

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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Advancing the social good in international education: Revisiting the emic and the etic

Daniel A. Wagner, University of Pennsylvania.*

1. The proposition. The Symposium overview proposes the following: “The foundation of comparison underlying CIE over the past fifty years has moved from a sole focus on measurement, which seeks to refine metrics to engage in sound evidence-based findings, to recognition of the importance of qualitative understandings of context and meaning.” I see this history differently. For me, the tension between quantitative and qualitative research approaches has been around long before CIE was a field. It is at the foundation of the social science enterprise. Implicit in this quant-qual distinction is an ethos about the progressive politics of international education. There are several related questions at the heart of this discussion. To what extent are (and were) educational development policies controlled by colonial and postcolonial discourses? Can Western countries, which still provide the bulk of international development aid today, be trusted with designing development activities for others? To what extent are “evidence-based” approaches any more of a problem than qualitative approaches? In other words, is the debate of this Symposium raising issues that need to be “resolved” or simply re-recognized as inherent in the work of social scientists. I will argue for the latter: that this is an old scientific wine/debate repackaged in new bottles—and that this conclusion is of serious importance to all of us.

2. What does the field of international education aim to do? For some, CIE may be considered to be a conceptual and knowledge production exercise—to support or challenge current reigning paradigms. Indeed, CIE needs to be inclusive of the use of such knowledge in support of what I call here the “social good.” This view aims to improve education and learning, while broadly seeking to reduce poverty and inequality. International organizations non-profit agencies, local communities—and many others—have created programs and interventions in education in support of such a vision, as exemplified most recently in the UN SDGs.

Cultural differences—implicit in the critique of evidence-based approaches—are among the major challenges to what is called “development work.” Put simply, the mismatch between policymakers (and their policies) and the recipients of development assistance goes a long way toward explaining poor outcomes over many decades. Still, the question remains as to what a qualitative/cultural/epistemological critique of quantitative/evidence-based categories brings to the story and actions of international education.

3. Emic and etic. Simply put, qualitative researchers tend to focus on context-specific ethnographic observations, and the meaning of data and narrative. Conversely, quantitative researchers have been principally concerned with the ability to operationalize definitions and to generalize using numbers. There has always been a natural and

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essential tension between context-specific (or emic) and universalistic (etic) approaches to measurement. This distinction directly applies to CIE.

In one classic comparison, take the definition of “literacy.” An emic approach would consciously focus on local words or cultural descriptors of literacy as perceived, say, in Kampala as contrasted with those used in New York City. In the former, literacy might be defined as something involved with the use of print in everyday life; in the latter, it might be defined as the ability to handle complex immigration forms. Etic approaches are those that would define “literacy” as a universal concept, measuring individuals across cultures along a single quantitative continuum, such as reading fluency (the number of correct words per minute in reading a short text).

The history of social science’s involvement in international educational development has different but important implications. In the half-century following the founding of the World Bank in 1944, raising the GNP of low-income countries became the primary aim of most of the major development agencies, heavily influenced by economists. By contrast, sociologists study systems, organizations, and institutions that govern individual and societal outcomes. Psychologists tend to view development as largely a cognitive and behavioral phenomenon fostered at the individual level, such that measurable skills, attitudes and values of individuals (or clustered by groups and cultures) are studied. Anthropologists were among the first to describe cultural diversity, typically working in close proximity with local populations, while often challenging the claims of external authority and bias.

4. Advancing the social good. What, then, could be the right way to approach international education today? Each of the disciplines described above—through either an emic or etic perspective—continues to aim for a hegemony that often ends with a silo-fication of CIE and development work. Yet, to change lives and societies “for the better” is notoriously difficult, if one accepts the need to do so at all. Defining what constitutes “better” is continuously up for debate. Nonetheless, the challenge to help improve people’s lives and well-being through education remains.

The field of international educational development has strong proponents and critics. The social science underpinnings of poverty and development show that today’s world remains a very difficult place for the poor and the poorly educated. Social scientists have a responsibility to be relevant and responsive, and apply tools that are both appropriate and sensitive to the contexts of people, education and development. Relevance and responsibility—deploying all of our methodological tools—should be the guideposts for an effective social science in the service of advancing the social good.

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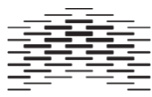


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