Comparative, International and Global Perspectives on Education

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Professor Michael Crossley, 9 February 2006
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Bridging Cultures and Traditions: Perspectives from Comparative and International Research in Education

A professorial address at the University of Bristol, 9 February 2006

Michael Crossley
Professor of Comparative & International Education
Graduate School of Education
email: m.crossley@bristol.ac.uk
Small, D (2005) 'The challenge of being a critic and conscience in the 'one size fits all' world', seminar presented at the University of Bristol, 24 November.


Sutherland, M, Watson, K & Crossley, M (2006) 'The British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE)', in M Bray, V Masemann & M Manzon (eds) Common Interests, Uncommon Goals: Histories of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies and its Members, Hong Kong: Centre for Comparative Education Research, the University of Hong Kong, and Dordrecht: Springer.


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Samoff, J (1998) 'Education sector analysis in Africa: limitations of national control and even less national ownership', paper presented to the 10th World Congress of Comparative Education Societies


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**Bridging Cultures and Traditions: Perspectives from Comparative and International Research in Education**

**Introduction**

Today's lecture is the last in a series of four on the broad theme of *Comparative International and Global Perspectives on Education*. In this presentation I will identify and explore a number of core themes that illustrate aspects of the Graduate School of Education's distinctive contribution to the multidisciplinary field of comparative and international education. In doing so, I will draw upon my own recent work on the history and development of the field, and upon a selection of studies carried out over a 25 year period in the South Pacific, the Caribbean and Africa.

It is argued that, especially in these increasingly globalised times, disciplined comparative and international research can contribute much to the development of theory and methodology - as well as to the improvement of policy and practice in education worldwide. For this to be realised it is maintained that ongoing efforts to challenge and 'reconceptualise' the field deserve sustained support - and increased attention to what I have previously identified as a more effective 'bridging of cultures and traditions' (Crossley 2000). The core of the lecture examines various dimensions of this 'bridging' thesis in greater depth and points to possible ways forward for those engaged in advancing the future of comparative and international research in education and in the social sciences more generally. A central, and deceptively simple, question that is posed - and one that should appeal to the widest of audiences - is how can we best learn from experience elsewhere?
A revitalised field

Comparative and international research is currently attracting increased attention within the social sciences, the arts and the humanities. Efforts are also being made to share experience across disciplinary boundaries, to encourage multidisciplinary collaboration and to promote systematic training in comparative methodologies. In the field of law, for example, it has recently been argued that training should include comparative studies and that:

Being trained only in national law makes us take things for granted. By looking outside, we challenge our own ways of thinking, learn from our mistakes and are encouraged to do better (Rauxloh 2004: 60).

Underpinning this revitalisation are changing geo-political relations, the intensification of globalisation, dramatic advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) and paradigmatic developments across the social sciences. The revitalisation of the field of comparative and international education has been particularly dramatic during the last decade. This has also been characterised by a strong research orientation and by the creation of new comparative research centres in leading universities that include Hong Kong, Oxford, Nottingham and Bristol. To this we can add the worldwide growth of national comparative and international education societies and the buoyant expansion of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) (Schweisfurth 1999; Bray 2003). The latter umbrella body unites scholars and practitioners from 33 national, sub-national, regional and language based societies to provide a forum through which different groups and individuals can bring 'comparative education to bear on the major educational problems of the day, by fostering co-operation by...
Reflecting this growth the 12th World Congress convened by the WCCES and Cuban colleagues, held in Havana during October 2004, proved to be the largest to date. Adopting the theme of *Education and Social Justice* the event attracted over 1,000 participants from 68 countries, including a large delegation from Bristol. This was the first WCCES Congress to be held in the Caribbean and the first in a Spanish speaking country. Most significantly, the event was personally supported by Head of State, Fidel Castro. This helped to stimulate a nationwide debate through a sequence of local seminars and workshops designed to involve Cuban communities in pre-conference meetings. Comparative research in education was, in this way, taken well beyond the worlds of the academic and the policy-maker, deep into the towns, villages and homes of Cuba.

For the wider general public perhaps the most visible manifestation of the contemporary impact of comparative research in education has emerged in the shape of cross-national studies of educational achievement, and the widespread influence of related league tables. In the 1990s, for example, much public debate in the UK focussed upon the findings of Reynolds and Farrell’s (1996) study *Worlds Apart? A Review of International Surveys of Educational Achievement Including England*. This UK Government supported research highlighted the achievements of Pacific Rim countries, such as Taiwan and Singapore, in international league tables of school achievement. The authors concluded by suggesting that the UK has much to learn from the more formalistic, whole class, approaches to teaching and learning carried out in such contexts. More recently the results of the OECD-led Performance in International Student Achievement (PISA) studies,
investigating the abilities of 15 year old students in 32 countries, has attracted similar worldwide attention from policy-makers, practitioners, the media and the wider public (OECD 2001, 2004).

Somewhat paradoxically, what is less widely recognised is the fact that it is the comparative and international research community that has been most critical of such cross-national achievement studies. Hannu Simola, for example, Professor of Education at the University of Helsinki in Finland, challenges Finland’s strong results in the PISA survey in an article recently published in the journal *Comparative Education*. In this she draws attention to the limitations of overly formalistic pedagogic cultures and practices, and questions whether international surveys:

... really make it possible to understand schooling in different countries, or whether they are just part of the processes of ‘international spectacle’ and ‘mutual accountability’ (Simola 2005: 455).

The key point being made here is that as new researchers, research users and audiences have contributed to the revitalisation of interest in comparative and international studies - new dangers and pitfalls have also emerged. Comparative surveys and league tables may be fascinating, but they can also be misleading, damaging and political sensitive, as the following quotation relating to higher education in Malaysia indicates:

**RANKINGS SPARK DEBATE ABROAD.** The *Times Higher’s* second World University Rankings have fuelled debate in countries concerned about the future of their higher education systems.
compromise or bland search for consensus. Rather, as argued at length elsewhere (Crossley & Watson 2003), it prioritises and values the ongoing creativity and originality that the juxtaposition of different world views may generate - as well as an improved awareness of the implications of cultural and contextual differences.

Context
Finally, my third conclusion returns to the question raised at the outset, about how we might best learn from experience elsewhere. Drawing upon her long and distinguished career in China, Ruth Hayhoe (2005) makes a helpful contribution by applying the work of leading Chinese comparativist Gu Mingyuan (2001). Professor Gu's work also calls for improved understandings between cultures and acknowledges 'the remarkable capacity of Confucian culture to accommodate other cultures and absorb some of their best elements into itself' (Hayhoe 2005: 582). According to Hayhoe, this is not through the simple copying or borrowing of ideas, but through a critically informed dialectic, sensitive to cultural identity and contextual differences. In this light, it is argued here that we can, indeed, learn much from experience elsewhere, but to cite Stenhouse (1979: 5-6) this is best done in ways that help to 'tutor our judgement' - recognising that comparative research 'deals with insight rather than law as a basis for understanding'. My own work reflects these perspectives, challenges uncritical international transfer and suggests that 'context matters' more than is often realised, not only by policy-makers, but also by many researchers working in education and across the social sciences (Crossley & Jarvis 2001).

It can be seen how sensitivity to culture and context, combined with strong collaborative research traditions, has helped to shape a response was especially vigorous in Malaysia, where opposition politicians have used the rankings, published on October 28, to criticise the government for the low international status of the country's universities. Lim Kit Siang, a Malaysian MP and a leading light in the opposition DAP party, described the rankings as 'a global blow'.

The University of Malaya fell 80 places from 89 to 169, while the other Malaysian university to feature in 2004, Sains, dropped out of the top 200 after being in 111th place last year.

Mr Kit Siang calls for a Royal Commission to look at the crisis (Martin Ince, Times Higher, 11 November 2005: 3).

Harold Noah's (1986) classic cautionary advice about the 'use and abuse' of comparative education certainly deserves both an updating and wider readership in days when it is too easily assumed that 'we are all comparativists now'. Yes it is good to see boundaries between disciplines and specialisms blurring, and to see new organisations and personnel engaging in comparative and international research - but this is a field with distinguished traditions, an extensive literature, and distinctive insights and perspectives. Recognising both its theoretical and applied traditions and potential, for example, King (1965: 147) long ago warned that 'If we do not pay proper attention to this latter aspect of Comparative Education as a social science, other people will. They may not then call their work Comparative Education, but will nevertheless work over our proper concerns without benefit of our insights.' There is, therefore, much to be learned by those new to working in such arenas if the mistakes of the past are not to be reworked or repeated. By way of illustration, Konai Helu Thaman's
research at the University of the South Pacific has done much to challenge the imposition (and frequent failure) of western inspired curriculum innovation within the Pacific region. For her, repeated and rapid aid driven change is part of the curriculum problem throughout the region, and her own work argues, with strong Tongan conviction, for a more culture-sensitive model of curriculum development for the South Pacific (Thaman 1993; 1999).

At the heart of many comparativists' criticisms of international surveys, league tables and externally generated development projects is, firstly, a heightened awareness of the significance of culture and context in understanding and pursuing educational research and educational development (Broadfoot 1993; Crossley 1999). Secondly, theoretically informed approaches to comparative and international research have long emphasised the dangers of the uncritical international transfer of educational policy and practice (Phillips & Ochs 2003). Here I cannot resist quoting Sir Michael Sadler's now famous Guildford lecture (delivered way back at the start of the 20th century) on the theme, How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education? Sadler is widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of the field of comparative education, and his influence lives on today. In 1900 he wrote:

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant … but if we have endeavoured, in a sympathetic spirit, to understand the real working of a foreign system of education, we shall in turn find reporting that:

… our individual and collective efforts to achieve dialogue between theorists/researchers and policy makers/practitioners are not likely to be easy. Nevertheless, like the goal of a world characterised by peace, freedom and justice, the goal of dialogue between and among theorists and researchers on the one hand, and policy-makers and practitioners, on the other, is one for which we should struggle.

Difference
My second broad conclusion emphasises that the bridging of cultures and traditions envisaged here celebrates and values difference - and applies comparative perspectives and processes to generate new creativity. Bakhtin's understanding of such processes is helpful in this respect when he suggests that:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning … We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we see answers to our questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths … such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched (Bakhtin 1986: 7).

In this light, while our bridging process may encourage a blurring of boundaries between constituencies, paradigms and personnel - this does not equate in any way to an intellectual or professional
impact within the social sciences themselves.

*Dialogue*

The first of my three concluding points is therefore that improved dialogue is central to the conception of bridging that is advocated here. As Reimers and McGinn (1997) suggest in their book *Informed Dialogue: using research to shape education policy around the world*, because research-based knowledge is constructed within specific value frameworks, policy decisions cannot be based solely on research-based evidence. Instead they call for 'informed dialogue' across cultural and professional boundaries, suggesting that:

Research can bring fresh air and new perspectives, but it has to be incorporated into a process of communication so that it informs the meanings of this collective construction of educational problems and options (Reimers & McGinn 1997: 26).

The consideration of alternative policy options they also argue:

... should take place not within the simplified environment of the analyst but in the real world where concrete persons and groups express these multiple interests (Reimers & McGinn 1997: 27).

This resonates well with Gibbons et al's (1994) view that contemporary modes of knowledge production are increasingly characterised by the collaboration of different stakeholders and by a flow back and forth between the theoretical and the practical. Such bridging is, however, difficult to achieve in practice as the various studies considered here indicate, and as Ginsburg and Gorostiaga (2001: 196) emphasise in

ourselves better able to enter into the spirit and tradition of our own national education, more sensitive to its unwritten ideals, quicker to catch the signs which threaten it and the subtle workings of hurtful change (Sadler 1900: 49).

My own recent work (Crossley 1999; Crossley & Watson 2003) suggests that the dangers of uncritical international transfer have intensified with the advent of modern technologies. Today, for example, new policy proposals formulated in one context can be instantly transferred across the globe where they may find an immediate (if not appropriate) application (Vulliamy 2004). Comparativists, policy-makers and practitioners today also face a potential avalanche of information - a far cry from Sadler's era when access to foreign policy documentation and experience was a major challenge for those working in comparative fields. Transfer can also be seen to operate in other influential ways, including the movement of ideas, models and principles from one sector of life to another - perhaps most notably in current times, from the world of business to education - bringing with it similar possibilities and dilemmas.

These are, therefore, exciting and challenging times for comparative and international research in many fields. Times when innovative developments in theories, methodologies, organisations and substantive issues for investigation are being made - and when the contextually sensitive insights and perspectives of disciplined and critical comparative analysis have much to offer in what has been called our 'one size fits all world' (see, for example, Small 2005).
A personal engagement

My own interest in comparative and international research was stimulated by three main factors. The first, shared with my wife Anne, was a desire to see the world and to travel to the Pacific. Secondly, stories of education in Papua New Guinea, told by friends then studying with us at the University of London, played a part in inspiring a focus for future work. Thirdly, practical experience teaching in UK secondary schools during the 1970s generated a strong personal critique of the impact of changing educational policies on practising teachers - and of the ways in which research itself too often failed to capture the realities and practical implications of teaching and learning at that time.

Subsequent doctoral research, undertaken in the early 1980s from La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, facilitated the travel and focussed upon the transfer of British school-based curriculum development strategies to Papua New Guinea. The fieldwork component for this research built upon work by writers such as Lacey (1970) and Burgess (1983) and included one of the first in-depth, qualitative case studies of a secondary school engaged in educational innovation in a low-income country context (Crossley 1984).

The location for the fieldwork was Kagua Provincial High School in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. As can be seen from the following map, Kagua is located at 5,000 feet above sea level in a very isolated part of one of the least travelled mountain ranges in the world.

Map of Papua New Guinea

This was a formative period in many ways, since the Southern Highlands was first contacted by the western world as late as the 1950s, Lyla Brown's recently completed work extends the examination of partnership processes in the OECS, again utilising a collaborative framework that generated insider perspectives and strong support from within St Lucia. In considering factors that hinder the effectiveness of many development partnerships, this study builds upon a critique of the western pace of change that has emerged from experience in each of the three collaborative research and evaluation projects discussed earlier (see Crossley & Watson 2003: 80-81). However, the theoretical dimension of time as a concept and resource in development cooperation is explored here in considerable depth, in ways that have direct relevance for policy-makers striving to improve the success of international partnerships. Further comparative and international research on differing conceptions and uses of time could have significant implications for future development research, and for the bridging of cultures thesis itself - and, I suggest, for many organisations and individuals who are currently experiencing the political and professional ramifications of rapid change in our globalising world.

Conclusions

What is required is genuine dialogue among partners who not only talk but also listen and hear (Samoff 1998: 24).

In concluding here it is tempting to include far too many complexities and issues for comfortable digestion. I will therefore be mindful of this and try be both concise and accessible. Indeed, I would argue that this is in itself an important conclusion - since improved clarity and accessibility is essential if the findings of research in any field (comparative or otherwise) are to bridge the varied cultures and traditions of the growing diversity of contemporary stakeholders and audiences. And if the global democratisation process is to have an
by its own scholars and researchers or preferably in collaboration with others from outside the region, would add to the data available for use by the international community (Louisy 2001: 436).

By building up a network of small states’ scholars engaged in education, the GSoE has worked hard to support such initiatives, to generate more critical perspectives on the development priorities of small states, and to contribute to improved cross-cultural understanding in this arena.

A sequence of three doctoral studies on education in St Lucia and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) by Louisy (1993), Holmes (2001) and Brown (2006) illustrate this well and show how efforts have increasingly been made to work in collaboration with St Lucian personnel, and to explore research priorities collectively identified within the nation and wider Caribbean region. Louisy’s own research combined macro and micro level analyses and examined the potential for stronger regional higher education partnerships within the Caribbean. She continues as an active member of the Research Group to the present day, bridging the research cultures of Bristol and St Lucia, and facilitating continuity, field access and collaborative relationships for both Keith Holmes and Lyla Brown. The study carried out by Holmes built upon Louisy’s call for more effective partnerships and for greater legitimisation of local forms of knowledge. In doing so he worked in close collaboration with Ministry of Education personnel, adopted a postcolonial theoretical framework, and developed a critical analysis of the influence of western research and development paradigms in St Lucia and the Caribbean. To cite his own words ‘This raises questions about how knowledge for educational development is produced and whose interests are served’ (Holmes 1999: 1).

and when I first arrived there Papua New Guinea had only recently gained its independence from Australia in 1975. In 1980 Kagua was a relatively new, rural high school with 280 pupils, 11 staff and strong community links.

Photograph of Kagua

Findings from this research (some produced in collaboration with another visiting researcher and friend by the name of Graham Vulliamy) contributed to the ongoing development of curriculum policy in the Papua New Guinea National Department of Education (Crossley & Vulliamy 1986) Subsequently there came an invitation to join the staff of the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) (with a second desk and role as a curriculum officer located within the Ministry of Education). This was to launch a new programme to support the work of teachers involved in curriculum innovation. Here was a direct bridge between the ministry and the university.

Going to work each day was, I should add, a little different to that in Bristol. One memorable occasion that may illustrate the importance of context, required a visit to supervise a student working within his school on the island of Manus - the place where the anthropologist Margaret Mead did much of her New Guinea fieldwork (Mead 1930). Here is a rough itinerary:
The influence of much rewarding work undertaken in Papua New Guinea during this time can be seen in different ways throughout my subsequent research in Bristol - and through an almost continuous string of postgraduate/doctoral students that have since followed me to the GSoE from Papua New Guinea. One particular vignette illustrates this continuity well. Rushing in late to a seminar presented by Roger Dale on his arrival in Bristol in 1999 I quickly found a seat at the back of the room. At the end of the presentation I was tapped on the shoulder by a newly arrived doctoral student, sponsored by the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme. ‘Hello’ he said, ‘my name is Willie Yamuna Ako from Papua New Guinea, and you taught me social science in grade 7 at Kagua High School in 1980.’

I am happy to report that Dr Ako’s own research usefully challenged the imposition of western inspired education plans in the Southern Conference - and its promotion of basic education - legitimised the Bank’s 1990s investment in the BPEDP. This was despite the fact that many small states, including Belize, argued that primary education was less problematic for them, and less of a priority in their own development planning. The politics of the development process, nevertheless, linked prospects for financial support to the acceptance of dominant ‘international’ agendas.

Part of the rationale for the Small States Research Group was to contribute to the strengthening of research capacity in such contexts, through partnerships and collaboration that would improve their ability to advance locally perceived priorities in international arenas. For this a ‘bridging’ of world views was essential.

As Dame Pearlette Louisy, a founder member of the research group and current Head of State for St Lucia, has since argued:
in perspectives that are increasingly regarded as the hallmark of disciplined, context sensitive, comparative and international research.

Today the influence and potential of such collaborative approaches to research are being explored further in the context of a new DFID funded Research Programme Consortium (RPC) led by Leon Tikly. This focuses upon studies designed to help improve the quality of education in low income countries, and the mode of operation continues to foreground long-term, international partnerships and research capacity strengthening (Crossley 2006). The RPC is thus an overtly collaborative initiative centred on partnerships between the University of Bristol, the University of Bath, the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the Kigali Institute of Education in Rwanda, the University of the Cape Coast, Ghana, and Witwatersrand University in South Africa (RPC 2005). This points to an exciting new phase of development research for all involved.

2. Educational development in small states
A second sequence of studies that helps to illustrate the potential of the bridging thesis, draws attention to the GSoE’s Education in Small States Research Group, and to cumulative work carried out by a succession of doctoral research students since the group was founded in 1994. The origins of this initiative lie in Bristol partnerships established with Belizean colleagues, with St Lucian researchers and with the Commonwealth Secretariat in the early 1990s. At that point in time, many of the small states of the Commonwealth (those with less than 1.5 million people) were increasingly concerned about the dominance of large state perspectives and priorities in the agendas pursued by influential development agencies (Bray & Packer 1993). In Belize, for example, the influence of the World Bank supported Jomtien Highlands, and he completed his doctorate successfully in 2003. Moreover, I am currently an adviser to a health education project that he and Dr Jane Fitzpatrick (another Bristol Graduate working at the University of the West of England) are carrying out with success in the poorest communities of Port Moresby (the capital city) and the Southern Highlands. This is a project that is grounded in field research and development theory, but one that has provided practical health training and basic medical resources that are currently saving lives in practice at the grass roots level. Another example, perhaps of our bridging theme emerging? ‘Grass Roots’ is, by the way, the name of an infamous cartoon character who appears regularly in the daily newspaper of Papua New Guinea - the Post Courier.

‘Grass Roots’ cartoon

From this slide you may be able to guess why the Post Courier is advertised as “the best smoke in the Pacific”.

It took an invitation from the University of Bristol for me to apply for a post in the then School of Education - received in Papua New Guinea via a new technology called a fax - to entice the now growing Crossley family to return to the UK from the Pacific. This we did in April 1990.

At that point in time the School of Education had a long and distinguished tradition of teaching, research and consultancy in education and international development dating back to the 1950s. This was led by Roger Garrett and was supported by strong links with the Overseas Development Administration (now the Department for International Development, DFID), and other international agencies such as the British Council. This was complemented by a strong
comparative research profile focusing upon a sequence of European studies directed by Patricia Broadfoot and sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (see Broadfoot et al 1993).

These parallel but related international and comparative traditions within the University reflected the intellectual and professional differences and divisions that then characterised the broader field of international and comparative education. As writers such as Wilson (1994) have argued, the 'international' tradition has most often been characterised by applied, policy related studies carried out in low-income countries; while 'comparative education' has a tradition more directly associated with detached, theoretical analyses of education in more prosperous industrialised contexts such as North America, Europe and Japan. Although this characterisation over simplifies an inevitably more complex situation, it does draw attention to a number of significant polarisations that have had a marked impact upon the history and development of the field. And it is to the implications of such issues that I now turn.

Bridging cultures and traditions

In the light of the above, I will now focus more directly upon the nature of the bridging of cultures and traditions thesis - and upon its potential for the strengthening of comparative research in education and the social sciences. Firstly, I will sketch out the origins, nature and scope of the bridging rationale, with reference to related organisational developments in the UK and here in Bristol. Secondly, I will try to demonstrate how this theoretical positioning has worked out in practice, in the form of two sequences of related research programmes. The first of these draws upon my collaborative work in the arena of research and evaluation capacity strengthening in the South. The second is related to combining insiders familiar with the cultural contexts involved, with outsiders who can bring fresh and challenging perspectives - a strategy much commended in the international literature (Spindler & Spindler 1982; Osborn et al 2003). In the Belizean and Kenyan studies emphasis was also placed on involving practitioners in forms of participatory or action research and evaluation. This is consistent with Delanty's (1997) proposal for social research to be conceptualised as 'discursive practice', whereby problems are democratically identified, defined and examined. In a related vein, Chambers, an advocate of participatory research in development work, calls for the researcher's role to be transformed in similar ways so that:

> From planning, issuing orders, transferring technology and supervising, they shift to convening, facilitating, searching for what people need and supporting. From being teachers they become facilitators of learning (Chambers 1994: 34).

In these three studies bridges were thus built between the North and the South, between researchers, policy makers and practitioners, and between insiders and outsiders. In addition, all three studies were multidisciplinary in nature, provided research training that bridged paradigmatic boundaries, incorporated macro and micro levels of analysis and located contemporary policy critique within a thoroughly researched historical framework. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, each of these studies usefully illustrate the possibilities and dilemmas that are encountered when efforts are made to investigate development issues with increased sensitivity to what Armove and Torres (2003) call the 'dialectic of the global and the local'. In this respect we can see how these initiatives, designed partly to help strengthen local research and evaluation capacity, are firmly grounded.
The substantive findings of each specific study can be read elsewhere, but here it is more pertinent to explore how they collectively demonstrate different dimensions of the bridging thesis in practice. It is therefore the process goals and associated research strategies that are most illuminating for present purposes. In all three cases it can be seen that the research was carried out by international teams of researchers - emphasising long-term collaboration between organisations and personnel in both the North and the South. This had the advantage of

<table>
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<th>Project</th>
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| 1. The Belize Primary Education Development Project (1994-1999)         | University of Bristol  
Belize Ministry of Education  
Belize Teachers’ College  
University College, Belize  
National Curriculum Development Unit  
District education offices  
Participating schools                                                                 |
Kenyan Ministry of Education Science & Technology  
Kenyatta University Centre for British Teachers  
Participating schools  
Other private research agencies and consultants                          |
University of Bath  
University of Dar es Salaam  
Kigali Institute of Education, Rwanda                                        |

All projects were funded and supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID)

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In the UK, 1997 saw the creation of the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE). This resulted from the amalgamation of two former societies that previously served separate comparative and international constituencies (Watson 2001; Sutherland, Watson & Crossley 2006). Organisationally, this represented a bridging of the two academic and professional cultures that are noted above - the comparative and the international. As a member of the founding National Executive Committee for BAICE, my own work on 'reconceptualising the field' played a part in articulating the rationale for the new society (Crossley 1999). At Bristol this organisational bridging and rationale was also reflected in the subsequent launching of our current CLIO Research Centre for International and Comparative Studies (ICS).

As may now be apparent, the bridging of cultures thesis presented here has emerged as much from critical reflection upon direct professional practice in international development, as it has from personal engagement with the diverse theoretical and historical literatures that inform comparative and international education. It reaches back, for example, to my combined university and Ministry of Education experience in Papua New Guinea, and to more recent University of Bristol work on research and evaluation capacity in Belize, Kenya and Tanzania. Similarly, it emerges from theoretical scholarship on the nature and future of comparative and international research carried out for the positioning of our own Research Centre; and for an influential Special 'Millennium' Issue of the journal *Comparative Education*, edited with Peter Jarvis, titled *Comparative Education for the 21st Century*.
In this work the contemporary resurgence of the field was acknowledged, but it was also suggested that improved research impact and relevance for the 21st century demanded a fundamental strengthening of linkages between many of the cultures and traditions upon which the field has been built. Extending this initial analysis here, it is argued that, despite the organisational changes reflected in BAICE and ICS, much can still be gained from a more effective bridging across paradigmatic and disciplinary boundaries, and between theoretical and applied studies; policy and practice; micro, macro and other levels of analysis; specialist and mainstream research traditions; studies of the past and those of the present; the humanities and the social sciences; and research in the North and the South.

In many ways such efforts could help to address the challenges raised about the impact, authority and accessibility of educational and social research throughout the last decade (see, for example, Gibbons et al 1994; Hargreaves 1996; Hillage 1998; Tooley and Darby 1998; Crossley & Holmes 2001). Stromquist (2005: 108) has, for example, recently urged comparativists to challenge growing global inequalities, engage in ‘collective action, and span diverse communities within and between the north and south’. Indeed, ongoing work suggests that there is a growing number of ways in which the bridging thesis can be applied to the advancement of comparative and international research both within education and beyond. It is to examples of this, in my own collaborative work, that I now turn.

1. Research and evaluation capacity for international development

Between 1994 and 2006 a number of linked research and evaluation studies were carried out in collaboration with colleagues in Bristol, Bath, Belize, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania. The first study (1994-1999) was designed to document the nature and quality of teaching and learning in Belizean primary schools - and to help evaluate the impact, in practice, of the DFID funded Belize Primary Education Development Project (BPEDP) (Crossley & Bennett 1997). The second two-phase study consisted of the formative and summative evaluation of the implementation of the Primary School Management Project (PRISM), designed to train head teachers in leadership skills in Kenya (1996-2000). This was combined with a reflective and historically situated analysis (2001-2005) of the theoretical foundations of the project and its associated research and evaluation strategies (Crossley et al 2005). The third study (2000-2002) examined the implications of globalisation for education and training policies in Rwanda and Tanzania (Tikly et al 2003).

From a research perspective these initiatives can be seen to build cumulatively upon each other. While each had a different substantive focus, all were funded by DFID and all prioritised improved stakeholder partnerships and process goals designed to contribute to the strengthening of research and evaluation capacity within the South. From the outset, this was seen to include ways of improving the context sensitivity, and cross-cultural research skills and experience of all involved - including the Northern partners. The key organisational partnerships established for each of the three studies are illustrated in the following chart:
In this work the contemporary resurgence of the field was acknowledged, but it was also suggested that improved research impact and relevance for the 21st century demanded a fundamental strengthening of linkages between many of the cultures and traditions upon which the field has been built. Extending this initial analysis here, it is argued that, despite the organisational changes reflected in BAICE and ICS, much can still be gained from a more effective bridging across paradigmatic and disciplinary boundaries, and between theoretical and applied studies; policy and practice; micro, macro and other levels of analysis; specialist and mainstream research traditions; studies of the past and those of the present; the humanities and the social sciences; and research in the North and the South.

In many ways such efforts could help to address the challenges raised about the impact, authority and accessibility of educational and social research throughout the last decade (see, for example, Gibbons et al 1994; Hargreaves 1996; Hillage 1998; Tooley and Darby 1998; Crossley & Holmes 2001). Stromquist (2005: 108) has, for example, recently urged comparativists to challenge growing global inequalities, engage in ‘collective action, and span diverse communities within and between the north and south’. Indeed, ongoing work suggests that there is a growing number of ways in which the bridging thesis can be applied to the advancement of comparative and international research both within education and beyond. It is to examples of this, in my own collaborative work, that I now turn.

1. Research and evaluation capacity for international development

Between 1994 and 2006 a number of linked research and evaluation studies were carried out in collaboration with colleagues in Bristol, Bath, Belize, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania. The first study (1994-1999) was designed to document the nature and quality of teaching and learning in Belizean primary schools - and to help evaluate the impact, in practice, of the DFID funded Belize Primary Education Development Project (BPEDP) (Crossley & Bennett 1997). The second two-phase study consisted of the formative and summative evaluation of the implementation of the Primary School Management Project (PRISM), designed to train head teachers in leadership skills in Kenya (1996-2000). This was combined with a reflective and historically situated analysis (2001-2005) of the theoretical foundations of the project and its associated research and evaluation strategies (Crossley et al 2005). The third study (2000-2002) examined the implications of globalisation for education and training policies in Rwanda and Tanzania (Tikly et al 2003).

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The substantive findings of each specific study can be read elsewhere, but here it is more pertinent to explore how they collectively demonstrate different dimensions of the bridging thesis in practice. It is therefore the process goals and associated research strategies that are most illuminating for present purposes. In all three cases it can be seen that the research was carried out by international teams of researchers - emphasising long-term collaboration between organisations and personnel in both the North and the South. This had the advantage of cumulative studies carried out by members of our Education in Small States Research Group (see www.smallstates.net for further details).

In the UK, 1997 saw the creation of the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE). This resulted from the amalgamation of two former societies that previously served separate comparative and international constituencies (Watson 2001; Sutherland, Watson & Crossley 2006). Organisationally, this represented a bridging of the two academic and professional cultures that are noted above - the comparative and the international. As a member of the founding National Executive Committee for BAICE, my own work on ‘reconceptualising the field’ played a part in articulating the rationale for the new society (Crossley 1999). At Bristol this organisational bridging and rationale was also reflected in the subsequent launching of our current CLIO Research Centre for International and Comparative Studies (ICS).

As may now be apparent, the bridging of cultures thesis presented here has emerged as much from critical reflection upon direct professional practice in international development, as it has from personal engagement with the diverse theoretical and historical literatures that inform comparative and international education. It reaches back, for example, to my combined university and Ministry of Education experience in Papua New Guinea, and to more recent University of Bristol work on research and evaluation capacity in Belize, Kenya and Tanzania. Similarly, it emerges from theoretical scholarship on the nature and future of comparative and international research carried out for the positioning of our own Research Centre; and for an influential Special ‘Millennium’ Issue of the journal Comparative Education, edited with Peter Jarvis, titled Comparative Education for the 21st Century.
comparative research profile focussing upon a sequence of European studies directed by Patricia Broadfoot and sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (see Broadfoot et al 1993).

These parallel but related international and comparative traditions within the University reflected the intellectual and professional differences and divisions that then characterised the broader field of international and comparative education. As writers such as Wilson (1994) have argued, the 'international' tradition has most often been characterised by applied, policy related studies carried out in low-income countries; while 'comparative education' has a tradition more directly associated with detached, theoretical analyses of education in more prosperous industrialised contexts such as North America, Europe and Japan. Although this characterisation over simplifies an inevitably more complex situation, it does draw attention to a number of significant polarisations that have had a marked impact upon the history and development of the field. And it is to the implications of such issues that I now turn.

Bridging cultures and traditions
In the light of the above, I will now focus more directly upon the nature of the bridging of cultures and traditions thesis - and upon its potential for the strengthening of comparative research in education and the social sciences. Firstly, I will sketch out the origins, nature and scope of the bridging rationale, with reference to related organisational developments in the UK and here in Bristol. Secondly, I will try to demonstrate how this theoretical positioning has worked out in practice, in the form of two sequences of related research programmes. The first of these draws upon my collaborative work in the arena of research and evaluation capacity strengthening in the South. The second is related to combining insiders familiar with the cultural contexts involved, with outsiders who can bring fresh and challenging perspectives - a strategy much commended in the international literature (Spindler & Spindler 1982; Osborn et al 2003). In the Belizean and Kenyan studies emphasis was also placed on involving practitioners in forms of participatory or action research and evaluation. This is consistent with Delanty's (1997) proposal for social research to be conceptualised as 'discursive practice', whereby problems are democratically identified, defined and examined. In a related vein, Chambers, an advocate of participatory research in development work, calls for the researcher's role to be transformed in similar ways so that:

From planning, issuing orders, transferring technology and supervising, they shift to convening, facilitating, searching for what people need and supporting. From being teachers they become facilitators of learning (Chambers 1994: 34).

In these three studies bridges were thus built between the North and the South, between researchers, policy makers and practitioners, and between insiders and outsiders. In addition, all three studies were multidisciplinary in nature, provided research training that bridged paradigmatic boundaries, incorporated macro and micro levels of analysis and located contemporary policy critique within a thoroughly researched historical framework. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, each of these studies usefully illustrate the possibilities and dilemmas that are encountered when efforts are made to investigate development issues with increased sensitivity to what Arnow and Torres (2003) call the 'dialectic of the global and the local'. In this respect we can see how these initiatives, designed partly to help strengthen local research and evaluation capacity, are firmly grounded
in perspectives that are increasingly regarded as the hallmark of disciplined, context sensitive, comparative and international research.

Today the influence and potential of such collaborative approaches to research are being explored further in the context of a new DFID funded Research Programme Consortium (RPC) led by Leon Tikly. This focuses upon studies designed to help improve the quality of education in low income countries, and the mode of operation continues to foreground long-term, international partnerships and research capacity strengthening (Crossley 2006). The RPC is thus an overtly collaborative initiative centred on partnerships between the University of Bristol, the University of Bath, the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the Kigali Institute of Education in Rwanda, the University of the Cape Coast, Ghana, and Witwatersrand University in South Africa (RPC 2005). This points to an exciting new phase of development research for all involved.

2. Educational development in small states

A second sequence of studies that helps to illustrate the potential of the bridging thesis, draws attention to the GSoE’s Education in Small States Research Group, and to cumulative work carried out by a succession of doctoral research students since the group was founded in 1994. The origins of this initiative lie in Bristol partnerships established with Belizean colleagues, with St Lucian researchers and with the Commonwealth Secretariat in the early 1990s. At that point in time, many of the small states of the Commonwealth (those with less than 1.5 million people) were increasingly concerned about the dominance of large state perspectives and priorities in the agendas pursued by influential development agencies (Bray & Packer 1993). In Belize, for example, the influence of the World Bank supported Jomtien Highlands, and he completed his doctorate successfully in 2003. Moreover, I am currently an adviser to a health education project that he and Dr Jane Fitzpatrick (another Bristol Graduate working at the University of the West of England) are carrying out with success in the poorest communities of Port Moresby (the capital city) and the Southern Highlands. This is a project that is grounded in field research and development theory, but one that has provided practical health training and basic medical resources that are currently saving lives in practice at the grass roots level. Another example, perhaps of our bridging theme emerging? ‘Grass Roots’ is, by the way, the name of an infamous cartoon character who appears regularly in the daily newspaper of Papua New Guinea - the Post Courier.

‘Grass Roots’ cartoon

From this slide you may be able to guess why the Post Courier is advertised as “the best smoke in the Pacific”.

It took an invitation from the University of Bristol for me to apply for a post in the then School of Education - received in Papua New Guinea via a new technology called a fax - to entice the now growing Crossley family to return to the UK from the Pacific. This we did in April 1990.

At that point in time the School of Education had a long and distinguished tradition of teaching, research and consultancy in education and international development dating back to the 1950s. This was led by Roger Garrett and was supported by strong links with the Overseas Development Administration (now the Department for International Development, DFID), and other international agencies such as the British Council. This was complemented by a strong
The influence of much rewarding work undertaken in Papua New Guinea during this time can be seen in different ways throughout my subsequent research in Bristol - and through an almost continuous string of postgraduate/doctoral students that have since followed me to the GSoE from Papua New Guinea. One particular vignette illustrates this continuity well. Rushing in late to a seminar presented by Roger Dale on his arrival in Bristol in 1999 I quickly found a seat at the back of the room. At the end of the presentation I was tapped on the shoulder by a newly arrived doctoral student, sponsored by the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme. 'Hello' he said, 'my name is Willie Yamuna Ako from Papua New Guinea, and you taught me social science in grade 7 at Kagua High School in 1980.'

I am happy to report that Dr Ako's own research usefully challenged the imposition of western inspired education plans in the Southern Conference - and its promotion of basic education - legitimised the Bank’s 1990s investment in the BPEDP. This was despite the fact that many small states, including Belize, argued that primary education was less problematic for them, and less of a priority in their own development planning. The politics of the development process, nevertheless, linked prospects for financial support to the acceptance of dominant 'international' agendas.

Part of the rationale for the Small States Research Group was to contribute to the strengthening of research capacity in such contexts, through partnerships and collaboration that would improve their ability to advance locally perceived priorities in international arenas. For this a 'bridging' of world views was essential.

As Dame Pearlette Louisy, a founder member of the research group and current Head of State for St Lucia, has since argued:

It is not easy to avoid the dangers of 'uncritical transfer' if one lacks the national or institutional capacity to undertake the type of research or investigative inquiry necessary to 'customise' the experiences of others, however tried and tested ... It has proven very difficult sometimes to persuade development agencies that the contexts and circumstances of sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America, for example, do not necessarily apply to the Caribbean region (Louisy 2001: 435-436).

She goes on to suggest that:

More current studies in the economic, cultural, social and political contexts and histories of the region, carried out either

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**Port Moresby to Bundahi High School, Manus Province**

1. 6.00 am Depart Port Moresby by jet aircraft for Rabaul in New Britain (town now destroyed by volcanic eruption);
2. 8.00 am Depart Rabaul for Lorengau, Manus Island by six-seater, propeller-driven aircraft;
3. 12 noon Depart Lorengau town by four-wheel drive Landrover over unsealed mountain road for jetty on south coast;
4. 2.30 pm Depart jetty in outboard motor boat to bypass inner reef and reach river estuary heading up to Bundahi High School;
5. 3.30 pm Boat gets stuck going up narrow river passage due to fallen trees;
6. 3.45 pm Begin walking/wading along river bank, knee deep in mud, to reach school before nightfall;
7. 5.30 pm Arrive at the High School to be well greeted;
8. Evening Go down with malaria – return trip only possible following recovery!
by its own scholars and researchers or preferably in collaboration with others from outside the region, would add to the data available for use by the international community (Louisy 2001: 436).

By building up a network of small states’ scholars engaged in education, the GSoE has worked hard to support such initiatives, to generate more critical perspectives on the development priorities of small states, and to contribute to improved cross-cultural understanding in this arena.

A sequence of three doctoral studies on education in St Lucia and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) by Louisy (1993), Holmes (2001) and Brown (2006) illustrate this well and show how efforts have increasingly been made to work in collaboration with St Lucian personnel, and to explore research priorities collectively identified within the nation and wider Caribbean region. Louisy’s own research combined macro and micro level analyses and examined the potential for stronger regional higher education partnerships within the Caribbean. She continues as an active member of the Research Group to the present day, bridging the research cultures of Bristol and St Lucia, and facilitating continuity, field access and collaborative relationships for both Keith Holmes and Lyla Brown. The study carried out by Holmes built upon Louisy’s call for more effective partnerships and for greater legitimisation of local forms of knowledge. In doing so he worked in close collaboration with Ministry of Education personnel, adopted a postcolonial theoretical framework, and developed a critical analysis of the influence of western research and development paradigms in St Lucia and the Caribbean. To cite his own words ‘This raises questions about how knowledge for educational development is produced and whose interests are served’ (Holmes 1999: 1).

and when I first arrived there Papua New Guinea had only recently gained its independence from Australia in 1975. In 1980 Kagua was a relatively new, rural high school with 280 pupils, 11 staff and strong community links.

Photograph of Kagua

Findings from this research (some produced in collaboration with another visiting researcher and friend by the name of Graham Vulliamy) contributed to the ongoing development of curriculum policy in the Papua New Guinea National Department of Education (Crossley & Vulliamy 1986) Subsequently there came an invitation to join the staff of the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) (with a second desk and role as a curriculum officer located within the Ministry of Education). This was to launch a new programme to support the work of teachers involved in curriculum innovation. Here was a direct bridge between the ministry and the university.

Going to work each day was, I should add, a little different to that in Bristol. One memorable occasion that may illustrate the importance of context, required a visit to supervise a student working within his school on the island of Manus - the place where the anthropologist Margaret Mead did much of her New Guinea fieldwork (Mead 1930). Here is a rough itinerary:
A personal engagement

My own interest in comparative and international research was stimulated by three main factors. The first, shared with my wife Anne, was a desire to see the world and to travel to the Pacific. Secondly, stories of education in Papua New Guinea, told by friends then studying with us at the University of London, played a part in inspiring a focus for future work. Thirdly, practical experience teaching in UK secondary schools during the 1970s generated a strong personal critique of the impact of changing educational policies on practising teachers - and of the ways in which research itself too often failed to capture the realities and practical implications of teaching and learning at that time.

Subsequent doctoral research, undertaken in the early 1980s from La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, facilitated the travel and focussed upon the transfer of British school-based curriculum development strategies to Papua New Guinea. The fieldwork component for this research built upon work by writers such as Lacey (1970) and Burgess (1983) and included one of the first in-depth, qualitative case studies of a secondary school engaged in educational innovation in a low-income country context (Crossley 1984).

The location for the fieldwork was Kagua Provincial High School in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. As can be seen from the following map, Kagua is located at 5,000 feet above sea level in a very isolated part of one of the least travelled mountain ranges in the world.

Map of Papua New Guinea

This was a formative period in many ways, since the Southern Highlands was first contacted by the western world as late as the 1950s, Lyla Brown's recently completed work extends the examination of partnership processes in the OECS, again utilising a collaborative framework that generated insider perspectives and strong support from within St Lucia. In considering factors that hinder the effectiveness of many development partnerships, this study builds upon a critique of the western pace of change that has emerged from experience in each of the three collaborative research and evaluation projects discussed earlier (see Crossley & Watson 2003: 80-81). However, the theoretical dimension of time as a concept and resource in development cooperation is explored here in considerable depth, in ways that have direct relevance for policy-makers striving to improve the success of international partnerships. Further comparative and international research on differing conceptions and uses of time could have significant implications for future development research, and for the bridging of cultures thesis itself - and, I suggest, for many organisations and individuals who are currently experiencing the political and professional ramifications of rapid change in our globalising world.

Conclusions

What is required is genuine dialogue among partners who not only talk but also listen and hear (Samoff 1998: 24).

In concluding here it is tempting to include far too many complexities and issues for comfortable digestion. I will therefore be mindful of this and try be both concise and accessible. Indeed, I would argue that this is in itself an important conclusion - since improved clarity and accessibility is essential if the findings of research in any field (comparative or otherwise) are to bridge the varied cultures and traditions of the growing diversity of contemporary stakeholders and audiences. And if the global democratisation process is to have an
impact within the social sciences themselves.

Dialogue
The first of my three concluding points is therefore that improved dialogue is central to the conception of bridging that is advocated here. As Reimers and McGinn (1997) suggest in their book *Informed Dialogue: using research to shape education policy around the world*, because research-based knowledge is constructed within specific value frameworks, policy decisions cannot be based solely on research-based evidence. Instead they call for 'informed dialogue' across cultural and professional boundaries, suggesting that:

Research can bring fresh air and new perspectives, but it has to be incorporated into a process of communication so that it informs the meanings of this collective construction of educational problems and options (Reimers & McGinn 1997: 26).

The consideration of alternative policy options they also argue:

… should take place not within the simplified environment of the analyst but in the real world where concrete persons and groups express these multiple interests (Reimers & McGinn 1997: 27).

This resonates well with Gibbons et al's (1994) view that contemporary modes of knowledge production are increasingly characterised by the collaboration of different stakeholders and by a flow back and forth between the theoretical and the practical. Such bridging is, however, difficult to achieve in practice as the various studies considered here indicate, and as Ginsburg and Gorostiaga (2001: 196) emphasise in

ourselves better able to enter into the spirit and tradition of our own national education, more sensitive to its unwritten ideals, quicker to catch the signs which threaten it and the subtle workings of hurtful change (Sadler 1900: 49).

My own recent work (Crossley 1999; Crossley & Watson 2003) suggests that the dangers of uncritical international transfer have intensified with the advent of modern technologies. Today, for example, new policy proposals formulated in one context can be instantly transferred across the globe where they may find an immediate (if not appropriate) application (Vulliamy 2004). Comparativists, policy-makers and practitioners today also face a potential avalanche of information - a far cry from Sadler's era when access to foreign policy documentation and experience was a major challenge for those working in comparative fields. Transfer can also be seen to operate in other influential ways, including the movement of ideas, models and principles from one sector of life to another - perhaps most notably in current times, from the world of business to education - bringing with it similar possibilities and dilemmas.

These are, therefore, exciting and challenging times for comparative and international research in many fields. Times when innovative developments in theories, methodologies, organisations and substantive issues for investigation are being made - and when the contextually sensitive insights and perspectives of disciplined and critical comparative analysis have much to offer in what has been called our 'one size fits all world' (see, for example, Small 2005).
research at the University of the South Pacific has done much to challenge the imposition (and frequent failure) of western inspired curriculum innovation within the Pacific region. For her, repeated and rapid aid driven change is part of the curriculum problem throughout the region, and her own work argues, with strong Tongan conviction, for a more culture-sensitive model of curriculum development for the South Pacific (Thaman 1993; 1999).

At the heart of many comparativists' criticisms of international surveys, league tables and externally generated development projects is, firstly, a heightened awareness of the significance of culture and context in understanding and pursuing educational research and educational development (Broadfoot 1993; Crossley 1999). Secondly, theoretically informed approaches to comparative and international research have long emphasised the dangers of the uncritical international transfer of educational policy and practice (Phillips & Ochs 2003). Here I cannot resist quoting Sir Michael Sadler's now famous Guildford lecture (delivered way back at the start of the 20th century) on the theme, How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education? Sadler is widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of the field of comparative education, and his influence lives on today. In 1900 he wrote:

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant ... but if we have endeavoured, in a sympathetic spirit, to understand the real working of a foreign system of education, we shall in turn find

reporting that:

... our individual and collective efforts to achieve dialogue between theorists/researchers and policy makers/practitioners are not likely to be easy. Nevertheless, like the goal of a world characterised by peace, freedom and justice, the goal of dialogue between and among theorists and researchers on the one hand, and policy-makers and practitioners, on the other, is one for which we should struggle.

Difference

My second broad conclusion emphasises that the bridging of cultures and traditions envisaged here celebrates and values difference - and applies comparative perspectives and processes to generate new creativity. Bakhtin's understanding of such processes is helpful in this respect when he suggests that:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning ... We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we see answers to our questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths ... such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched (Bakhtin 1986: 7).

In this light, while our bridging process may encourage a blurring of boundaries between constituencies, paradigms and personnel - this does not equate in any way to an intellectual or professional
compromise or bland search for consensus. Rather, as argued at length elsewhere (Crossley & Watson 2003), it prioritises and values the ongoing creativity and originality that the juxtaposition of different world views may generate - as well as an improved awareness of the implications of cultural and contextual differences.

Context
Finally, my third conclusion returns to the question raised at the outset, about how we might best learn from experience elsewhere. Drawing upon her long and distinguished career in China, Ruth Hayhoe (2005) makes a helpful contribution by applying the work of leading Chinese comparativist Gu Mingyuan (2001). Professor Gu's work also calls for improved understandings between cultures and acknowledges 'the remarkable capacity of Confucian culture to accommodate other cultures and absorb some of their best elements into itself' (Hayhoe 2005: 582). According to Hayhoe, this is not through the simple copying or borrowing of ideas, but through a critically informed dialectic, sensitive to cultural identity and contextual differences. In this light, it is argued here that we can, indeed, learn much from experience elsewhere, but to cite Stenhouse (1979: 5-6) this is best done in ways that help to 'tutor our judgement' - recognising that comparative research 'deals with insight rather than law as a basis for understanding'. My own work reflects these perspectives, challenges uncritical international transfer and suggests that 'context matters' more than is often realised, not only by policy-makers, but also by many researchers working in education and across the social sciences (Crossley & Jarvis 2001).

It can be seen how sensitivity to culture and context, combined with strong collaborative research traditions, has helped to shape a

The response was especially vigorous in Malaysia, where opposition politicians have used the rankings, published on October 28, to criticise the government for the low international status of the country's universities. Lim Kit Siang, a Malaysian MP and a leading light in the opposition DAP party, described the rankings as 'a global blow'.

The University of Malaya fell 80 places from 89 to 169, while the other Malaysian university to feature in 2004, Sains, dropped out of the top 200 after being in 111th place last year.

Mr Kit Siang calls for a Royal Commission to look at the crisis (Martin Ince, Times Higher, 11 November 2005: 3).

Harold Noah's (1986) classic cautionary advice about the 'use and abuse' of comparative education certainly deserves both an updating and wider readership in days when it is too easily assumed that 'we are all comparativists now'. Yes it is good to see boundaries between disciplines and specialisms blurring, and to see new organisations and personnel engaging in comparative and international research - but this is a field with distinguished traditions, an extensive literature, and distinctive insights and perspectives. Recognising both its theoretical and applied traditions and potential, for example, King (1965: 147) long ago warned that 'If we do not pay proper attention to this latter aspect of Comparative Education as a social science, other people will. They may not then call their work Comparative Education, but will nevertheless work over our proper concerns without benefit of our insights.’ There is, therefore, much to be learned by those new to working in such arenas if the mistakes of the past are not to be reworked or repeated. By way of illustration, Konai Helu Thaman's
investigating the abilities of 15 year old students in 32 countries, has attracted similar worldwide attention from policy-makers, practitioners, the media and the wider public (OECD 2001, 2004).

Somewhat paradoxically, what is less widely recognised is the fact that it is the comparative and international research community that has been most critical of such cross-national achievement studies. Hannu Simola, for example, Professor of Education at the University of Helsinki in Finland, challenges Finland’s strong results in the PISA survey in an article recently published in the journal *Comparative Education*. In this she draws attention to the limitations of overly formalistic pedagogic cultures and practices, and questions whether international surveys:

... really make it possible to understand schooling in different countries, or whether they are just part of the processes of ‘international spectacle’ and ‘mutual accountability’ (Simola 2005: 455).

The key point being made here is that as new researchers, research users and audiences have contributed to the revitalisation of interest in comparative and international studies - new dangers and pitfalls have also emerged. Comparative surveys and league tables may be fascinating, but they can also be misleading, damaging and political sensitive, as the following quotation relating to higher education in Malaysia indicates:

**RANKINGS SPARK DEBATE ABROAD.** The *Times Higher’s* second World University Rankings have fuelled debate in countries concerned about the future of their higher education systems.

distinctively Bristol approach to comparative and international research in education. Central to much of this work are innovative approaches to research inspired by various forms of bridging in cultures and traditions. Looking to the future, it is hoped that the personal narrative that has contributed to today’s presentation, will, for example, be seen as an indication of ways in which ongoing innovations in narrative research in the GSoE (Trahar 2006) also hold much potential for application by comparative researchers world wide. It is certainly most appropriate that the name Bristol is derived from an old English word meaning ‘the place of the bridge’ - and that our own University website (www.bris.ac.uk/citybristol) sees Bristol itself as ‘a bridge to culture, experiences, landscapes, careers - and the future’.
Reflecting this growth the 12th World Congress convened by the WCCES and Cuban colleagues, held in Havana during October 2004, proved to be the largest to date. Adopting the theme of Education and Social Justice the event attracted over 1,000 participants from 68 countries, including a large delegation from Bristol. This was the first WCCES Congress to be held in the Caribbean and the first in a Spanish speaking country. Most significantly, the event was personally supported by Head of State, Fidel Castro. This helped to stimulate a nationwide debate through a sequence of local seminars and workshops designed to involve Cuban communities in pre-conference meetings. Comparative research in education was, in this way, taken well beyond the worlds of the academic and the policy-maker, deep into the towns, villages and homes of Cuba.

For the wider general public perhaps the most visible manifestation of the contemporary impact of comparative research in education has emerged in the shape of cross-national studies of educational achievement, and the widespread influence of related league tables. In the 1990s, for example, much public debate in the UK focussed upon the findings of Reynolds and Farrell’s (1996) study Worlds Apart? A Review of International Surveys of Educational Achievement Including England. This UK Government supported research highlighted the achievements of Pacific Rim countries, such as Taiwan and Singapore, in international league tables of school achievement. The authors concluded by suggesting that the UK has much to learn from the more formalistic, whole class, approaches to teaching and learning carried out in such contexts. More recently the results of the OECD-led Performance in International Student Achievement (PISA) studies,

specialists from different parts of the world’ (WCCES 2005: 1).

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A revitalised field
Comparative and international research is currently attracting increased attention within the social sciences, the arts and the humanities. Efforts are also being made to share experience across disciplinary boundaries, to encourage multidisciplinary collaboration and to promote systematic training in comparative methodologies. In the field of law, for example, it has recently been argued that training should include comparative studies and that:

Being trained only in national law makes us take things for granted. By looking outside, we challenge our own ways of thinking, learn from our mistakes and are encouraged to do better (Rauxloh 2004: 60).

Underpinning this revitalisation are changing geo-political relations, the intensification of globalisation, dramatic advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) and paradigmatic developments across the social sciences. The revitalisation of the field of comparative and international education has been particularly dramatic during the last decade. This has also been characterised by a strong research orientation and by the creation of new comparative research centres in leading universities that include Hong Kong, Oxford, Nottingham and Bristol. To this we can add the worldwide growth of national comparative and international education societies and the buoyant expansion of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) (Schweisfurth 1999; Bray 2003). The latter umbrella body unites scholars and practitioners from 33 national, sub-national, regional and language based societies to provide a forum through which different groups and individuals can bring ‘comparative education to bear on the major educational problems of the day, by fostering co-operation by

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Bridging Cultures and Traditions: Perspectives from Comparative and International Research in Education

Introduction

Today's lecture is the last in a series of four on the broad theme of *Comparative International and Global Perspectives on Education*. In this presentation I will identify and explore a number of core themes that illustrate aspects of the Graduate School of Education's distinctive contribution to the multidisciplinary field of comparative and international education. In doing so, I will draw upon my own recent work on the history and development of the field, and upon a selection of studies carried out over a 25 year period in the South Pacific, the Caribbean and Africa.

It is argued that, especially in these increasingly globalised times, disciplined comparative and international research can contribute much to the development of theory and methodology - as well as to the improvement of policy and practice in education worldwide. For this to be realised it is maintained that ongoing efforts to challenge and 'reconceptualise' the field deserve sustained support - and increased attention to what I have previously identified as a more effective 'bridging of cultures and traditions' (Crossley 2000). The core of the lecture examines various dimensions of this 'bridging' thesis in greater depth and points to possible ways forward for those engaged in advancing the future of comparative and international research in education and in the social sciences more generally. A central, and deceptively simple, question that is posed - and one that should appeal to the widest of audiences - is how can we best learn from experience elsewhere?
DEDICATION

To Kathleen Crossley and Beryl Morgan
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