


EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

# Expanding Our Ways of Seeing through Comparative and International Histories of Education

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## Why look abroad?

One reason is to understand a world that continues to grow smaller. Recent migration patterns, economic networks, and new technologies have altered how the local relates to the global. These developments have allowed people, ideas, and material culture to move across physical and political boundaries with greater frequency and volume. As such, understanding the present and anticipating the future will increasingly require a global understanding of the past.<sup>1</sup>

But looking abroad also has the power to teach us about ourselves—prompting us to see in new ways. Scholars of education specializing in international comparative work, for instance, help us better understand what’s possible. Such work can show a fuller range of how educational institutions might be structured and how their processes might be understood. That’s not to say that all comparisons are valuable. Problems like overgeneralization, oversimplification, and misrepresentation can often plague such efforts. And the idea of applying “lessons” from one setting to another, regardless of contextual differences, can be unproductive, however enticing. Nevertheless, by de-normalizing the familiar, comparative and international viewpoints allow us to see the water in which we swim.<sup>2</sup>

Historians, even if they don’t cast their gazes abroad, can lay claim to similar contributions. The idea that the past is equivalent to “a foreign country” is perhaps

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<sup>1</sup>Macelo M. Suárez-Orozco, ed., *Humanitarianism and Mass Migration: Confronting the World Crisis* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Kimberly Clausen, Open: *The Progressive Case for Free Trade, Immigration, and Global Capital* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Richard Baldwin, *The Great Convergence: Information Technology and the New Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Akira Iriye, ed., *Global Interdependence: The World after 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010); Pasi Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 3.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2021); Amanda Ripley, *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014); Philip Altbach, *Global Perspectives on Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Andrew Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley, *The Global Fourth Way: The Quest for Educational Excellence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2012).

too reductive to be true in any meaningful way. Yet the study of history does expose us to different assumptions, beliefs, customs, and culture. When we visit the past—as authors and as readers—we open the door to another reality with a range of familiar and unfamiliar forces shaping the human experience. As historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban once put it, history provides us a whole storehouse of experiments on those who came before us.<sup>3</sup> The result, whatever the context of the study—whether foreign or domestic, ancient or modern—is that it expands our ways of seeing.

In light of this, international and comparative histories—like those in this issue—are particularly useful for decentering perspectives rooted in the here and now. They enhance our understanding of others; but they also offer new ways of thinking about ourselves. Readers of this issue will travel vast distances in time and space, often moving back and forth across borders. Some might even come away from these manuscripts with a fuller sense of how people think and act in different settings and circumstances. After all, like great literature, such histories broaden us.

It's worth noting here that the History of Education Society Presidential Address is also included in these pages, and it marks a very welcome addition. Unlike the rest of this issue, which features four articles and a policy dialogue—works focused on the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and the global phenomenon of climate change—Christopher M. Span's address begins and ends at home. It reminds us that the past, though it has many purposes, always matters for its own sake. Whoever we are, and wherever we are in the world, history offers us a record of what was, so that we might know our stories.

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<sup>3</sup>David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 6. Tyack often shared this idea of history-as-experiments with students and colleagues.