at description of educational reality at the school level. Crossley and Vulliamy argue that (positivist) comparative educationists have mixed feelings about such descriptive school level research, but they, in contrast, stress the substantial potentials of employing case studies. They specifically see case study research as useful for bridging the gap between policy and practice, and between macro-level and micro-level research (Crossley & Vulliamy 1984: 197–201). Their emphasis lies nevertheless mainly on the micro-level. With respect to likelihood that results of case study research can be used for the formation of general statements they state (referring to their own case studies):

‘(...) it should be recognized that given the epistemological foundations of case study, although findings are used to challenge certain assumptions currently held by many curriculum change theorists, no attempt is made to extrapolate general laws or universally applicable recommendations in a positivistic sense’ (Crossley & Vulliamy 1984: 201).

### 3 Towards a non-ethnographic definition of the case study method

#### 3.1 Introduction: case study research as a basic category of social science inquiry

The use of case studies has not received much attention in comparative education’s methodological literature. It has been connoted with ethnographic, descriptive school-based research. In this definition of the case study method, little value is attached to the formulation of general theories. To define ‘case study research’ as a basic category of social science inquiry is of relevant recent date. Such a non-ethnographic definition may be a promising approach to the comparative study of education, as it would adequately meet the dilemmas of particularity and generalisability.<sup>1</sup> In a non-ethnographic definition a ‘case’ refers to any contemporary, naturally occurring phenomenon in its wider context. More than one case may be studied by means of the case study method. For comparative education, cases may be conceived as educational policies, processes of curriculum change, education system innovations, etc. They can be studied in either one education system or several.

This section draws considerably on two important contributions to the theory of case study research, to wit Bromley’s and especially Yin’s.<sup>2</sup> Bromley, whose work is directed in particular at psychologists, sees the individual case study as ‘the bedrock of scientific investigation’ (Bromley 1986: ix). Yin, who addresses a wide range of social scientists but in particular organization and management theorists, is perhaps more cautious in his formulation, when he calls case study research ‘an essential form of social science inquiry’ (Yin 1984: xi). Unlike Stenhouse and Crossley and Vulliamy, both Bromley and Yin think that it is possible to employ case studies in formulating general principles and developing comprehensive theories. They do not equate case study research with ethnographic inquiry, but perceive it as a distinct approach in the social sciences and are convinced that the production of valid, scientific knowledge is possible by studying individual cases.

### 3.2 Bromley: a plea to get beyond the unique individual

Bromley refers to both Stenhouse and Crossley and Vulliamy. He observes that in education, the case study method has not been clearly defined, as: 'it has been bracketed, somewhat vaguely, with participant observation, qualitative studies, ethnography, and field studies' (Bromley 1986: 22).

Bromley, a psychologist, selects examples of case study research from a wide array of other academic disciplines, ranging from business studies to psychiatry. Bromley states that common feature of all these different sorts of case is that they are singular, naturally occurring events in the real world and points to the common inductive reasoning that can be found in those diverse fields, claiming that:

'A basic logic or methodology underlies case studies in these diverse areas. A particular set of events and relationships is identified. This 'case' is then described, analysed, interpreted and evaluated within a framework of ideas and procedures appropriate to cases of that sort' (Bromley 1986: ix).

Bromley himself is essentially concerned with case studies of individuals, or better segments from individual life-histories. The term 'case study' to a psychologist means the study of an individual person, usually in a problematic situation, over a relatively short period of time (Bromley 1986: ix). From this definition it may seem that Bromley only is concerned with the particularities of individual persons. However, while admitting that the value of the case study approach is that it deals directly with the individual case in its actual real-life context, he also underlines the importance of studying such single cases for subsequent theory development. According to Bromley, the study of individual cases 'carries implications about the extent to which the resulting analysis is applicable to other similar cases' (Bromley 1986: xi). He underlines, although recognizing the intrinsic uniqueness of single cases, the need for and possibility of general theory development, stating that: 'in the final analysis, of course, each case is unique; but if a case is to be explained, or if two or more cases are to be compared, then abstract and general terms are needed' (Bromley 1986: 15).

### 3.3 Yin: case study research as a distinct strategy

The contribution of Yin to case study methodology is less specifically aimed at psychologists, as Yin addresses the social sciences at large. According to Yin the case study method has, unfortunately, often been associated and confused with qualitative research methods in general and ethnography and participant observation in particular, thereby receiving little status in positivist social science research.<sup>3</sup> According to Yin though, it deserves a distinct place within social science methodology, as it is a rigorous method of research. As a distinct research strategy, and not to be confused with ethnography, it is highly relevant when studying contemporary social phenomena. Of the diverse strategies of conducting research:

'In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when „how“ or „why“ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context' (Yin 1984: 13).

According to Yin, the case study method can be used for all purposes of social science research, whether these are descriptive, exploratory or explanatory. He explicitly distinguishes the case study method from qualitative research:



‘The essence of qualitative research consists of two conditions: (a) the use of close-up, detailed observation of the natural world by the investigator, and (b) the attempt to avoid prior commitment to any theoretical model. (...) However, this type of research does not always produce case studies (...), nor are case studies always limited to these two conditions. Instead, case studies can be based (...) entirely on quantitative evidence; in addition, case studies need not always include direct, detailed observations as a source of evidence’ (Yin 1984: 25).

Table 1: Four major case study designs (Source: Yin 1984: 46)

	Single-case designs	Multiple-case designs
Holistic (single unit of analysis)	TYPE 1	TYPE 3
Embedded (multiple units of analysis)	TYPE 2	TYPE 4

The case study method should be conceived as a distinct research strategy, separate from qualitative research at large, though perhaps employing qualitative methods. When employing case studies, Yin underscores the importance of developing theory prior to the collection of data. Such theoretical statements do not have to have the status nor the formality of ‘grand theories’. Formulating theoretical statements or merely ‘embryonic’ ideas beforehand, however, is essential, because these ideas will ‘increasingly cover the questions, propositions, units of analysis, logic connecting data to propositions, and criteria for interpreting the findings – that is the five components of the needed research design’ (Yin 1984: 36). Yin discerns four major case study designs. Two important criteria are used: (1) the question whether only one case included in the design or more than one; and (2) the question whether only one unit of analysis is used or more than one. These criteria result in a matrix of four designs (table 1).

The main drawback of case study research, according to positivists, has been the difficulty of generalising from single cases to a larger population. The priority of the social sciences is not the description and analysis of particular events, but with the explanation of social phenomena at large. The following section of this paper addresses this problem of generalisability and the potentials of using the case study method, in the definition of Bromley and Yin, in comparative education research.

## 4. The problem of generalisability and case study design choices

### 4.1 Research scope and generalisability

Before entering any discussion about the tricky concept of ‘generalisability’, one should reflect the scope of the research undertaken. Swanborn underscores that an important question in making decisions about the use of case studies often is not asked: do we focus on the *case-as-such* or do we want reach a higher level of analysis?<sup>14</sup> The former situation often occurs in a context of educational evaluation and policy-driven research. A case is studied for the sake of the case itself, and the researcher has no ambition whatsoever to go

beyond the particularities of the case. In the latter situation, the case is supposed to say something about a larger domain of settings and contexts. Swanborn calls this the *pars-pro-toto* case study. This is the kind of case study research both Bromley and Yin attempt to contribute to. Comparative education, by its nature, may more interested in *pars-pro-toto* case studies than in *case-as-such* studies. However, before starting a case study we may actually want to reflect critically whether it is going to be a *case-as-such* or a *pars-pro-toto* case. The scope of the study should be addressed prior to any decisions are made regarding research questions and design. When we study a *case-as-such*, and there is nothing wrong with doing that, the aspect of generalisability becomes irrelevant. However, if we want to be able to produce knowledge that is valid in 'other cases', we will have to explicitly show how such knowledge is produced by our study.

This problem of generalisability has received ample attention in social science methodology. Typically, the term 'generalisability' refers to the issue whether results found in a specific study are valid in other contexts as well. Kerlinger, for example, defines the term as answering the question if we can generalise the results of a study to other subjects, other groups, and other conditions?<sup>5</sup> This definition of generalisability has severe consequences for the conduct of scientific social research. The research design should address external validity. As such, the notion of generalisability of research results has in particular been judged as essential in basic research, as basic researchers are interested in formulating and testing theoretical propositions that ideally generalise across time and space. Although many applied researchers have limited their scope somewhat, the idea of generalisability has also informed their work. For researchers studying contemporary social phenomena this usually has meant that they draw a sample from a larger population (using specific techniques in order to obtain a representative sample), followed by testing hypotheses that, if they are accepted, can be generalised to the population. In comparative education, the IEA-studies and the 'effective schools paradigm' are classical examples of this approach. This approach to the study of contemporary educational processes leads to the formulation of general theoretical principles.

#### 4.2 Case law, analytic generalisation and purposeful sampling

How to develop such general principles from single cases? When engaging in *pars-pro-toto* case study research, the aspect of generalisability will have to be addressed. For Bromley investigating single cases is a process that, in an essentially inductive way, leads to the formulation of general principles and, ultimately, theory development:

'Rather than working from the top down (...), from abstract theory to individual instance or particular rule, the case method (...) works from the bottom up, from the analysis of particular cases (...) to „types“ of case (cases of greater generality) through the development of „case law“' (Bromley 1986: xii).

'Case law' is a metaphor for the appearing conceptual framework, developed through a process of theoretical advancement, and reached by in-depth studying of one case and subsequent analysis of other cases. Bromley states that: 'there comes a time when the developing conceptual framework seems to impose a satisfactory pattern of meaning, such that consideration of subsequent cases adds little or nothing to the analysis' (Bromley 1986: 3). For the development of such case law, Bromley proposes the so-called 'quasi-judicial method', an approach to the investigation of singular events or instances, that combines features of judicial procedure and the scientific method. Bromley calls this 'a

way of solving scientific and professional problems raised by the occurrence of actions and circumstances. It attempts to apply rigorous reasoning in the interpretation of empirical evidence systematically collected' (Bronley 1986: 9).

Yin also thinks it is feasible to study cases in order to contribute to theory development. With regard to generalisability of results he distinguishes between analytic generalisation on the one hand and statistical generalisation on the other. While the former is typical for case study research, the latter is the common definition of generalisation, as described above:

'Case studies (...) are generalisable to theoretical prepositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study (...) does not represent a „sample“, and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalise theories (analytic generalisation) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalisation)' (Yin 1984: 21).

This concept of generalisation is fundamentally different from the classic concept in the social sciences. Yin underlines this difference as follows:

'The external validity problem has been a major barrier in doing case studies. Critics typically state that single cases offer a poor basis for generalising. However, such critics are implicitly contrasting the situation to survey research, where a „sample“ (if selected correctly) readily generalises to a larger universe. This analogy to samples and universes is incorrect when dealing with case studies. This is because survey research relies on statistical generalisation, whereas case studies (...) rely on analytical generalisation' (Yin 1984: 43).

Analytic generalisation thus is another problem than the difficulty researchers face when generalising from a sample to a population or universe<sup>6</sup>. Generalising to theory, according to Yin, relies on replication logic, which involves the use of multiple cases, as in experimental settings, when several experiments strengthen the theory that is being developed. The number of cases is not depending on their 'representativeness', but on the theoretical considerations for selecting them. A similar reasoning can be found in the contrast Patton sees between 'probability sampling' and 'purposeful sampling':

'The logic and power of probability sampling depends on selecting a truly random and statistically representative sample that will permit confident generalisation from the sample to a larger population (...). The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling' (Patton 1990: 169).

Yin describes, with adequate examples, how to select cases and how to relate the results of case study research to further theory development (Yin 1984: 3–28). In all instances, the capacity of the researcher to combine the conduct of case studies with adequate theoretical analysis is of major importance. Or, as Bromley summarizes, the generalisation from the single case is based on the validity of the analysis, and not on a prior notion about its representativeness (Bromley 1986: 288). The case study researcher should therefore account for the selection of one or more information-rich cases and consider, prior to data-analysis, their significance for theory development. Such design choices should be made explicitly in comparative education research.

### 4.3 Making design choices in comparative education

How can the work of Bromley and Yin be fruitfully employed in comparative education? As was shown in section 2 of this paper, much of the work done in comparative education actually is the study of a single foreign educational system or phenomenon. This work has hardly been informed by a well-founded methodological view on the use of cases. Conscientious reflection about the case study design is often limited. When conducting *pars-pro-toto* case study, what sort of choices about the design does a comparative educationist face?

The first design choice is the number of cases to be studied. As was argued above, a single country study may perfectly well be considered a 'comparative education' study, as long as the theoretical analysis of it is convincing. Employing more than one case may be a more challenging undertaking, but it should not be regarded as a necessary condition for a meaningful comparative education study. When does one decide to study only one case? A number of situations may lead to this decision. One situation occurs when a case is considered unique by the researcher, for example a school employing a radically innovative pedagogy. However, also new educational policies, contemporary curricula, an original change process may justify a single-case study. The theoretical reasoning around such a case, however, should account for its uniqueness and relate this information-rich case to general notions.

Another situation results from the objective to review an existing theory: one case is studied in-depth to assess to what extent the theory is able to explain the case. Results from this one case study will accept, reject or at least modify the theory?

Two or more case studies will be included in the research design when the researcher wants to show that a theory is valid in a wider variety of situations. Yin refers to this as 'replication logic', whereas Bromley calls it 'the development of case law'. It involves a multiple case study design.

The second design choice is which cases to include in such a multiple case study. The selection of cases (or 'purposeful' sampling) results from the researcher's objectives. If a comparative educationist wants to show, without prior theoretical notion, the existing variety of for example minority schooling, second language instruction, educational management or any other topic, a number of diverse case studies from different educational systems may be presented. A typology may result from such a design.

When more stringent theory development is aimed for, the choice of cases is crucial. The formulation of theoretical statements beforehand will help selecting cases. One option is to choose two or more really dissimilar cases and contrast them with each other, thus exploring the variety of possible important aspects, factors, relations, etcetera. An example would be a study of factors contributing to successful educational innovation, in which two radically different cases are compared: one case representing a successful implementation and another case describing a failure. Another option is to minimalise the differences and study relative similar cases, only differing from each other in one aspect. An example would be a study of school management in centrally organized versus decentrally organized educational systems. Swanborn proposes the use of the 'independent and dependent variables'-terminology when making design decisions about cases, as reflection of causes and effects would facilitate the choice of relevant cases. He proposes to select cases on causes and is opposed to selecting cases on effects, because of the 'uncontrolled' variables thus entering. Two principles of case selection he suggests are to minimize

variance of (presumed) causes in order to elaborate theory, aiming at its basic features and the reliability of conclusions, and, subsequently, to maximize variance of (presumed) causes in order to review the theory and expand its domain (Swanborn 1994: 332).

Swanborn adds the option of selecting cases in different stages of a longitudinal development process. This option may be of interest to comparative education and deserves further consideration.

The third design choice is the way in which the cases will be dealt with: the procedure of case analysis. This procedure, as the choice of cases, is much helped by prior theoretical reasoning, even if only in the form of 'embryonic' ideas. Two procedures of analysis can be mentioned: case-comparison and controlled-comparison (Swanborn 1994: 332). The first involves the description and analysis of a range of cases, either simultaneously or subsequently, followed by analytic generalisation. The second is analysing one case, developing a temporary theoretical model, analysing a second case using this model, adjusting it, and thus obtaining a theory that covers all cases under study.

The fourth design choice is the level of description. How detailed should a researcher report on the cases studied? Case study research can rely on either qualitative or quantitative methods, or a combination of these. Research instruments may therefore vary from open interviews and observation to the examination of documents, content analysis and the use of surveys. The advantage of comparative education is that the nature of much research requires both in-depth analysis of single cases and the comparison of several cases. In the terminology of Yin this signifies the use of single-case designs and multiple-case designs. When adding several layers of inquiry, for example the levels of educational policy making and curriculum change, the four types of case study design as identified by Yin are covered (see table 1). An in-depth analysis of a single case, in particular when employing qualitative methods, will result in a detailed case-description. When more cases are included, the level of description will undoubtedly shift to more condensed, summarizing accounts. Quantitative methods, such as multi-variate analysis and multi-level analysis may be particularly useful in multiple case study designs.

## 5 Summary and concluding remarks

Although the expression 'case study' has frequently been used by comparative educationists and much of their work has in fact been the study of one specific educational system or phenomenon, the methodological debate in comparative education has rarely included cautious reflection on the use of case studies. In general, positivists have granted little importance to the use of individual case studies. Within a cultural relativist and phenomenological standpoint the case study has been equalled to ethnographic inquiry. For them, the conduct of a case study signifies the 'illumination of the particular'. The development of general theory has been of minor interest to them.

A theoretical shift to a more appropriate definition of 'case study' is required. The contradiction between the unique and the general, that is idiographic description versus nomothetic law may need to be overcome. For comparative education, an integrative epistemological view is needed. We need 'general' knowledge of educational development, but also 'particular' knowledge of single educational systems, their historical-cultural milieu and how actors experience their roles in this system. The case study approach advocated here, that is not tied to an ethnographic meaning, may offer such an integrative view. Bromley's and Yin's work, who delineate the use of cases as a separate research strategy

and do not equate it with ethnography, suggest that is conceivable to conduct case studies as a means of developing general principles. Methodological recommendations can be given for the generalisation to a more comprehensive theory. Design choices involved are the number of cases, the selection of cases, the procedure of analysis and the level of description.

If we study one or several cases in a comparative study, we can not simply remain at the descriptive level of the particularities of the case, although such 'particular' knowledge is and will remain highly relevant. We can not conclude our case studies with summing up some occasional 'lessons to be learned'. Perhaps we should not travel to yet another country or case too hastily, but more cautiously reflect on how this particular case can contribute to our general thinking about educational development. In addition, we may have to externalize the mental operations we are engaging in when reasoning about this case: how do we actually reach the 'general' level and how do we return to the case involved? We will have to reflect the issue of generalisation and make our reasoning and design choices explicit to each other.

As comparative educationists, for our melioristic mission to succeed it is necessary to travel between the general and the particular and, above all, provide each other with the maps of our journeys. Thus, a much needed 'general' body of 'lessons to be learned' will emerge, enriching our applied scholarship.

#### *Notes*

1. This paper originates from the 16th CESE-conference, Copenhagen, 1994 where an embryonic version was presented at the workshop for young researchers, conducted by Prof. Epstein of Ohio State University. A more elaborate version was submitted to the Commission of Theory and Theory Shifts of the World Congress on Comparative Education (Sydney, 1996). Thanks are due to Prof. Jürgen Schriewer, Humboldt University Berlin, for accepting the paper at this Commission and to Dr. Robert Cowen of the University of London for his valuable feed-back.
2. The author works at the NUFFIC, the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author alone and should by no means be attributed to the NUFFIC.
3. This practice of composing descriptive reports of foreign education ('Auslandspädagogik') has a long tradition, starting with the accounts early travellers gave of education abroad. These were followed by the educational expeditions of well-known early comparative educationists such as Mann, Arnold, Cousin and Thiersch: 'Nineteenth-century scholar-administrators, entrusted with the task of guiding policy in order to build up new national education systems, began a modern tradition of studying schools outside their own country, thus reviving a practice that goes back in Western-Europe at least to Erasmus, and even to Plato himself'. (Holmes 1990: 69).
4. Campbell remarks that 'the single case study (...) is in reality a comparison of two cases: the original culture and the foreign culture. But this is a very asymmetrical comparison (...)'. (Campbell 1975: 188).
5. Although a number of alternative ways of 'mapping' knowledge in comparative education have been proposed recently, I use Epstein's classification and terminology in this article. Epstein has given an overview of methodological frameworks in Epstein 1988.
6. Examples of this approach include the work of Lê Thành Khôi and Farrell. According to Lê Thành Khôi: 'a truly general theory of education would be based on an in-depth study of reciprocal relations between education and society in different types of historical civilizations (...) The goal of such an undertaking would be to arrive at a formulation of laws: laws that would not have the validity of those generated in experimental sciences but that would express relatively constant

relationships in space and time' (Lê Thành Khôi 1986: 217). This view is shared by Farrell who claims that: 'comparative data are essential to establishing the credibility of our theories, and hence of our explanations. Since we have little in the way of credible theory regarding education, most of our 'explanations' are partial and unverified (...). Comparative data do not simply enrich the explanation of single-country findings. Without them there cannot be adequate explanation. I am suggesting, then, that there can be no generalising scientific study of education which is not the comparative study of education' (Farrell 1986: 207 f.).

7. Masemann has focused on the conduct of ethnographic studies that are embedded in critical theory. She questions ethnographic research that is not driven by theoretical considerations and states that 'critical ethnography' refers to studies that: 'rely for their theoretical formulation on a body of theory deriving from critical sociology and philosophy' (Masemann 1986: 11).
8. The term 'ethnography of schooling' is employed by for example Spindler (1982).
9. Consider: '(...) Comparative education has paid too little attention to observation and description, preferring to emphasize such abstractions as statistics and measurements on the one hand and school 'systems' on the other' (Stenhouse 1979: 6). Instead, Stenhouse proposes that comparative educationists should develop: 'a better grounded representation of day-to-day educational reality resting on the careful study of particular cases' (Stenhouse 1979: 10).
10. The anthropological tradition is predominantly North American (e.g. Spindler 1982), while the sociological tradition is British of origin, and embedded in what has commonly been called the 'new sociology of education'. Curriculum and programme evaluation has traditionally been informed by an emphasis on the exact measurement of results, description of treatments and 'objective' judgement. Recent contributions to evaluation theory propose the use of case-studies from a relativist framework, see for example Guba and Lincoln (1989).
11. The contradiction between the unique and the general, that is idiographic description versus nomothetic law may have been overemphasized in epistemological and methodological discourse. Smelser emphasises that these two approaches 'do not call for different theoretical grounding-points' (Smelser 1976: 205) For comparative education, an integrative epistemological view is needed. We need 'general' knowledge of educational development, but also 'particular' knowledge of single educational systems, their historical-cultural milieu and how actors experience their roles in this system.
12. Bromley has dealt extensively with the use of cases as a basic feature of psychological inquiry in Bromley 1986. Yin has proposed the use of case studies in the social sciences in Yin 1984 of which a second and revised edition was published in 1989. I make reference to this edition. Yin has elaborated his views in Yin 1993.
13. Consider the way Yin describes the typical reaction to the conduct of case study research: 'The case study has long been stereotyped as a weak sibling among social science methods. Investigators who do case studies are regarded as having deviated from their academic disciplines; their investigations, as having insufficient precision (that is, quantification), objectivity, and rigor' (Yin 1984: 10).
14. Swanborn, of the University of Amsterdam, has critically reviewed Yin's work (Swanborn 1994). He uses a matrix of case study research that distinguishes between basic and applied research; and between 'case-as-such' and 'case-pro-toto' (Swanborn 1994: 334).
15. For Kerlinger's definition, see Kerlinger 1981. Kerlinger equates generalisability with external validity and with representativeness: 'A difficult criterion to satisfy, *external validity* means *representativeness* or *generalizability*' [italics in original] (Kerlinger 1981: 325).
16. Bromley remarks in this respect: 'The main point (...) is that the case laws (conceptual frameworks) arrived at are in no dependent upon prior considerations regarding representative sampling from a demographically defined population. That is a different approach to a different problem' (Bromley 1986: 3).
17. For such a case study the term 'crucial' is used, as with experiments that will reject or accept a theory (refer to Yin 1984, for a number of examples). A third situation for a single case study

design is the 'revelatory' case: a researcher, by exception, is able to study a situation or phenomenon normally not subject to inquiry (Swanborn 1994: 326).

18. This procedure is very similar to what Bromley calls 'case-law'. Bromley emphasises the in-depth study of one case, followed by inductively formulating a conceptual framework and subsequently analysing other cases, thus enriching the framework or theory. 'Controlled-comparison' refers to a more deductive procedure, in which a theoretical model is formulated, to which cases are selected for their resemblance in important aspects. The explanatory factors can thus be found only in the theoretical model, as other factors are controlled for by the resemblances. For an introduction to this procedure in comparative social science, refer to: Smelser (1976: 215–219).

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