

## CHAPTER 5

# COMPARATIVE EDUCATION IN SPANISH-SPEAKING LATIN AMERICA: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter, the authors analyze the academic field of comparative education in Spanish speaking Latin America as a contested construction both in epistemological and political dimensions. First, the authors provide a brief historical account of the origin and development of comparative education in the region since the nineteenth century. Next, they focus on the current state of the field by addressing three aspects: (1) the institutional basis, specially the development of comparative education societies; (2) an account of the contributions of international organizations, both in terms of studies that have been recently conducted and of the development of data bases; and (3) an analysis of prevailing topics as well as theoretical and methodological approaches in a sample of articles published during the 2010-2017 period. The authors conclude by summarizing the main aspects of the current situation, and pointing to future epistemological and political challenges for the field in the region.*

**Keywords:** Comparative education; Latin America; academic societies; epistemological debates; research approaches; theoretical and methodological choices

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## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we analyze the academic field of comparative education in Spanish speaking Latin America as a contested construction both in the epistemological and political dimensions. We highlight some elements that provide a general picture of the current situation and possible future developments of the field in the region. Although the focus is on Spanish speaking countries, we make some references to the case of Brazil, as it makes it easier to understand regional dynamics.

We need to consider that the region is not only characterized by important common historical and cultural features but also significant diversity along demographic, economic, and political dimensions. The last decades have been characterized by both the consolidation of democratic rule and the persistence of high social inequalities. In the education sector, different kinds of reforms have been implemented reflecting disputed visions about the relationships between education and society, and including the influence of internationalization and globalization trends.

Comparative education has achieved a high level of institutionalization worldwide, as evident in the existence of university chairs, research centers, academic societies, and scientific journals. Such level of institutionalization, however, has not implied a consensus about its epistemological status (discipline, multidisciplinary field, method, focus) or about its own definition (Manzon, 2011). While some scholars advocate a science of educational comparison, which consists in the application of a comparative method to any educational problem, in the opposite pole the study of transnational educational phenomena is postulated without the need for an explicit comparative approach (Ferrer, 2002; Manzon, 2011).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the field has been traditionally characterized by the epistemological divide between nomothetic and ideographic approaches, with their respective emphases on formulating explanatory laws and understanding the particularities of individual cases; as well as by the tension between the academic purpose of understanding or explaining specific dimensions of education, and the interventionist or melioristic intents of transferring practices, ideas, and policies from one context to another (Nóvoa, 1998; Schriewer, 2014). More recently, the traditional focus on nation states has been challenged by theoretical approaches and research programs claiming that comparative education should adopt a world system or a world culture perspective which better responds to globalization and internationalization phenomena (Arnoe, 2009; Nóvoa, 1998).

On the other hand, we need to take into account the political nature of comparative education. Since its origins, comparative education research has been instrumental in creating hierarchies and legitimizing inequalities among nations (Krawczyk, 2013; Marginson & Mollis, 2001). Early developments of the field at the beginning of the twentieth century were addressed, in many cases, at meeting requirements of European colonial administrations. And from the 1950s, when the field began its consolidation in the United States and Europe, a high reliance on human capital and modernization theories was closely linked to the establishment of international cooperation structures and their prescriptions

for educational reform in the “Third World” or the “underdeveloped” countries (Nóvoa, 1998). More recently, new forms of regulation have developed, which promote worldwide particular educational models on the basis of comparative research and indicators that measure the “efficiency” and the “quality” of educational systems (Cowen, 2014; Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003).

Only during the last decades comparative education in Latin America has showed an incipient development, unlike a situation of relative consolidation in North America, Europe, and Oceania. As we will show in the next section, there are multiple reasons that explain this phenomenon, some of which may be traced to long-term economic and political instability. In spite of such precedents, national governments, and ministries of education along with some international agencies have made remarkable efforts in recent times in order to organize and update databases, and to publish reports that allow obtaining comprehensive views of regional trends as well as assessing the impacts of specific public policies and reformist processes. At the same time, national societies of comparative education are making vital contributions to the development of the field, reinforcing the growth of academic research projects and publications.

In the following section we provide a brief historical account of the origins and development of comparative education in Latin America since the nineteenth century. The next three sections focus on the current state of the field. The first one addresses its institutional basis, including the development of comparative education societies, journals, and academic centers; the second one provides an outlook of the role of international organizations in the production of comparative studies and data bases; and the third one presents an analysis of prevailing topics and research approaches in a sample of articles published during the 2010-2017 period. We conclude by summarizing the main aspects of the current situation, and pointing to future epistemological and political challenges for the field in the region.

## **COMPARATIVE EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA: SOME HISTORICAL NOTES**

We offer in this section a brief account of some key elements in the history of the field in the region.<sup>2</sup> Comparative education in Latin America is characterized by a weak and uneven development since the end of the nineteenth century (Acosta & Ruiz, 2018; Calderón López-Velarde, 2000; Fernández Lamarra, Mollis, & Dono Rubio, 2005). Factors that explain these features include limited development of educational research in general; the professional orientation of universities; persistent low levels of investment in research and development; and difficulties in producing and updating national indicators as well as regional and cross-national data bases. In addition, we need to take into account the dependent or subaltern status of the region in the global scenario, which entails “different constraints and possibilities concerning the process of research” (Vulliamy, Lewin, & Stephens, 1990, p. 4). Among the constraints, we can mention the global dynamics of academic production and dissemination that reinforce the peripheral

situation of universities and academic centers located outside central countries (Altbach, 1998). Furthermore, educational researchers in Latin America, in many cases, might have rejected comparative education approaches in favor of research perspectives that were seen as more sensitive to local cultures and power issues (Krawczyk, 2013).

The ways in which educational systems have developed, particularly their needs of both expert knowledge and legitimization at specific moments, are key elements for understanding how comparative education has unfolded in the region. The initial developments of the field were linked to the processes of creation of educational systems as part of the organization of nation-states after independence and civil wars. Albeit important variations in the way countries in the region organized education, a widespread trend consisted in establishing the State as provider of compulsory elementary education for securing cultural homogenization and loyalty to the nation (Tedesco, 2012). The experience of the travelers who brought ideas and practices from other countries, usually considered more advanced, for the improvement or even the creation of educational systems at home – which is recognized by several scholars (i.e., Altbach & Kelly, 1986; Nóvoa, 1998) as one of the first important precedents of comparative education – had significant impact in the Latin American region in the second half of the nineteenth century (Acosta & Ruiz, 2018). Educational models, policies, and even teachers, were introduced, mainly from France, Germany, and USA. On the other hand, there were very limited attempts at systematizing findings in a scientific manner.

During the decades of 1950, 1960, and 1970 international organizations, particularly United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), played a decisive role in producing regional studies and data bases that aimed at facilitating educational planning at the national level, as well as building regional consensus for educational reform (Fernández Lamarra et al., 2005). These initiatives were mainly driven by human capital theory and the human resources approach, which linked the expansion of educational systems to economic development (Tedesco, 2012). They involved establishing or strengthening national statistics systems, and developing sector diagnosis and needs assessment studies. A quite different, more holistic approach concerned with the multiple links between education and society was adopted in the “Development and Education in Latin America and the Caribbean” (DEALC) project, carried out in the 1975–1981 period with the participation of researchers from several countries (Rama, 1978).<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the work of national agencies and international organizations, the region showed very little theoretical and empirical production between the 1940s and 1980s – in particular from critical perspectives (Krawczyk, 2013) – with the exception of a few outstanding works (Fernández Lamarra et al., 2005). Mexico had some significant institutional activity in the 1970s and 1980s, with the publication of the *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos*, and the organization of both an annual meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society in 1978, and a Latin American Forum of Comparative Education held at the University of Colima in 1980 (Calderón López-Velarde, 2000). In general,

however, theoretical debates on comparative education from developed countries had little impact in the region, and the field consisted mostly of a few individuals with scarce exchange with other scholars from the region or overseas.

The decade of 1990 witnessed processes of deep educational reform throughout the region, with the involvement of regional and international organizations, and in the context of the recovery of democracy and of neoliberal economic adjustment. Compared to previous decades, UNESCO and Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) lost presence<sup>4</sup> while financial agencies – the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank – and new organizations, like the Partnership for Education Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL),<sup>5</sup> gained significant influence over the design of reforms (Espinoza, 2016).

A significant growth of comparative education studies was evident both in academic production and works from international organizations. The increase of studies and publications during the 1990s (Calderón López-Velarde, 2000) was part of a general growth of educational research in the region linked to educational reform policies, expansion of graduate programs, and governmental incentives to research, among other factors (Palamidessi, Gorostiaga, & Suasnábar, 2014). Initiatives of regional integration, like the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR),<sup>6</sup> and the revitalization of organizations like the *Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano* (CSUCA) had also important impact in fostering comparative education studies during the 1990s (Fernández Lamarra et al., 2005).

Educational reforms prompted studies on regional trends, comparisons between countries in the region, and analyzes of individual cases in terms of global imperatives. Studies from international organizations were particularly prone to identifying “good practices” or “lessons learned” that may be transferred from one country to another (Acosta & Ruiz, 2018), an exercise that could be seen as part of strategies for legitimizing homogeneous recipes of education reform (Krawczyk, 2013). Academic production, on the other hand, tended to portray regional patterns and national cases as the result of impositions from international organizations or the hegemony of neoliberal rationalities.

## INSTITUTIONAL BASIS

The analysis of the institutional dimension reflects the traditional weakness of comparative education in the region. However, as we will show in this section, we have witnessed in recent years an incipient expansion, with the creation of new national societies that have promoted scientific publications and meetings.

To date there are six comparative education societies that are currently active in Latin America: (1) the Argentinean Society of Comparative Studies in Education (SAECE); (2) the Mexican Society of Comparative Education (SOMECE); (3) the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education (SBEC); (4) the Venezuelan Society of Comparative Education (SVEC); (5) the Uruguayan Society of Comparative and International Education (SUECI); and (6) the Association of Pedagogues of Cuba – Comparative Education Section (APC-EC). Table 1 summarizes some

**Table 1.** Latin American Societies of Comparative Education.

Societies of Comparative Education	Foundation Year	Objectives	Study Areas (Only References for Latin America Based on Written Publications)	Affiliation Criteria	President
Argentinean Society of Comparative Studies in Education (SAECE)	2001	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote and disseminate the development of research and comparative studies in the area of education and culture.</li> <li>Organize congresses, seminars, courses, professional, and educational meetings focused on comparative studies.</li> <li>Promote the publication of bulletins, magazines, and books related to the academic and professional areas of society.</li> <li>Disseminate the activities of society in the country and abroad through all available means.</li> </ol>	<p>Comparative focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers in public education.</li> <li>Graduate education.</li> <li>English teaching as second language.</li> <li>Teacher training.</li> <li>Inclusive education.</li> <li>Social inequity in secondary education.</li> <li>Educational policies at all levels.</li> <li>Educational reform.</li> <li>School drop-out.</li> <li>Trajectory of faculty members.</li> <li>Use of information technologies in higher education.</li> <li>State of the art and updating in comparative education.</li> <li>Research methods in comparative education.</li> </ul>	<p>Researchers, policy-makers, teachers, and scholars from academic and professional areas related to comparative studies in education.</p>	<p>Norberto Fernández Lamarra</p>
Mexican Society of Comparative Education (SOMECE)	2003	Undeclared	<p>Comparative focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>University autonomy.</li> <li>High school curriculum.</li> <li>Evaluation of teacher performance in public education.</li> <li>Evaluation and accreditation in higher education.</li> <li>Globalization and internationalization of education.</li> <li>Free higher education.</li> <li>School leadership and teacher development.</li> </ul>	Undeclared.	<p>Zaira Navarrete Cazales</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational policies at all levels.</li> <li>• Education and gender.</li> <li>• Research methods in comparative education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational policies at all levels.</li> <li>• Education and gender.</li> <li>• Research methods in comparative education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational policies at all levels.</li> <li>• Education and gender.</li> <li>• Research methods in comparative education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational policies at all levels.</li> <li>• Education and gender.</li> <li>• Research methods in comparative education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational policies at all levels.</li> <li>• Education and gender.</li> <li>• Research methods in comparative education.</li> </ul>
<p>Brazilian Society of Comparative Education (SBEC)</p> <p>Venezuelan Society of Comparative Education (SVEC)</p>	<p>1983</p> <p>2000</p>	<p>Undeclared</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Analyze the current state of Education in Venezuela and the contributions for the improvement of Comparative Education.</li> <li>2. Disseminate and formulate proposals on public policies and research strategies in the educational field.</li> <li>3. Socialize research and comparative studies in academic communities and the general population, through the publication of a journal of the Venezuelan Comparative Education Society</li> </ol>	<p>Without own publication</p> <p>Without own publication</p>	<p>Luis Enrique Aguilar</p> <p>Luis Bonilla Molina</p> <p>It does not declare requirements. Educators and researches from the social science field with recognized academic and scientific careers or other professionals linked to the education sciences.</p>
<p>Uruguayan Society of Comparative and International Education (SUECI)</p> <p>Association of Pedagogues of Cuba – Comparative Education Section (APC-EC)</p>	<p>2011</p> <p>Not reported</p>	<p>Promote comparative studies in education at a national and international level.</p> <p>Without Information, nor official channel of disclosure</p>	<p>Without own publication</p> <p>Without own publication</p>	<p>Undeclared.</p> <p>Undeclared.</p>

of their main characteristics. SBEC and APC-EC were founded in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, while the other four societies were created after the year 2000.<sup>7</sup> All are part of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), a consultative body of UNESCO. In addition, it is worth mentioning that in 2014 the six Latin American societies of comparative education, along with those of Spain and Portugal, established the Ibero-American Comparative Education Society (SIBEC), which has already organized two congresses.

Among Latin American societies, only two have a regular channel of disclosure of their academic and research production, namely: SOMECE, that has co-published since its founding a total of 15 books with a comparative approach (in which there is an important collaboration of authors from Argentina), and SAECE, that has published uninterruptedly 12 issues of the *Latin American Journal of Comparative Education (Revista Latinoamericana de Educación Comparada – RELEC)*<sup>8</sup> since 2010. It is noteworthy that RELEC benefits from the collaboration of the other Ibero-American comparative education societies, whose representatives make up part of the Editorial Board. The other societies identified above, on the other hand, do not manage or sponsor journals or other publications. In 2017 the *Brazilian Journal of Comparative Education* was created. The journal, run by faculty from the State University of Campinas, has not yet launched the first issue, although it has already made a public call to receive contributions.

Three of the six societies (SAECE, SOMECE, and SBEC) have web pages, a tool that represents their main information channel. But while SAECE and SOMECE have well developed websites that seem to respond to their needs, SBEC has an Internet site with a precarious development that provides a low and outdated volume of information. On the other hand, SVEC, SUECI, and APC-EC do not even have institutional websites; only SVEC and SUECI have a blog for communicating news and activities, while APC-EC does not have any dissemination channel at all.

In terms of the organization of academic events (like seminars, meetings, and congresses) it is interesting to note the important role that some societies of comparative education have been playing in the Latin American region over the last decades. Until 2017, SBEC had organized seven National and International Meetings. It also hosted the Second Ibero-American Meeting of Comparative Education (SBEC does not disseminate the papers through its web portal) and its affiliates publish comparative education studies in various educational research journals. Unfortunately, given that intellectual production is not collected, it is not possible to have an opinion on the issues presented as well as the lines of work developed by researchers at meetings organized by SBEC. SOMECE, meanwhile, has promoted three Meetings of International and Comparative Education between 2013 and 2017, but it does not publish the papers presented either. SVEC, in turn, held its “First Congress of Comparative Education and Research” in 2015. In the same year, SUECI organized the “Seminar on Convergence and Development of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Role of Comparative Education in the Agenda for Educational Transformation.” SAECE, meanwhile, has organized six congresses between 2003 and 2017, and managed, in partnership



with the WCCES, the organization of the “XV World Congress of Comparative Education” held in Buenos Aires. In the case of SVEC, it is noteworthy the organization since 2012 of the Master’s Degree in Comparative Education of the *Gran Nacional de Educación* project within the *Alternativa Bolivariana para América Latina y el Caribe* (ALBA). This initiative has been promoted by the Bolivarian Government of Venezuela, with the participation of Cuba and Nicaragua, and the endorsement of the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC).

Regarding the issues addressed in the papers and the publications that result from the different activities they support, both SOMECE and SAECE are interested in the application of the comparative approach to schools and higher education institutions, educational policies, achievement and results studies, and management and accreditation in higher education. Moreover, SOMECE has a particular interest in studies of internationalization of education. In the case of SAECE congresses, the works that are accepted respond to a flexible concept of comparison, allowing also, as Acosta and Pérez Centeno (2011) show, for papers presenting individual case studies. SOMECE seems to have a similar approach in its publications, although the international and transnational dimensions are given some preeminence over national or institutional comparisons (see Navarro & Ornelas, 2013; Navarro Leal & Navarrete Cazales, 2015).

Other journals in the region that regularly publish essays and studies on comparative and international education are: in Brazil, *Educação & Sociedade* (University of Campinas), *Avaliação: Revista da Avaliação da Educação Superior* (University of Campinas); *Revista Brasileira de Educação* (ANPED – Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Educação); and *Cadernos de Pesquisa* (Carlos Chagas Foundation); in México, *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa*, edited by COMIE, *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos* from *Centro de Estudios Educativos, Perfiles Educativos* of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and *Revista de la Educación Superior*, of the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education; in Colombia, *Revista Colombiana de Educación*, of the National Pedagogical University; *Propuesta Educativa*, edited by FLACSO Argentina; and *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación Superior*, joint initiative of Universia (Ibero-American university collaboration network that integrates more than 1,169 universities and higher education institutions) and the Institute of Research on University and Education (IISUE), of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Outside Latin America, *Education Policy Analysis Archives (EPAA)* and *Revista Española de Educación Comparada* have become important channels for articles on comparative and international education written by authors based in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico.

Information about the number of courses and university chairs on comparative education in the region is scarce. A survey conducted by Fernandez Lamarra et al. (2005) found few courses at both graduate and undergraduate levels for the Argentinean case. In Mexico, in turn, by 2010 only 42 universities – 15 public and 27 private – offered diverse courses related to the field either in bachelor,

master, or doctorate programs, in a higher education system that includes more than 2,000 institutions (Navarro, Lladó, & Sánchez, 2010). And in Uruguayan universities teaching of comparative education appeared for the first time in 2006 (Martínez Larrechea, 2013).

There exist very few academic centers and networks exclusively devoted to comparative education, among them, *Centro de Políticas Comparadas de Educación* (CPCE) from Universidad Diego Portales (Chile); and a Permanent Inter-institutional Seminar on Comparative Education – created in 2006 and based at UNAM – that brings together some of the most prestigious scholars from the field in Mexico. On the other hand, it is possible to identify a trend of growing academic initiatives that contribute to the field in different ways. In the area of higher education the work of *Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo Andino* (CINDA) has been prominent. Since 2007, CINDA has produced every two years a Report on Higher Education in Ibero-America, based on national reports that are commissioned to researchers in each country and complemented with data from international agencies like UNESCO, World Bank, and OECD.<sup>9</sup> In recent years the initiative of the recently discontinued *Red de Investigadores Sobre Educación Superior* (RISEU) was also very valuable, bringing together scholars from Latin America and Spain with the support of the UNAM *Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y la Educación* (IISUE, Mexico). The possibilities offered by new communication technologies as well as funding from international agencies (e.g., the Alpha and Erasmus programs from the European Union) and some national governments have contributed to the implementation of several comparative research projects during the last 15 years, some of which have turned into permanent collaboration programs between institutions. In addition, networks like Red ESTRADO, which performs some comparative work on the issue of teachers work, have steadily grown in this period.

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

International organizations, in particular multilateral agencies, have continued to play an important role in the production of comparative education research as well as in building cross-national data bases in the region. During the decade of 2000, we can mention at least three examples of studies that had an important impact: a project of the Inter-American Development Bank about the 1990s education reform processes and results in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, which was carried out in collaboration with the ministries of education of the three countries (Carnoy, Cosse, & Cox, 2004); a study on teacher professionalization in four countries conducted by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO) branch in Buenos Aires (Tenti Fanfini, 2005); and the hemispheric projects sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS) in cooperation with ministries of education that covered the topics of secondary education, teacher training, and policies to prevent school failure.

Education studies with a comparative component have been also carried out, during the last years, by UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC), ECLAC, the EUROsociAL program of the European Commission, and the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI), among others. Some issues covered by those studies are: education for indigenous groups, teacher training policies, use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in schools, urban education and disadvantaged groups, school leadership, and technical/professional education. IIEP UNESCO currently carries out comparative studies on ICT and education programs, on policies of conditional cash transfer to schools, and, in partnership with the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE), on the education laws enacted in the region during the last years. UNESCO IESALC, for its part, has played a central role in producing and disseminating comparative studies in the sub-field of higher education, which stand as remarkable academic contributions: from general views of the situation and prospects of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean (Gazzola & Didriksson, 2008; IESALC, 2006; Rama, 2005) to the examination of specific issues like internationalization (Didou, 2006; Didou & Jaramillo, 2014); drop-out and repetition (IESALC/CINDA, 2006); and social responsibility of universities (Aponte Hernández, 2015). Much of its current comparative work is performed through groups like the *Observatorio sobre Movilidades Académicas y Científicas* (OBSMAC) and the *Observatorio Regional sobre Internacionalización y Redes en Educación Terciaria* (OBIRET), which are led by university-based researchers.

In addition, during the last years the development of regional data bases has experienced an extraordinary move forward, representing an important advance for education research, and particularly for regional studies and for comparisons between countries. Currently, IIEP-UNESCO Buenos Aires manages two Latin American information systems that produce key indicators as well as studies that analyze collected data: one for educational trends (SITEAL), in partnership with OEI, aimed at producing comparative information on educational systems in general; and the other focusing on early childhood (SIPI) in partnership also with OEI and with UNICEF TACRO. Moreover, OREALC has developed valuable databases constructed with the results of tests about learning achievements and performance levels in primary education, as well as information on factors associated with these results; these tests are designed by OREALC and applied at the national level (15 countries participated in the last edition in 2013). At the same time, OEI's *Instituto de Altos Estudios Universitarios* and the *Red Iberoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología* (RICYT) put together in 2016 a group of experts for the elaboration of a *Manual Iberoamericano de Indicadores de Educación Superior* (OEI, 2017). In response to the dispersion of existing indicators in different data bases (managed by governments, ministries of education, and national and international agencies), the precarious character of available data, and their lack of updating, this document proposes a set of consolidated indicators (about access, performance, funding, human resources, institutional structure among others) that might serve as basis for developing comparative studies in higher education.

UNESCO chairs, boosted in the region from the decade of 1990, represent another valuable resource for comparative education in the region. They provide a dissemination channel – through the organization of workshops, seminars, conferences as well as the publication of reports – of activities and academic production related to the field. However, to date no systematization of experiences or evaluations of this initiative have been conducted. Currently, there are eleven UNESCO chairs in higher education (UNESCO, 2017). Through an examination of their declared objectives, it is possible to conclude that they focus on issues of university management, innovation, inclusion, and policies. The scholars who have been distinguished with appointments in these chairs belong to seven countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, and Mexico.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, we wish to mention the role of non-governmental organizations in fostering comparative studies and reports. Two relevant examples in this sense are the case of the Education Program of the Inter-American Dialogue (formerly PREAL), that has regularly launched regional reports assessing the performance of educational systems along various dimensions; and CLADE, whose advocacy efforts include the implementation of some academic work, like a recent study on educational privatization trends in Latin America and the Caribbean (CLADE, 2014). In addition, there have been other remarkable initiatives, like the study jointly conducted by four national teachers unions about the reforms implemented during the 1990s in the Southern Cone (CTERA et al., 2005); as well as the work of the Latin American Forum on Educational Policies (FLAPE), which produced and disseminated various studies aiming at building a critical regional view on key policy issues.

## SOME FEATURES OF ACADEMIC PRODUCTION

There are few works that study patterns and characteristics of comparative education academic production in the region. Navarro and Ornelas (2013) have recently analyzed epistemological and theoretical approaches for the Mexican case. After remarking the hegemony of functionalism and positivism in the first works of the 1960s and the subsequent challenge from neo-Marxist and postmodern views, they state that

Currently it seems there is a predominance of different neo positivist models, especially among scholars that use quantitative techniques. Other colleagues do work from anthropological and ethnographic perspectives and some others adhere to neo institutionalist methods. (p. 52)

In the context of Argentina, a bibliographic analysis of comparative education articles published in the 1997–2014 period found a strong dominance of higher education and governance as thematic areas, along with a geographical concentration in single-unit studies of Argentina and of Latin America as a region (Gorostiaga, Fanego, & Ferrere, 2015). And a survey of papers presented at three Latin American congresses of comparative education (years 2005, 2007, and 2009) showed a predominance of qualitative methods and of single-unit studies,

as well as a focus on universities and national education systems, as opposed to studies on schools or on sub-national levels (Acosta & Pérez Centeno, 2011).

In order to obtain a general overview of some of the features of the recent academic production from Spanish speaking Latin America, we analyzed the articles published in RELEC – the journal that is published by the Argentinean society (SAECE) with support from the other Ibero-American societies of comparative education – from 2010 (issue number 1) to 2017 (issue number 12). As Wolhuter (2008, p. 324) argues, “journal analyses have proved to be an effective way to reveal the identity and trends constituting an area of study.” The analysis covered authors’ country of institutional affiliation, themes, levels of analysis, number of units, geographical foci, and research strategies.

We identified 53 articles, by considering only those in which the first author belongs to an institution based on a Spanish speaking Latin American country.<sup>11</sup> Their distribution in terms of first authors’ nationality (see Table 2) indicates a possible bias, since Argentina and, to a lesser extent, Mexico present high percentages of articles that do not necessarily represent their actual weight in the regional academic production,<sup>12</sup> while the rest of the region has a marginal presence. Only two articles have authorship from more than one country, corresponding to authors from Argentina in collaboration with authors from Brazil, in one case, and from Uruguay, in the other case.

In terms of thematic focus, we may begin by noting that five issues featured a dossier or special section on a particular theme. These were: “New times for public education systems” (issue number 4, 2013); “Internationalization of higher education” (issue number 5, 2014); “New approaches to the State, the local, the global, and comparative studies in education” (issue number 6, 2014); “Education for All 2015: balance and prospective for or from Latin America” (issue number 8, 2015); and “Evaluating the evaluation of education. How much do systems of evaluation improve education?” (issue number 12, 2017). The first three dossiers consisted of papers presented at the WCCE Congress, held in Buenos Aires in 2013, while the other two were based on open calls of contributions.

Table 3 shows the distribution of articles by research theme, showing only those themes that present three or more works. The topic of Governance, that concentrates 20.7% of the articles, includes different aspects of the regulation of

**Table 2.** Articles by First Authors’ Nationality (Based on Institutional Affiliation).

Nationality	Frequency
Argentina	30
Mexico	14
Chile	3
Uruguay	2
Colombia	1
Costa Rica	1
Paraguay	1
Venezuela	1
Total	53

**Table 3.** Distribution of Articles by Predominant Themes.

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Governance	11	20.7
Teachers	7	13.2
Equality in education	6	11.3
Virtual education	3	5.7
Pedagogy	3	5.7
Other	23	43.4
Total	53	100

educational systems, but it is noteworthy that most cases focus on evaluation at the higher education level. Articles on Teachers address teacher education policies, career and trajectories, and performance evaluations. Equality in education, in turn, comprises works on the right to education, inclusion policies and programs, and access to universities. Besides a few articles on Virtual Education and on Pedagogy, with three articles each, other themes that were the focus of one or two articles each include educational funding, technical/professional education, citizen education, sexual education, student mobility, and research methodology. In addition, from an analysis that cuts across the different themes, we found that 35 articles (66%) address issues of educational policy, a prevalence that is in line with the idea of the high interrelationship between comparative education and education policy (Cowen, 2006; Crossley & Watson, 2009).

In analyzing the distribution by education levels (Table 4), we found that most articles concentrate on higher education (34%) and on basic education (30.2%), a category that accounts for compulsory levels as a whole.<sup>13</sup> A significant amount of articles (17%) – which includes two works on technical/professional education as well as one study about adult education – focuses on secondary education, a level that has been the object of recent reforms throughout the region. Only two articles are devoted to teacher training (which is, in fact, part of the higher education system in most countries), while there is absence of studies on non-formal education and on initial/early childhood education.

Table 5 shows the distribution of articles by levels of analysis, taking into account Wolhuter's (2008) classification. Choices about both levels of analysis and number of units are significant elements in the discussions about the field. As we pointed out in the Introduction, the traditional focus of comparative education on national education systems has been challenged during the last decades by theoretical approaches that argue for the need of higher levels (regions and world) analyzes, but also for considering local and institutional dynamics more carefully. On the other hand, debates about the paradoxical dominance of single-unit studies and about how much actual comparison is done or should be done in comparative education research have been salient (Epstein, 1992; Rust, Soumaré, Pescador, & Shibuya, 1999; Steiner-Khamsi, 2010).<sup>14</sup>

In our sample country level studies (66%) clearly dominates over other levels, followed by articles that focus on a regional level (15%). The studies that address the institutional level take the university as object of inquiry, which means that

**Table 4.** Distribution of Articles by Educational Level.

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Higher education	18	34.0
Primary education	16	30.1
Secondary/middle Education system	9	17.0
Teacher training	3	5.7
Not specified	2	3.8
Total	5	9.4
	53	100

**Table 5.** Distribution of Articles by Levels of Analysis.

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Region	8	15.1
Supra-country	1	1.8
Country	35	66.0
Sub-country	3	5.7
Institution	3	5.7
Theory and methodology	3	5.7
Total	53	100

there are no studies on the school as institution. Another point to make is the absence of studies for categories as world, continent, classroom, and individual, as well as the small presence of articles focusing on methodological and theoretical dimensions. As a whole, a traditional approach that privileges the analysis of national education systems seems to prevail, even though theoretical perspectives on globalization and on world culture are profusely cited. In terms of number of units, it is interesting to note that although single-unit studies have an important weight, they are not dominant. Within country-level studies, 69% of the articles employ two or more units. At the same time, all studies at the regional level are single-unit works about Latin America, but they usually rely on references to national cases to illustrate regional patterns.

Regarding the geographical foci of the articles, there is an almost exclusive concentration in Latin America. Very few works analyze cases outside the region, and always in comparison with regional cases: Argentina and Spain; Cordoba (Argentina) and Cataluña (Spain); Mexico and Spain; and France and Mexico. Besides, there was one study conducted in Canada about student mobility from Mexico and Venezuela. In country, sub-country and institutional level articles there is strong trend toward authors' countries of institutional affiliation, which results in a dominance of Argentina and Mexico as geographical foci. On the other hand, there are just four studies about Central American countries, while Peru, Ecuador, and Venezuela are included in only one article each, and Cuba and Dominican Republic in none.

In Table 6 we present the distribution of articles by research strategies in terms of data collection/production, following, in an adapted way, the categories

**Table 6.** Distribution of Articles by Research Strategies.

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Content analysis	31	37.7
Literature review	22	26.8
Interviews and focus groups	10	12.2
Existing data	9	11.0
Historical	3	3.7
Observation	3	3.7
Questionnaire	3	3.7
Statistical analysis	1	1.2
Total	82	100

*Note:* Most studies employ more than one strategy, resulting in a total of 82 strategies for the 53 articles.

proposed by Rust et al. (1999). Here we need to consider that each study may employ more than one strategy. The most employed strategy was content analysis, applied mainly to laws and other normative texts, official documents, curriculum documents, and teaching programs. In second place, reviews of secondary literature were used in 22 articles. Quantitative strategies include existing data research, which involves the descriptive use of numeric data sets coming from national and international surveys and from census; the administration of questionnaires; and the application of statistical analysis to existing numeric data. The overall picture shows a high dominance of qualitative over quantitative methods. It may also be noted that fieldwork methods (interviews and focus groups, participant and non-participant observation, and questionnaires) are employed in a minority of studies.

Although our analysis did not include a close reading of each article that would allow for a more informed view about theoretical choices and the implicit or explicit adherence to a particular approach to comparative education, we are able to make a few general considerations based on the previous description and a rapid examination of methodological and theoretical frames:

1. “Multiple comparative educations,” to employ Cowen’s (2000) expression, are present in the sample, from institutional or country case studies to analysis of regional trends to comparisons of specific dimensions of three or four national education systems. Besides, we identified a few articles whose connections to comparative and international education – in any of its multiple definitions or delimitations – seem virtually inexistent, as they do not use any theory or data allowing for an, albeit partial, comparative, or international analysis.
2. Articles that explicitly rely on conceptual and methodological developments from comparative education comprise less than half of the sample. The bibliographic references they use are mainly from authors from English speaking countries, particularly USA. A few authors from inside the region are cited.
3. A high percentage of studies (36%) are purely descriptive, with no explicit conceptual framework that guides the analysis; these studies are, in most cases, comparisons between countries. In addition, there is another group of works



of significant weight (21%) that makes explicit theoretical choices, but from outside the field, mainly from didactics, pedagogic, and sociologic sources.<sup>15</sup>

## THE FUTURE OF CE IN SPANISH SPEAKING LATIN AMERICA

The previous analysis of the current situation of comparative education in Spanish speaking Latin America shows an encouraging scenario, in line with other analyzes that see a “flourishing” of the field in the region (Acosta & Ruiz, 2018; Navarro & Ornelas, 2013). This present picture owes much of its positive aspects to the role of different actors from governmental, both multilateral and non-governmental regional/international organizations, and the academic world. In addition, both historical features of the way comparative education has unfolded in the region (Acosta & Ruiz, 2018) and recent global trends (Navarro & Ornelas, 2013) play an important role in the form and dynamics that the field adopts at this time.

In institutional terms, we wish to emphasize the vitality of existing national societies, which – together with the recently created Ibero-American society – have implemented fundamental actions for the growth of the field. Institutionalization, however, shows an uneven development among countries. The formation of new national societies, as well as the establishment of new academic centers devoted to comparative education, would surely give a more decisive impulse to the field in the region. In relation to collaborative efforts, like the ones that exist among national societies, it should be noted that cooperation and exchange within Latin America and with Spain looks strong, but links with researchers from other regions are scarce, with the exception of a few scholars from other European countries and USA. We found particularly regrettable the lack of south–south cooperation in comparative education projects.

Among other issues to highlight is the remarkable development of comparative studies on higher education, previously noted by Acosta and Pérez Centeno (2011) and by Chiancone and Martínez (2012), the latter emphasizing the weight of comparative *policy* studies. Our survey of the academic production also showed a significant number of studies on secondary education, while both initial and adult education appear as areas with almost no comparative research. Another area that seems to receive relatively low attention in the academic production is that of methodological and theoretical reflection.

A second point to make is that while, as we showed in the previous section, “multiple comparative educations” (Cowen, 2000) are at play, some approaches and perspectives have had a low level of endorsement, like, for instance, world system and world culture analyzes. Another example in this sense is the prevalence of a policy perspective in contrast with the low employment of cross-cultural approaches, in a region with a great cultural diversity and where many inequalities are linked to ethnicity and socio-economic status. In addition, comparisons with other regions of the world are almost absent, while comparisons at sub-national and institutional levels are rather unusual. In our view, possible paths to

follow in order to strengthen comparative education in the region include increasing dialogue and exchange between different approaches; conducting studies that take more advantage of existing data bases; and advancing discussion of theoretical and methodological choices, including the exploration for new approaches as well as the problematization of how existing ones apply to different national and local contexts.

Finally, we believe that today some of the most critical challenges for comparative education are connected to the situation of educational systems in the region. In the last two decades, most countries have experienced significant advances in terms of increasing equal access and attention to diversity, which contrast with persistent debts for achieving quality education for all that contributes to more just societies. When we write this chapter we are just a few months away from the Third Regional Conference on Higher Education, which will take place in the city of Córdoba (Argentina) as a tribute to the University Reform of 1918 and the democratization impulse it represented for the whole region. The Conference will actualize debates about the right to education and the commoditization of educational provision. This represents only one of the multiple issues for which theoretical and empirical contributions from comparative education may be relevant in a regional scenario signed by social and political tensions, as well as intense global pressures. In this regard, we consider that comparative education in the region should assume – from a pluralistic stance both theoretical and ideological – the tasks of developing studies that address issues like the links between models of development and education, while, at the same time, furthering critical reflection about how academic research engages with policy debates.

## NOTES

1. The field, however, seems to get closer to the latter position. This is not surprising, given that there is no agreement about what it means to compare in methodological terms (Epstein, 1992; Rust, Soumaré, Pescador, & Shibuya, 1999), and that it is evident that comparison is not a dominant methodology among the members of this academic community (Rust et al., 1999; Steiner-Khamsi, 2010).

2. For a more complete historical account, see Acosta and Ruiz (2018).

3. The DEALC Project was sponsored by UNESCO, the United Nations Development Program, and the ECLAC. It had also the support from nine governments in the region.

4. Nevertheless, both organizations played key roles in building consensus among countries for the implementation of reforms as well as in articulating a vision for the restructuring of education (Tedesco, 2012).

5. PREAL was a network of private and public organizations jointly managed by the Inter-American Dialogue and *Corporación de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo* (CINDE, Chile), launched in 1995 as a result of the Miami Summit of the Americas. From 2010 the program was absorbed within the Inter-American Dialogue.

6. Established in 1991 by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, MERCOSUR incorporated, later on, other countries like Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela as partners or associates. Its education sector has been particularly active in fostering processes of harmonization at the university level.

7. In the creation and consolidation of these societies, various world congresses held in the region seem to have played a significant role (i.e., Sixth Congress held in Rio de Janeiro

in 1987, Twelfth Congress in Havana in 2004, Fifteenth Congress in Buenos Aires in 2013) along with meetings sponsored by the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) of the United States (conferences of 1978 and 1997 in Mexico City).

8. It publishes research, essays, and reviews that account for regional production, and also includes a significant number of collaborations by scholars from the United States and Europe.

9. CINDA reports include relevant data on Latin American higher education systems in the following areas: institutional structure, access, teaching staff, training of advanced human capital, funding, government, management, and quality assurance (<http://www.cinda.cl/>).

10. No systematized information was found on chairs covering other educational levels and topics, but we should note the existence of chairs with significant links with comparative education, like the one on “Education and future for Latin América: reforms, changes, and innovations,” based at Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, Argentina.

11. Articles that were left out include a large number of works by authors from Brazil and Spain, other articles by authors from USA and European countries, and two articles with participation of scholars from Spanish speaking Latin American countries, but not as first authors.

12. The high percentage of authors based at Argentinean institutions may be due to the fact that the journal is published by the Argentinean society of comparative education, while the case of Mexican authors may be explained by the close relationship between both societies.

13. Currently, in most Latin American countries compulsory education comprises one or two years of initial education in addition to primary and both lower and upper secondary levels.

14. As it is argued in the literature, single-case studies might be considered as comparative research as long as they engage in “implicit” (Carnoy, 2006) or “contextual comparisons” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010).

15. We need to acknowledge that this is a highly interpretive consideration since the borders of the field are not fixed, but in continuous disputation.

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