

PREFACE

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If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.

[Attributed to George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)]

Associated with contemporary global trends is a growing interest in the international exchange of ideas and what might be learnt from comparing one country, region or sector with another. For some, the motivation is largely driven by an academic research interest, while for others the focus is on the exploration of new ideas with a view to enhancing policy and practice.

At its best, this attempt to learn from the experience of others can be invaluable in assisting reflection on ‘taken for granted’ concepts and approaches, and in contributing to the development of innovative theoretical and empirical perspectives. At its worst, however, an uncritical approach can underplay the vital importance of a deep understanding of context – historical, social, cultural – resulting in misguided efforts to transplant ‘good practice’ from one environment to another. The challenge of securing meaningful, mutual exchange is exacerbated by power differentials (for example, between the global north and global south) and the associated roles of different international and intergovernmental agencies.

1. Structure

This volume explores these issues through the specific lens of comparative research on adult education and learning. The book is divided into four chapters comprising two parts: an analytic essay followed by an anthology of readings from a selection of key texts. These readings are intended to illustrate different perspectives, theories and/or approaches. It is, of course, difficult to narrow the selection to just sixteen extracts from a diverse and rich vein of work, and no doubt others would have made different choices. Working within the constraint that the texts had to be readily available and published in English, we sought representation from authors (female and male) working on comparative issues and

from varying perspectives in different countries. Analysis and readings relating to research methods will be found in a companion volume to this book *Empirical Research Methodology in Adult Learning and Education. Authors and Texts* (Boffo, Federighi and Nuissl 2016)¹.

2. Chapter outline

In Chapter 1 I outline the field of study, introducing key concepts from comparative social science and teasing out distinctions and interrelationships between comparative, international and development education. This leads to a discussion of interpretations, relevance and applicability in the specific arena of *adult* education and learning.

While it is to be hoped that the development of knowledge is, to some extent at least, cumulative, it is undeniable that this process is not linear and that theoretical and empirical ‘fashions’ can be found across all disciplines. The case is made here that some degree of social and historical awareness is important as a base to better understanding of contemporary approaches to comparative adult education. In Chapter 2, therefore, I introduce a number of key stages and developments out of which contemporary developments have emerged.

Adult education and associated learning opportunities are highly diverse in terms of:

- (i) location (community, workplace, college, university, adult education centres, open access e-learning, libraries, etc.);
- (ii) level (ranging from basic literacy to specialist continuing professional development);
- (iii) purpose (social/political, personal, knowledge acquisition, skill development and/or job related);
- (iv) policy interest (education, social inclusion, health, economy, regional development, agriculture, etc.).

In Chapter 3 Regina Egetenmeyer discusses these and associated complexities of comparative research in the field of adult education and learning, contrasting them with comparative research undertaken on formal education systems (schools, colleges, universities and the like). She proposes a focus on issues in adult education, which can be compared between different contexts. Following this approach, she suggests that comparative adult education is best understood as a specific perspective in adult education research, rather than a method or a research field in its own right.

¹ Firenze, Firenze University Press.

International inter-governmental (IGO) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a significant role both in the development of policy and practice of adult education and also in shaping a good deal of the comparative discourse through the generation and dissemination of empirical data. In Chapter 4, Balázs Németh identifies some drivers which, on the one hand, support the promotion of international collaborations in adult and lifelong learning and, on the other, may contribute to barriers which restrain partnership development and building open structures amongst providers of adult education.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the readings under three broad headings indicating the perspective they were primarily selected to illustrate: (a) conceptual issues; (b) empirical research; or (c) critical policy analysis of international or intergovernmental work in the arena of comparative adult education and learning. The readings provided here are best regarded as ‘tasters’. To make the optimum use of this volume, readers are encouraged to seek out the full texts and also to follow up the extensive references contained in the four analytic chapters.

Table 1 – Categorisation of readings.

Conceptual issues	Examples of comparative research on adult education and learning	Critical policy analysis
Phillips and Schweisfurth (Ch 1)	Desjardins (Ch 1)	Federighi (Ch 1)
Carnoy and Rhoten (Ch 1)	Yasukawa, Hamilton and Evans (Ch 2)	Popović (Ch 2)
Merrill and Bron (Ch 2)	Slowey and Schuetze (Ch 3)	Hinzen (Ch 4)
Field Künzel and Schemmann (Ch 2)	Dämmrich, de Vilhena and Reichart (Ch 3)	Lima and Guimarães’ (Ch 4)
Bray, Adamson and Mason (Ch 3)	Holford, Riddell, Weedon, Litjens and Hannan (Ch 3)	Milana (Ch 4)
Duke (Ch4)		

Finally, a word about terminology. In most countries adult education emerged from traditions which were quite different to those of formal systems of schooling, often with strong connections to social movements. As discussed in this book, for a variety of reasons – including a widespread policy focus on individual (as opposed to collective) learning, and the role of the workplace in fostering (or not) learning opportunities for adults – the connection with such historic roots has been subject to significant change. Increasingly, terms such as ‘adult education and learning’ or ‘adult learning and education’ appear in the literature (particularly in a policy context) to reflect this wider focus. While arguably ‘adult education and learning’ may imply a stronger focus on systems and provision, and ‘adult learning and education’ a focus more on learning and outcomes, for practical purposes here they are regarded as interchangeable.

able; however, they are not synonymous, but reflect the preferred usage by authors of different chapters.

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