

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

CIES Symposium – October 26-27, 2017

Hosted by:

George Mason University, Center for International Education

CIES Gender and Education Standing Committee

CIES South Asia Special Interest Group



Symposium statement: Destabilizing power and authority: Taking intersectionality seriously

Oren Pizmony-Levy, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Before I delve into my take on power and authority in Comparative and International Education (CIE) research and practice, I would like to share some information about my background and training. I believe these experiences shape my understanding of and engagement with power and authority. My decision to pursue a doctoral degree in sociology and education was informed by my work with two non-governmental organizations in Israel: The *Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel* (SPNI) and the *Israeli Gay Youth Organization* (IGY). In the late 1990s, at the SPNI, I was part of a team responsible for the development of environmental and sustainability education (ESE) curriculum. One of the lessons I learned at the SPNI is that although schools agree with the general cause of ESE they are not as open to change their educational practices. That is, schools and education systems have the capacity to block innovations, especially those advocated by external actors. I kept asking myself the following questions: Why schools are disengaged from one of the key challenges facing humanity? Who is designing school knowledge? How and where these decisions come about?

In the early-2000s, I started volunteering at IGY. There, I was part of a newly established research group that sought to inform advocacy and practice work of the organization. At early stage, our group realized that the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students in schools is unrecognized by policy makers. In order to craft the issue as a social problem, we decided to document the homophobic and transphobic climate in schools. With the help of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a US-based NGO, we conducted in 2004 the first school climate survey (n=300). The survey, which was presented at the Israeli parliament and has been replicated every four years since then, is often used by legislators, national and local policy makers, and NGOs to improve the life of LGBT students and youth in Israel. This experience taught me that basic research has the capacity to challenge powerful social institutions. I kept asking myself the following questions: How social movements create change in education systems? What is the role of research and evidence in the work of social movements?

How can CIE investigate power and authority dynamics and their implications for gender and education research and practice?

My point of departure here is a short report by the US National Research Council titled *Understanding Others, Educating Ourselves: Getting more from International Comparative Studies in Education* (2003). In the chapter titled “Range,” the authors lay out three types of CIE research:

- Type I: Cross-national comparisons (i.e., international-large scale assessments [ILSAs]),
- Type II: Studies designed to inform education policy by evaluating policies and programs,
- Type III: Studies designed to increase general understanding about education systems, teaching and learning (broadly defined).

Although the report call for more diversity in CIE research, the past two decades saw an immense growth in Type I studies, including Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). These studies receive much attention by governments, international organizations, and media outlets that cover the results of these studies. Unfortunately, stakeholders pay less attention to other types of CIE research even though Type II and Type III could offer more meaningful insights.

In their current form, ILSAs are simultaneously empowering and limiting. With their rich background questionnaires (for students, teachers, principals, and sometimes parents), ILSAs provide scholars with a unique opportunity to explore the factors that shape student achievement and engagement (e.g., attitudes) in many different countries. The data also enable scholars to examine some aspects of intersectionality by looking on the interaction between different characteristics, for example: the effect of being a female immigrant in the US on school engagement. Yet, ILSAs are also limiting scholars due to their focus on specific set of topics (e.g., mathematics, science, and reading) and explanatory factors. It is in this way that ILSAs exerts their power and authority on scholars.

Therefore, one way to investigate power and authority dynamics is to trace the emergence and development of ILSAs in the past six decades. This line of research may look at issues of power and inequality in the organizational field that choreograph ILSAs. Another way is to examine public discourse around ILSAs and which stakeholder participate and shape the discourse. Nancy Green Saraisky, for example, has found that those who are closer to schools – teachers, students, and parents – are the least quoted in media coverage of ILSAs results.¹

Gender is an interesting issue in the context of ILSAs. For many years, ILSAs report paid much attention to differences between boys and girls worldwide. Most of the research focused on differences in achievement, but there is growing research on attitudes. But gender is more than individual-level variable or characteristic, and gender roles impact all students. To address this limitation, scholars have begun to examine the ways in which social norms around gender affect students and the difference between boys and girls. Anne McDaniel, for example, has demonstrated that national-level gender ideology (measured by public opinion toward gender egalitarianism and female tertiary enrollment) affect gender gaps in educational expectations.² This type of analysis, one that use ILSAs data and combine it with additional sources of information, is one way CIE researchers can investigate the implication of power dynamics on gender and education.

Because people are “doing gender” through social interactions, it is also important to expand the way we “capture” gender dynamics in schools. In addition to asking about sex/gender of student (preferably by moving beyond the simple binary question), scholars should also pay attention to school climate around gender. Questions such as “how often have you heard comments about students not acting “masculine” enough?” or “how often have you heard comments about students not acting “feminine” enough?” could shed light on gender ideology within schools and the normative peruse to preform according to one’s (perceived) gender. An extension of this work should examine not only gender, but also related issues such as sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

In what ways can research and practice destabilize and transform knowledge hierarchies?

I offer two directions for action and illustrate them with my work. The first direction is to explore research questions from the perspective of otherwise marginalized groups and stakeholders. Educational policy research, for example, often overlooks the viewpoint of teachers, the general public, and social movements. This gap is counterintuitive given that teachers play a key role in the implementation of policy, and the general public is the benefactor and the beneficiary of educational systems. In a study with Ashley Woolsey, we found that teachers in New Jersey agree with the general principals of a recent education reform. Teachers’ support of the reform, however, was shaped by

¹ Saraisky, N. G. (2015). The politics of international large-scale assessment: The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and American Education Discourse, 2000-2012. Unpublished Dissertation.

² McDaniel, A. (2009). Cross-national gender gaps in educational expectations: The influence of national-level gender ideology and educational systems. *Comparative Education Review*, 54(1), 27-50.

the politics of the reform and its implementation.³ This research challenges common knowledge and narrative of teachers opposing education reforms.

The second direction focuses on disseminating and mobilizing knowledge beyond the conventional journal article, book chapter, or book. Policy makers and other stakeholder often do not have access to our work, not only because of technical barriers (e.g., journal paywall) but also because of the writing style of academics. We – scholars – should take efforts to make our work available to the public. This includes posting advanced drafts of publication online (see Columbia University’s Academic Commons), writing blogs or short stories about research, and presenting research to stakeholders.

In conclusion, in order for research to destabilize and transform knowledge hierarchies we should recognize that researchers, especially those working in academia, are part of the knowledge hierarchy. We should be sensitive for the ways we organize and operate and how these factors contribute to knowledge hierarchy. Using our unique position, we should shed light on marginalized or silenced perspectives that can inform a better understanding of the social and educational world. And once we figure out the story of our research we should make sure that as many people outside of the ivory tower can engage with it. After all, in contrasts to other resources, information and knowledge grow when more people consume them.

³ Pizmony-Levy, O., & Woolsey, A. (2017). Politics of education and teachers’ support for high-stakes teacher accountability policies. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25, 87.

CITATION:

Pizmony-Levy, O. (2017, October). Symposium statement. In CIES Symposium, *Destabilizing power and authority: Taking intersectionality seriously*. Conference Proceedings of the 2nd Comparative and International Education Symposium: Interrogating and Innovating CIE Research, George Mason University. Arlington, VA: GMU. Retrieved from: <https://cehd.gmu.edu/2017symposium/>

Other Symposium Sponsors

