

BOOK REVIEW

Jost Reischmann (Ed.). *Essential readings in international and comparative adult education* Ziel Verlag, Augsburg, 2021, 320 pp. ISBN978-3-96557-093-1 (pbk)

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Πᾶσα τέχνη καὶ πᾶσα μέθοδος, ὁμοίως δὲ πράξις τε καὶ προαίρεσις, ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ· διὸ καλῶς ἀπεφώνησαντο τὰγαθόν, οὗ πάντ' ἐφίεται. διαφορὰ δὲ τις φαίνεται τῶν τελῶν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ εἰσιν ἐνέργειαι, τὰ δὲ παρ' αὐτὰς ἔργα τινά. ὧν δ' εἰσὶ τέλη τινὰ παρὰ τὰς πράξεις, ἐν τοῦτοις βελτίω πέφυκε τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τὰ ἔργα. Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, (1094a-1094b).

"Every technical skill and every cognitive activity, similarly, every action and every process of choice and preference, has as its goal – by everyone's admission – some good. Rightly, therefore, they said of the good that it is that which constitutes the goal of all things". This is roughly the English translation of Aristotle's thesis borrowed from 'Nicomachean Ethics'. Who would have argued that the editor of this anthology, Jost Reischmann, the first President of the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE), had anything else in mind when he was compiling this motivating collection of published texts?

This is essentially the purpose of the anthology, prepared by the author and editor in his effort to trace what is 'good' in the lengthy history of the international and comparative approaches in adult learning and education; to exhibit its many forms and assist us in comprehending the different aspects that influence policy and practice across time and geographical borders. Jost Reischmann's argument culminates in a recognition of the relevance of contextualized politics, history, geography, and technique: what effect does this have on the reader?

Spanning 320 pages, the anthology unfolds ten distinct sections that introduce the reader to the history and development of the field, the added value of travellers' reports, the development of country reports and juxtaposition, references to specific comparative studies, the role of international organizations, reflections on some pitfalls in the comparative method, and some lessons learned. The book includes a foreword written by Tom Stork, followed by a preface and an opening induction chapter prepared by Jost Reischmann, an epilogue co-authored by Marcie Boucouvalas, Katarina Popovic, and the editor himself, and a final chapter that renders the editor's observations and perspectives for the future.

Overall, the book is very well situated with the similar anthologies in the field, like the one edited by Bennett et al. (1975), or the more recent one edited by Slowey (2016). The overarching aim of the editor in the selection of texts leaves the reader with very little room to avoid drawing the conclusion that any endeavour to learn from the experience of others (especially those who have made their careers in the field) can be extremely beneficial in facilitating reflection on "taken for granted" concepts and methods; as well as in contributing to the development of fresh theoretical and empirical views. In the first section of the book Reischmann is always sure to remind us that an uncritical approach might downplay the fundamental value of a comprehensive awareness of context, whether it be historical, social, or cultural. This can lead to erroneous efforts to transplant "good practice" from one environment to another. He draws on Michael E. Sadler's text from 1900 (pp. 21-25 of the book) to argue the practical value of studying foreign educational systems, which is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and understand our own.

The second section of the book (History, Development) has been thoroughly compiled by the editor. This section fundamentally unites the reader with George Z. F. Bereday's 1964 perennial perspective (pp. 38-49 of the book), that the most fruitful approach to studying topics is to select those that are living and relevant educational questions in one's own country. Comparative educators should turn to total analysis only after working through innumerable difficulties and diligently amassing research experience. This strong viewpoint is also held by authors such as Alexander A. Liveright and Noreen Haygood (1966) (cited in pp. 51-62 of the book) and Roby Kidd (1975) (cited in pp. 71-83 of the book), who assert that there is more to encounter than theory. This section encapsulates the universal position that adult education, in most of its forms and institutions, has existed outside of the official, government-supported forms of education and has often been disconnected from the area of comparative education. Comparative adult educationists appear to have

placed a greater focus on various aims (on the one hand, emphasis on the person learning about himself, and on the other end of the spectrum, rational societal change) than researchers more concerned with school systems. When comparative adult educators get more involved in the broader subject of comparative education, they have much to give and share, as well as much to gain. Unfortunately, while significant progress has been made in a very short period of time, comparative adult education has not progressed beyond a very rudimentary, embryonic level. This borrowing of cultural phenomena appears to have occurred without much consideration for how the new practice would affect the host community.

The third section of the book (Travelers and their reports) is what I would call the "less needed" part, particularly for today's researchers. As derogatory as this may sound, this section has high value for those readers interested in past representations of "the comparative". It does trigger thoughts of course, even more so when the reader reflects on such quotes as the one from Lore Arthur (2001) (cited in pp. 102-106 of the book), one of the very few women present in this anthology (others that appear in the various sections of this anthology include Elisabeth Reichart, Regina Egetenmeyer, Sharan Merriam, Hermien van der Heide, Qi Sun, Elizabeth Erichsen, Madeleine Blais, Marcie Boucouvalas, and Katarina Popovic), who suggests that: "*the more I 'travel' and experience, the more I am aware of the multifarious strands and layers that mesh into and out of what is commonly understood as 'culture' in the context of other countries and communities*".

With his selection of texts, Reischmann always underlines the issue of securing meaningful, mutual trade, which is made more difficult by power differentials (for example, between the global north and global south) and the associated functions of various international or intergovernmental bodies. Sections four, five, and six are a compilation of texts that draw on comparative studies and country reports. In my opinion, the significance of these three consecutive sections is endorsed by Alexander N. Charters' and Ronald J. Hilton's reference from 1989 (cited in pp. 164-163 of the book) that the real value of comparative study emerges only from the attempt to understand why the differences and similarities occur, and what their significance is for adult education in the countries under examination.

The seventh section is probably my favourite, as it exhibits a number of characteristic traps and pitfalls, especially related to international comparative work. From non-analytical descriptions to "sophisticated superficiality," Michał Bron Jr (2008) (cited in pp. 254-269 of the book) creates awareness of the drawbacks and, by doing so, emphasizes their avoidance. In addition, there are

more than one lesson learned in the eighth section of the book. John Henschke's (2008) (cited in pp. 283-296 of the book) and Madeleine Blais' (1999) (cited in pp. 297-302 of the book) texts introduce us to some of the opportunities and pitfalls in international cooperation as well as dialogic approaches to transnational research.

This vibrant collection of diverse narratives reflects on even more contemporary issues such as climate change, natural disasters, armed conflicts, migrant and refugee crises, attention to human rights (including honouring diversity, alongside mass protest movements), and sustainable futures (economic, environmental, and social justice). Jost Reischmann acknowledges numerous additional concerns in the area, including cultural or personal bias in comparative research, white, western male dominance in the profession, and the authority of the English language in published studies. What was usually overlooked were the "bridges" between the various parts that would offer cohesion. There are no references to feminist, post-structural, or post-colonial ideas, which would definitely provide a healthy balance to the present authorship. Yet, as Reischmann so eloquently stated, "standing on the shoulders" of people who provided crucial information about content, techniques, and reflections may help increase the quality of comparison and make admission into this sector more fun and easier. This is how he tracked what is 'good' over the lengthy history of the international and comparative approach to adult learning and education.

References

- Bennett, C. Kidd, J. R. & Kulich, J. (Eds.). (1975). *Comparative Studies in Adult Education: An Anthology*. Syracuse University.
- Slowey, M. (Ed.). (2016). *Comparative Adult Education and Learning: Authors and Texts*. Firenze University Press.