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Teaching Comparative Education at Universities: The Czech Case

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Abstract: This contribution is aimed to problems of teaching comparative education, particularly in the Czech Republic. A view of changes in comparative education after the political reversal in 1989 is given firstly. A positive influence and support of WCCES projects is pointed out as an inspiration for a research project mapping teaching comparative education at Czech universities. The project is described and research results are discussed. Finally challenges for further development are formulated.

Key words: comparative education, study programme, course, research, WCCES

Introduction

A main aim of this contribution is to document a present state of teaching comparative education at

Comparative education (CE) in the Czech environment has rather long historical tradition. But due a discontinuity in the period of one sided political orientation in second half of 20th century comparative research and teaching comparative education were underdeveloped (in more details Walterova, 2007). Comparative education was substituted by "a critics of Western capitalist education" and by an uncritical admiration of "Soviet socialist education". Comparative education was not a subject of teaching until 1989.

The political reversal opened the way to revitalization of CE in the Czech environment. Since 1990 CE developed particularly as an important recourse of ideas and inspirations for educational transformation, later on as a valuable field of study and an important research area aligning Czech educational research in the international and global discourse. However a weak academic statute of CE has created limits to develop comparative education study programmes in higher education up to recently. First realized research on TCE in the Czech Republic (Walterova, 2008) reflected a rather difficult situation: courses of CE were rarely located in study programmes, some comparative topics were spread in different courses/subjects, particularly in teacher education.

The improvement of TCE has been a progressive trend in the last decade. For a high university autonomy and absence of curricular standards, the place, concepts, content and issues of TCE were unknown and unreflected. A research mapping and critically analysing issues of TCE at Czech universities was demanding. Impulses for this research were found in the WCCES projects and activities analysing and supporting TCE around the world (see chapter 1). Results of the research were published (Walterova, 2014) and discussed by a group of comparatists engaged in CPS-CES (Czech Pedagogical Society-Comparative Education Section). Main data and results of the research and discussion follow in the sections 2 and 3.

1. Teaching Comparative Education in a context of the WCCES activities

Teaching comparative education has been on the WCCES agenda since the establishment of the Council. Already the constituting congress in 1970 stressed as one of the main themas a need "to place comparative and international education it the education of teachers" (Masemann, Bray & Manzon, 2007, p.2).

Various kinds of activities concerning TCE were performed later, particularly at the turn of 21th century. In 2003 an ambitious project, lead by Ervin Epstein "Comparative and International Education Courses Archive" was initiated by the Comparative Education Centre of Loyola University in Chicago. A presentation of the project at the CIES Conference in New Orleans, published later in CER (Cook, Hite & Epstein, 2004) initated an establishment of the working group and the project was accepted and supported by the WCCES. The database of the project is open and accessible on-line (see in references). It contains detailed information of CE courses at more than thirty universities in the world. A systematic building of the database with the unified structure of courses descriptions is a very suitable prerequisite for further utilisation and inspiration for others, including Czech

TCE at Czech universities described below. Another important project focused on TCE was the WCCES project performed in 2005-2008. A comparison of CE at universities in 41 countries discovered a detailed picture of the field and gave examples of models in different university environments. An interesting WCCES book (Wolhuter, Popov, Manzon & Leutwyler, 2008) also tries to identify developmental phases and trends in CE. A critical reflexion concerning concepts and paradigms of TCE opened discussion also in the Czech environment. An opportunity ty participate in the WCCES project (Walterova, 2008) gave to the author of this article further impulses to performe a research on TCE at Czech universities.

2. Research on teaching comparative education at Czech universities

Main aims of the research were following: a) to map the state-of-art in TCE b) to identify types of CE courses c) to find weak sites and problems of TCE d) to publish results and initiate discussions and improvements.

The research was performed in three phases: 1. Identification of departments and teachers performing CE courses. By the analysis of web presentations and correspondence with head of departments a list of potential respondents was created. 2. A questionnaire was constructed (a structure of CIECAP courses description was one important background) and distributed on-line. 16 questionnaires returned together with syllabuses of 20 courses performed at 11 faculties of 7 universities. 3. After data processing and a qualitative analyses of syllabuses results were published (Walterova, 2014) and discussion in the group of comparatists was organized (Walterova, 2015).

2.1. Research findings

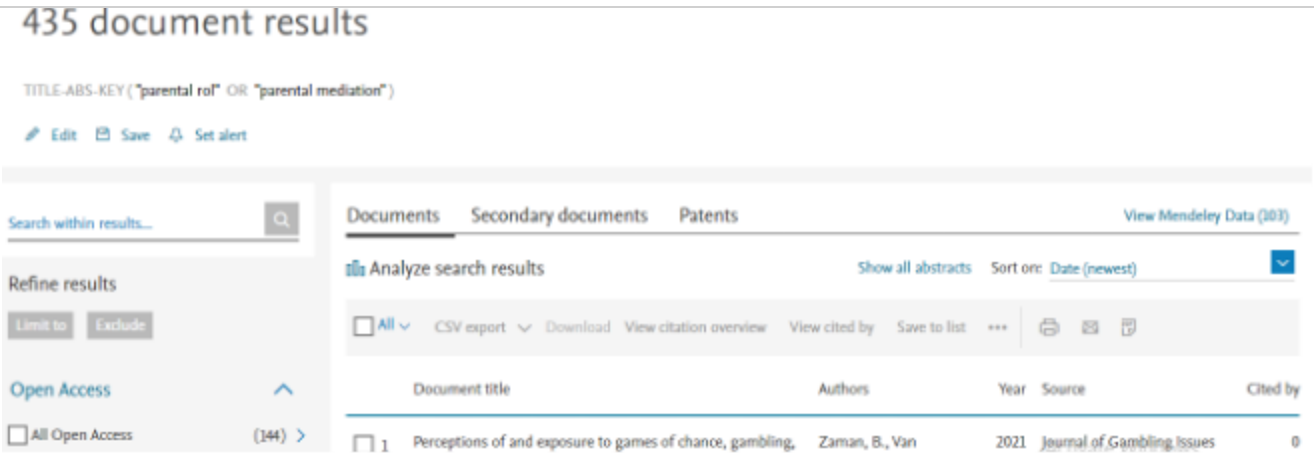
2.1.1. Overall state-of-art

CE courses (20 together) are performed at 11 faculties of 7 universities. Larges universities in metropolis (Prague, Brno, Olomouc) perform more than one course. Only some regional universities ofer CE courses in teacher study programmes, half of faculties of education do not ofer any CE cources in teacher study programmes.

2.1.2. Place and statute of CE courses in study programmes

CE courses are mostly a part of master studies in education sciences and in teacher education, in bachelor programs are rare (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Comparative education courses: Place and statute



2.1.3. Conceptions and models of courses

Types, models and syllabuses of CE courses are not standardised. They are mostly influenced by type of study programme and by teacher´s preferences. Three main models were identified as follows: 1. Systematic courses build as a discipline, performed in master study of education sciences 2. Constructivist courses selecting issues and topics actual in Czech education (such as inclusion, evaluation and assessment, curriculum development) and dealing with them in the comparative perspective and broader social context. This model is preferred particularly in teacher education programmes and has more content variations corresponding with needs of practice. 3. Courses aimed to description of educational systems abroad and analysing internal pedagogical issues in them.

Combinations of these models are used in teaching reality very ofen. Beside the models described above also PhD courses are performed at 5 faculties having Ph.D. accreditation. These courses are performed regularly since 1990s. They are constructed as a science discipline and lead by experienced professors engaged in research projects.

2.1.4. Contents of CE courses and thematic areas

Respondents were asked to bring out five main thematic areas creating a core of the content. The findings were completed by an analysis of syllabuses. Theories and methodologies of CE research, activities and programmes of international organisations and networks (UNESCO, OECD, IEA, EURIDYCE), Types of educational systems, Trends in educational policies, Global problems in education dominated in systematic courses. Teacher profession and education of teachers, International programmes of student assessment, educational reforms and innovations in teaching, alternative pedagogy were the most frequent in constructivist type of courses.

2.1.5. Geopolitical orientation of courses

In the whole sample of courses there is Europe the most preferred region followed by North America and South East Asia. Relatively marginal attention is given to Latin America and Subsahar Africa, a slightly growing interest concerns Arab States. From European countries neighbour states (Germany and Austria, followed by Poland and Slovakia) are in the focus beside Scandinavian

2.1.6. Profiles of CE teachers

For the reason that CE is not an autonomous field of study in Czech academies, the questions concerning teachers' profiles was important. CE teachers are professors or experienced assistants. An average of their university service is more than 10 years. Only half of teachers from the sample graduated initially from education science, others graduated from other fields, e.g. humanities, languages or sciences and they have a teacher qualification. Any standard combinations in teaching duty was not identified. Experienced professors teach CE beside basic compulsory courses (general education, general didactics, sociology of education, management of education). Younger teachers combine CE courses mostly with applied courses (e.g. gender study, multicultural education, health education, educational evaluation and assessment). As main personal reasons to teach CE courses were by teachers point out a need to integrate international dimension, to support interdisciplinarity or to utilize international experiences.

2.1.7. Methods and means of TCE

Interactive lectures or lectures followed by discussions combined with seminar forms are the most frequent. Student´s papers and seminar theses, derived from contents of courses, depend on choice of students and contribute to a broadening a repertoire of compared issues and countries. The most of student works are based on desk-research. Diploma theses in CE based on an empirical research are not very frequent. A live International experience of students is not very rich for limited mobility opportunities, particularly in teacher study programmes. Students deal mostly with information on web but language problems made limits, particularly in understanding of concepts and using terminology in English which is a global languge of CE. Written publications used by students are mostly published in Czech language. As basic textbooks are used frequently in Czech published comprehensive titles (particularly Prucha, 2006, Walterova, 2006). Research reports and reports on international studies of student assessment, programmes and reports of other international organisations are included in study materials if they have Czech versions.

3. Discussion and Challenges

A place, conception and content of CE courses depend mostly on possibilities of teachers, departments, eventually faculties responsible for study programmes and performance of them. In some cases in competition with other disciplines / subjects / courses CE could be omitted. Accreditation agencies usually are not directly bearing TCE in the focus of attention. For these reasons the research on TCE mapping the real state of art has a high importance for further development of TCE at Czech universities. Results were reported (Walterova, 2014) and stimulated panel discussion at the CES Conference. Conclusions and challenges would be sum up as follows:

• The role of TCE is considered as very important for development of critical thinking, corrections of desinterpretations and for cultivation of social cognition and affective attitudes toward differences.
• The attention should be given to the inclusion of CE courses in every study programmes in

• Contents of CE courses should be differentiated according level and type of study programmes. In Ph.D. studies CE courses should be compulsory and systematic. In teacher study the attention should be given to the inclusion of topics based on problems of teacher profession and educational practice.
• Geopolitical orientation depends mostly on preferences of teachers of and students. Attention to small and dislocated countries, particularly original countries of migrants and foreigners living in the CR should be given in more size.
• Students communicative skills in foreign languages, particularly in English, are not bad. But reading of specialized texts and discussion on specialized topics has to be supported and list of textbooks and study literature in English should be supplemented.
• New publications of a high quality in the field of CE are expected as well as in Czech language, original or translated ones.
• For future development and atractivity of TCE a participation of experts and students from abroad would be helpful.
• More opportunities for international mobility of Czech students in the field of education, particularly in teacher education, have to be supported.
• Comparative education could help to understand and tolerate differences and show what is possible to reach out in own education system. Knowing what is progressive in education in the global world is of a great importance.

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