

## CROSS CULTURAL INTERVIEWING IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION RESEARCH-A MEANS TO GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING

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### **Abstract**

*Most of the conflicts, be it at local or international level, thrive on ignorance. The root cause of these disputes could be traced down to the belief of superiority of one over the other. It is through education that one can develop global understanding by getting to know of cultures other than ours. And for this, 'if education is to contribute to the full realization of the individual, teachers and other educators remain key actors' (UNESCO,2015, p.54). Cross cultural comparative studies can be one route towards developing our own capacities as educators entrusted with the task of illuminating young minds in our classrooms. The present paper aims to illustrate the role of cross cultural interviewing in comparative education research toward enhancing global understanding. It will demonstrate how a meaningful partnership between interviewer and interviewee in cross national and cross-cultural research in the field of teacher education enabled not only a comparative study of pre-service teacher education in an Indian and a Chinese university but led towards achievement of the one of the goals of education; 'developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual values (UNESCO, 1996, p. 18).*

**Keywords:** *Comparative education research, cross cultural, interviewing*



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### **Introduction**

Linking higher education to society and developing meaningful partnership with all the stakeholders in education is indeed need of the hour. In these times of global conflict education can definitely play pivotal role in fostering such partnerships. Education is that bridge that will facilitate the smooth transition of the individuals from being the citizens of one nation to the citizens of world. Education can empower young minds to lead the changes that we desire to see in the world around us.

One way that we as educators can contribute to this goal is through undertaking researches using a comparative approach.

As pointed by Kandel in his 1933 landmark book that:

the chief value of a comparative approach to such problems [as conflicts, lacunae in education systems etc.] lies in an analysis of the causes which have produced them, in a comparison of the differences between the various systems and the reasons underlying them, and, finally, in a study of solutions attempted.

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The benefits of comparative approach can be further harvested by undertaking cross national comparative studies for promoting global understanding and transformation. This paper aims to illustrate the role of cross cultural interviewing in comparative education research toward enhancing global understanding. Its objective is to demonstrate how meaningful partnership between interviewer and interviewee in cross national and cross-cultural research in the field of teacher education enabled a step further towards one of the goals of education; 'developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual values (UNESCO,1996, p. 18).

### **Comparative approach for global understanding**

In today's era of globalization, for every nation, knowing about other nations is now not only a matter of curiosity but of necessity. The power to see education systems of other countries not only as they appear in their own national context but in terms of other systems is an important goal of comparative education. Naturally, the classic approach to comparative education has comprised country- or systems based comparisons, usually in the form of two-location study (Adamson 2012). Studying education through a comparative educationist lens is gaining insight into the history, politics, economics and sociology of the nation.

Moreover, through the study of foreign education system 'one studies not solely to know the foreign people but also- and perhaps most of all- to know one self' (Bereday, 1964, p. 7). Comparative studies, thus, have the potential to create greater global understanding.

Unfortunately, 'if there is any area in education faculties in Indian universities that is treated with scant attention, it is comparative education' (Singh 2011, p 254). One reason could be that in practice most comparative research requires construction of understanding and building bridges 'and this in turn requires interaction and personalization' (Bray, Adamson & Mason 2014, p.426).

Interviewing is one method which experts say that gives the possibility of an ethnographic approach whereby the goal involves understanding the shared experiences, practices and beliefs that arise from shared cultural perspectives (Brenner, 2006). Using a *responsive style* of interviewing which provides scope for 'adjusting the design as you go along' (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 44), this researcher could take risks, explore a bit of oneself, one's own fears and one's own areas of ignorance; thereby making it a suitable tool for cross cultural interviewing and also develop her own global understanding. In her doctoral research, "Pre-service teacher education for secondary school teachers in Indian and Chinese university- a

comparative study”, an ethnographic approach to interviewing was used whereby the goal was understand experiences, practices and beliefs that arose from shared cultural perspectives (Brenner 2006). This enabled a robust cross national cross-cultural comparative research.

### **Methodology**

The present analysis and discussion is based on interviews conducted by this author henceforth referred to also as interviewer. She examined data collected from: (1) audio tapes interviews of 12 teachers teaching in secondary schools in Hong Kong interviewed between 01 February 2017 to 23 March 2017 (2) detail transcripts of the interviews (3) interviewer’s field notes (4) communication between the interviewees and interviewer before and after the interviewees.

The researcher personally transcribed each of the interviews and listened to the audiotape of the original interviews a few times. She listened particularly for verbal and nonverbal indicators of the nature of the interviewer–interviewee relationship and changes in the tempo of the interview over time. The author read the transcript of the original interview several times, and wrote an interpretation in which she divided the interview into structural units or phases and identified and discussed salient moments in the interviews. In this article, she shares her findings and analysis.

These interviews were situated in context of interviewer being an Indian teacher educator registered in a University in India working on her doctoral research interviewing participants living in Hong Kong (Republic of China’s Special Administrative Region).

The author acknowledges that the analysis is affected by the knowledge and positionalities of the interviewer (Sands, Bourjolly&Roer- Strier,2007) whereby she brings in her knowledge of the other interviews conducted in this study; personal experiences as teacher, teacher educator from India and cross-cultural understanding gained from her extended stay in location of the interviews. The interviewer is an Indian who considers herself global citizen, 43-year old woman. During the course of the interviews she was devoting her time majorly for doctoral research and while she practiced as a professional coach.

Out of the total 12 interviewees, 9 teachers served in local Hong Kong schools while 3 worked in international schools. 1 teacher out of 9 local school teachers was of Indian origin and the rest were local Chinese teachers. The 3 international school teachers were of Indian origin. The local school teachers all prepared their students for the Hong Kong Diploma in Secondary Education (HKDSE) while 2 international school teachers delivered the IGCSE/

IB curriculum and the other worked in a school where she transacted IGCSE as well as American Curriculum. 4 out of 12 teachers offered to speak on phone while the remaining eight were willing for a face to face interview. The interviews lasted an average 45 minutes. Follow up communication was done via WhatsApp communication. Each of these interviews except one were recorded. The researcher met 2 teachers in their schools while the other 3 met in coffee shops and 3 in open public places. Teachers preferred timing as early as 11am in the morning to as late as 9.30pm in the evening.

The quotations that appear in this paper are taken directly from the interview transcripts.

Pseudonyms are used as is a common practice in qualitative research since ethical issues are especially critical in qualitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

As we move to the findings and analysis section of this paper, it is worthwhile to note that it is often difficult to distinguish in a qualitative study between the reporting of findings and the interpretation of the findings, attempt has been made to relate this researcher's findings to previously published studies. Interpretations will also involve the researcher's personal reflections because as a qualitative researcher, "the researcher has typically invested considerable time and emotional energy in collecting and analyzing data" (Lodico, 2010, p. 194)

### **Findings and discussion**

The adoption of a comparative perspective with its emphasis on the importance of context also applies to the very tool of inquiry; in this case interviews (Katyal & King, 2013). The interviews analyzed in this paper were set in Hong Kong, SAR of People's Republic of China. Situated on the edge of a once Communist monolith that is also the homeland of the ancient Chinese civilization, the polity of Hong Kong is essentially a British creation. While the population is predominantly Chinese, the administration and laws are still in the British tradition. The average population density was 6 690 people per square kilometer. Chinese and English are the official languages of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is also a major service economy, with particularly strong links to mainland China and the rest of the Asia-Pacific region.

Education is the largest element of government spending, accounting for about one-fifth of the total government expenditure in 2015-16. It is the Hong Kong government's policy initiative to develop the city as a regional education hub (Wai, 2010).

Interviews conducted within this unique cultural, political and social context offered a quite a few opportunities to develop first hand understanding of one of the oldest cultures in the world viz the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) right through the three phases of the process.

### **Pre-interview phase**

It began with the preparation of the interview protocol. Being a comparative study it was advisable to prepare a tool applicable for use both with teachers in Mumbai as well as teachers in Hong Kong. However, the researcher had to bear in mind that most people in Hong Kong considered their English “*not good*”. This learning came from her regular interaction with locals.

Gaining access to interviews through formal channels (like school heads, teachers associations) began to appear formidable as one learnt the hard way the “importance of having ‘right’ connections” (locally known as *guanxi*) to obtain necessary permissions” (Katyal & King, 2013)- another characteristic of CHC. The researcher then had to cultivate her *guano*(social contacts) to reach out. WhatsApp messages were sent to friends appealing to help reach out to secondary school teachers in their network of families and friends. After writing to almost 50 people, followed by follow up calls and chats, finally access to the 12 interviewees was gained.

After basic introductions on WhatsApp, the interview appointments were fixed. It took about one day to 2 and a half months to procure the appointments. This could be even be attributed to Hong Kong people’s reluctance of being interviewed (Katyal & King, 2013) or it could even be due to Hong Kong teachers are so well paid that “every hour of their expensive time is extracted, both in school hours and after” (Biggs & Watkins, 2001, p.287). Out of the total teachers interviewed only 2 teachers were comfortable calling this researcher to their schools. The rest preferred meeting in coffee shops near the MassTransit Railway (MTR). One preferred meeting at the university premise where he was studying for his Masters of Education degree. Out of these, it came in as a shocker when one of the interviewees, male teacher with 28 years of experience, Micky Zhang, invited the researcher to meet at 9.30pm in the evening. This interview was conducted in a local tea shop as against the Starbucks and Pacific Coffee that the researcher was used to. This corroborated with Wei & Li (2005) observation that below the veneer of a westernized modern community, there exists a society where traditional values and prejudices hold sway.

Being the first interview, the researcher had to contact local friends and associates to confirm whether he needs to be addressed as Mr. Zhang or Zhang *laoshe* (*laoshe* is teacher in Cantonese; the local language). This itself posed a difficulty as the researcher was unfamiliar with the surname and its correct pronunciation in. However, after an initial confusion over greeting; whether to shake hands or not, the interviewee insisted that he be called just Micky. Talking to him the researcher understood that while books and guides might teach local Hong Kong etiquettes, one will have to be confident and open to be pleasantly surprised.

### **During interview phase**

At the outset, it is worthwhile to note that participants who met face to face were willing to spend longer time and offered valuable insights before and at times even after the actual interview was over and the recorder was turned off. Like the time when an interviewer Osmond walked up the interviewer to the nearest MTR and in the course of the way explained the entire Band system of classification of Hong Kong schools.

On occasions, there were doubts about the interviewer's intent. The secondary teacher of Indian origin said,

“Shamim, there have been a lot of people in.. where we live who wanted to become teachers. I think I have spoken to 5 to 6 people. As of date at least 6 out of them are teachers. So I have tried to help as much as I possibly can”

-Mrs. Anita

In another case when asked “How far has the teacher education programme prepared you for your role as a secondary school teacher?”, I felt my defence mechanism coming into play when she replied,

“So, one thing lacking in Indian education system was how to make it really interesting, how to motivate students from outside...”

-Ms. Menaka

While these were the vignettes with teachers from the same country as I but currently based in Hong Kong, there was another case where the local teacher momentarily aroused my ignorance of my own country by suddenly asking,

“Ya. At that time like that. I am not sure in your country it is like that..there are lots of chances to enter university?”

-Ms. Hu

To this I had no answer and had to admit the same.

Overcoming such moments with honest admission helped with the cross-cultural interviewing becoming a collaborative performance in which both the interviewer and the interviewee crossed cultural boundaries that included definitions of physical space, negotiations of social roles, and creation of a new kind of interpersonal context (Brenner 2006). In this case the interview eventually led to invitation to local Toastmasters Club (for which this teacher was President) and thus an opportunity to understand the local culture still better.

In another case, when the interviewer was in dilemma was when asked,

“hmmm..in a school environments..I don't know about India, but in Hong Kong we have special characteristic..do you realize? Especially teachers....most off the teachers we have special character”

-Ms. Wai

This statement left the researcher nonplussed because here was an instance to show how “in Chinese societies, people’s meanings is often deeply embedded in what they are saying and people with the same orientation would be able to gauge the sub- context of such meanings” (Katyal& King, 2013)

### **Post interview phase**

While “one further obstacle commonly encountered in comparative education is that of language” (Bray, 2004 p248), this researcher realised even with same language one had to deal with understanding in different accent. Although the interviews were conducted purely in English, talking to people with different accents posed its own challenges. Like in the case when during transcription one realized that when the teacher replied that,

“I studied at Robert Black College” the interviewee had asked, “where is this college of Education?”.

-Ms. Li

This despite of having read up all about history of teacher education in Hong Kong. The only thing was one could not understand due to difference in accent. It was even noted how the interviewer’s voice lowered as she spoke at times very softly perhaps due to lack of confidence while having to deal with an interviewee who was not only senior by age but belonged to another CHC culture where seniors are held in high regards.

It was learning from this transcription that the interviewer made it a point to ask, “How did you feel during the interview?”. To which one respondent replied, “I was nervous. But you made me comfortable”.

- Ms. Yang

### **In conclusion**

As one reviews the above examples from interviewing in a cross-cultural set up, the researcher realizes that ultimately her experience as experience as an educator and training as a Coach helped tremendously. This was in congruence to finding one’s own style as a focused conversationalist and feeling comfortable with interviewees is the key to a good interview study (Brenner, 2006). Strategies like the one mentioned above along with acknowledging differences, joining where there were commonalities and opening up space for pain (Sands, Bourjolly & Roer-Struer, 2007) ultimately led to successfully winding up of the interviews. The researcher finally understanding what Adamson (2012) meant when he wrote, “Comparative education research needs you to be sensitive to the multiple layers in which cultural influences operate” and thus broaden one’s own horizons and global understanding.

In most research, it is implied that the researcher is required to maintain an epic perspective and remain detached and objective. However, it is clear from the above findings and discussions that in practice most comparative research requires construction of understanding and building of bridges. This interaction and personalization of research makes comparative approach an apt tool for fostering meaningful partnerships and global understanding.

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