

IS COMPARATIVE EDUCATION STILL NECESSARY IN THE 21ST CENTURY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA? STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Comparative Education (CE) is a common course for the undergraduate students aspiring to be a teacher. CE is a discipline postgraduate students can specialise on. Despite the importance of the course to prospective teachers, it is being dreaded by students. Based on the above narrative, questions were formulated to tease the study. A qualitative approach was developed. Interpretative paradigm was used to make sense of the participants' narrative. Using interpretative paradigm, six universities from six geopolitical zones of Nigeria were purposively selected. Furthermore, eighteen participants were selected and narrative analysis was used. The findings indicated among others that despite of the phobia developed by students towards the CE, it is very necessary in the contemporary era due to its revolutionization, innovative and internationalization dispositions. Based on the above findings, the study recommended that Nigerian government should allocate funds to university governing councils to employ competent and qualified experts in comparative education who possess expertise in the field and making the course interesting.

Keywords: Comparative Education, undergraduate students, postgraduate students, University institutions, 21st Century.

Introduction

Comparative Education (CE) is a wide, rich, an in-depth and growing field of study which focused on a wide range of key educational issues such as theories, practices, philosophy, policies, objectives, and aims across a range of cultures, states and countries. From all indications, though CE is a relatively young and upcoming discipline when one is compelled to compare it with disciplines such as astronomy, mathematics, physics, medicine, among others. However, despite the infantile nature of the discipline, it has had more than a hundred and ten (110) years historical existence in the university environment. CE is an increasingly vital area of study which is gaining remarkable grounds in our university environment. The essence of CE rapid flourishing nature in the university system is based on the fact that the experts try to understand other countries' educational system which facilitate the growth and development of the education and adopt it in re-shaping the less developing countries. Lawal and Adeyemi (2011) and Holmes (2018) argued that the aim of studying CE is to understand the various

factors that are responsible for series of negative and positive educational changes in every country of the world with a view of fixing it.

Despite the unprecedented importance of CE, there is a growing apathy among both undergraduate and postgraduate students towards the discipline in our universities in Nigeria. Scholarly views such as Mohammed (2018), Jacob and Ohaeri (2023) emanating from the universities around the world have shown that the teaching and learning of CE is facing many problems in Nigerian higher institutions due to various factors ranging from students' lack of interest on the discipline, dearth of qualified experts in the field and inadequate instructional materials. Fakayode, Lawal and Ajibade (2024) noted that despite CE's connection to History of Education, the field is declining. This decline stems from students' reluctance to conduct international research, which is a key requirement of the discipline. From the above conversation, the study seeks to unravel whether CE is still relevance in the contemporary university system in Nigeria.

The questions formulated guide to the study in arriving at valid findings are stated below.

- a) What is Nigerian university students' attitude towards the study of CE?
- b) Is the study of CE necessary in the contemporary Nigerian University institutions?

Theoretical framework underpinning the study

In this study, the researcher adopted Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) which was propounded by John William Atkinson in the 1950. This theory was initially used in the field of psychology. Recently, however, it has found expression in the field of education. Atkinson (1964) states that a person will be more motivated to act on a given task if he/she believes that he/she has the ability to succeed in the action and when he/she positively value the possible outcomes. Furthermore, Brisson, Dicke, Gaspard, Häfner, Flunger et al. (2017), Guo, Marsh, Parker, Morin and Dicke (2017) Arens, Schmidt and Preckel (2018) held that students' expectancy for success and subjective task values directly influence their achievement choices, effort, persistence and performance in different domains. This theory focusses on two central components namely; expectations and values. From the expectations' perspective, a person's beliefs about the probability that a certain outcome will occur as a consequence of his/her actions, while values relate to the importance or desire that the person assigns to those outcomes (Wigfield, Muenks & Eccles, 2021). EVT invariably look at the relationship between a person's expectancy for success at a given task or the achievement of a goal in relation to the value of task completion or goal attainment. Within the economics circle, the theory explains a person's consumption decisions based on his/her expectations about the results of the purchases and the value he/she assign to products.

Similarly, when one tries to look at this theory within the context of education, the theory is better adopted to understand how students choose between different subjects based on their performance expectations and the values they assign to their achievements. In the university, this theory is relevant in order to understand the motivation of students in the choice of subjects and their performance based on the rewards and benefits associated with the subjects. This theory is relevant to this study as it helps understand why students choose other disciplines over CE in university settings.

Literature Review

Comparative Education: Define

CE has multiple definitions from scholars like Broadfoot (2000), Lawal (2004), Watson (2014), Zhang and Bray (2020) have defined CE in so many ways. It appears there is no comprehensive agreement on the definition of comparative education. Considering these varying definitions, we will examine a few to establish a working definition. According to Kelly, Altbach and Arnove (1982), CE is a field of study that was developed through the examination of other countries education systems. Additionally, CE looks at the analysis of educational systems and problems of social, political, economic, cultural, ideological and other contents in order to understand the factors underlying similarities and differences in education in various countries (Wolhuter, 2018). Similarly, Torres, Arnove and Misiaszek (2022) CE is the study of different educational systems to understand their similarities and differences. Despite the array of definitions documented, the concepts which are paramount and which feature prominently in all the definitions are similarity and difference being looked at in the countries' education system. Based on the foregoing assertion, it is worthy to say that CE is a discipline that analyse the similarities and differences of two or more countries' education system with special reference to structure, philosophy, aims, curriculum, geographical space, administration, financing and teacher education.

Relevance of CE to University Students

The present contemporary situation demands a paradigm shift on the methodology adopted in conducting teaching and learning process in CE. Historically, CE has gone through series of development since its introduction from the borrowing stage to scientific phase (Bray, Adamson & Mason, 2014). From all indications, it appears CE may undergo further transformational process due to the introduction of digitalization in the contemporary teaching and learning process of CE. In fact, it is worthy of note to highlight, therefore, that giving detail on the introduction of digitalization in the teaching and learning of CE is another research all together, and it is currently in the conceptualization phase in the laboratory.

The issue of the relevance of CE to undergraduate and postgraduate students in our university has widely been researched. According to Chigisheva, Soltovets, Dmitrova, Akhtyan, Litvinova and Chelysheva (2021), the relevance of CE to undergraduates and postgraduates is for intellectual reason. CE is one of the disciplines which a student can do in order to enhance his/her intellectual capacity concerning other country's education system with the aim of enlightenment. Aside from the above assertion, CE is a discipline where students do major in the field. Within Nigerian university environment, there are scholars and researchers who earn their living on CE, therefore, students can become experts in the field. Brodowicz (2024) argued that education systems are not static, rather progressing, therefore, changes can be either beneficial or detrimental to the quality of education provided by a system. In light of the assertion, students' comparison of the various systems can be a strong tool for policy research into what types of changes have what types of effect.

Similarly, Cook, Hite and Epstein (2004), Brodowicz(2024) opined that students offering CE would better comprehend the changing circumstances and better equipment to fulfill the new responsibilities in the society. In other words, students of CE will understand of why some countries education systems are progressive while others are backward, therefore, put all the necessary motions in place to resuscitate it.

Methodology

Based on the nature of the topic under consideration and research questions formulated, it is appropriate to locate the study within the qualitative research approach. Cassol, Pétré, Degrange, Martial, Charland-Verville, Lallier, Bragard, Guillaume and Laureys (2018) had earlier argued that qualitative approach is adopted when a researcher wants to understand the participants' experiences from their own perspectives in order to answer your research questions. In line with the qualitative approach adopted, interpretive paradigm is used in the study. Treagust and Won (2023) opined that the choice of interpretive paradigm in the research is to enable one to gain further depth through seeking experiences and perceptions of a particular social context. Similarly, interpretive paradigm tends to focus on language, signs, and meanings from the perspective of the participants involved in the social phenomenon (Gichuru, 2017). Drawing from the above assertion, the researcher deploys interpretive paradigm in order to make sense of the participants' lived stories.

The population of the study is the entire undergraduate and postgraduate students in Department of Educational Foundations, Federal Universities in Nigeria. According to National Universities Commission (2023), there are two hundred and forty-nine thousand, nine hundred and seventy (249,970) education students in the federal universities in Nigeria. Furthermore, the researcher used purposive sampling technique to select six federal universities from each geopolitical region in Nigeria. The universities are University of Port Harcourt (South South), University of Nsukka (South East), University of Ibadan (South West), University of Jos (North Central), University of Maiduguri (North East) and Usmanu Danfodio University, Sokoto (North West).

The researcher adopted purposive sampling technique to select fifteen (15) undergraduates and three (3) postgraduates totaling eighteen (18) participants who offer CE for the study. The reason for the disparity in the selection of fifteen undergraduates and three postgraduates is based on the fact that only few postgraduates offer CE, whereas, it is common course for all education undergraduates. In another vein, the researcher decided to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants by replacing their names with pseudonyms. The instrument adopted for gathering information is semi-structured interview. The reason for the choice of semi-structured interviews is based on what Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi and Syam (2022) state that it allows the informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms. For clarity purpose, the instrument consisted of eighteen interview questions which address the research questions earlier set.

The researcher wrote and obtained permission to conduct interview from the Registrars of the affected universities. Audio recorder and fieldnote were used during the interview with the participants. The choice of audio recording is to produce verbatim transcripts (Rutakumwa, Mugisha, Bernays, Kabunga, Tumwekwase, Mbonye, & Seeley, 2020), while the fieldnote provide a detailed description of what the researcher sees (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The

data from the field was subjected to transcription. The transcribed data was further subjected to coding. Here, the essence of coding is to enable a cyclical and evolving data loop in which this researcher interacts, and is constantly comparing data and applying data reduction, and consolidation techniques (Adu, 2019; Williams & Moser, 2019). After coding the data, the categorization of the data was completed. Finally, after the categorisation of the data, the emerging themes were analysed using narrative analysis. The choice of narrative analysis in this study is to understand ways in which the participants tell the story of the relevance of CE in 21st century university institutions in Nigeria.

Results

Research Question 1: What is Nigerian university students' attitude towards the study of CE?

Students' phobic for CE

From the analysis, it was established from the participants that the discipline is very wide and vast hence they developed phobia towards it before the commencement of the lecture. Stephen is currently a final-year education student at University of Port Harcourt reported that when he did the course in his second year, he did not find it easy. Furthermore, he narrated that he managed to score lowest grade in the course. Stephen was interrogated on the basic reason for his lowest grade, he replied:

Sir, CE is very wide, therefore, one cannot cover the course contents in a year. Again, how do you expect me to study a country's education system, when I have never visited the country since I was born, this is not possible.

Ibrahim and Glory who are students at University of Ibadan and University of Jos respectively narrated how they were struggling with the course during their second-year programme in the university. Ibrahim specifically said that he found CE a bit difficult due to the complexity of its contents. Ibrahim queried why the university authority introduced a course which relates to foreign countries, yet they refused to sponsor students to the country for first-hand information. In addition, Glory reported that since the CE is about the study of other countries' education system, the university authority should be able to make provision for students to visit those countries in order to acquaint themselves with the education system of those countries.

In a similar vein, Loveth who is a postgraduate student at University of Ibadan reported that though she got a serious CE lecturer in the person of Professor B. O. Lawal who tried to make the discipline interesting, she always finds the course confusing. Loveth was asked why she found the CE confusing, she replied with another question:

Does it make sense to study for a course where one has never visited the country(ies)? Is it what is applicable to students who study French Language or any other foreign languages? Listen, students offering CE should be made to visit the country in which they are studying, with this, one would be able to have first-hand knowledge about the country, that is, geography, people, culture, education, among others.

Dearth of Comparative Educationist

The narration from the participants indicated that most education students exhibited negative attitude towards CE due to the fact that in most of the universities in Nigeria, the course is taught by people who are not experts. Chinyere, Adeola and Ene of University of Nsukka, University of Maiduguri and Usmanu Danfodio University, Sokoto respectively, asserted that in their universities the course is taught by either a lecturer who is a specialist in History of Education or Philosophy of Education. In fact, Ene was very categorical with her story when she declared:

In my department, CE is taught by a particular associate professor of Philosophy of Education (PE). When this man is teaching, one does not understand what he is saying. He usually mixes the terminologies of CE with that of PE.

In addition to Chinyere, Adeola and Ene assertion, Christiana who is a third year education student at University of Port Harcourt stated that though CE in our university is taught by renowned Professor in the field, however, the lecture hall is often crowded due to the fact he is the only person who is teaching CE. Furthermore, Christiana submitted that the university management ought to have employed another expert in CE in order to decongest the lecture hall. When Christiana was interrogated further on how the overcrowded nature of CE lecture hall has a relationship with the dearth of expert in CE, she resorted

Our lecturer informed us that he is tired teaching the large class-size of CE alone, that he has appealed to Vice Chancellor through the Head of Department (HoD) to employ another expert in the field, so that the class would be divided. He was informed by the Vice Chancellor that an advert was placed in the national dailies on two occasions, there was no expert in the field that applied for the position advertised.

The above excerpt explained the scarcity of professionals in the field of CE at the Faculty of Education in Nigerian universities. It was established that the scarcity of these professionals and the resultant over population of students in the class has made comprehension of the course difficult hence the phobia for the course.

Research Question 2: Is the study of CE necessary in the contemporary Nigerian University institutions?

The emerging themes from the analysis have shown that CE is very necessary in the contemporary era based on the following points listed below:

Revolutionisation of education system

Most participants interviewed reported that CE is extremely necessary in the contemporary time in light of the fact that Nigeria being a third world country is bedeviled with numerous challenges facing her education sector ranging from out-of- school children, poor funding, non-availability of instructional resources, use of old curriculum and a huge shortage of quality educators, to mention but a few. Therefore, there is need for the study of CE in order to revolutionise the sector in line with the developed world countries. Loveth and Chinyere specifically stated that the reason we take this firm position in saying that CE is necessary in the

present era is because even if we were to build hundreds of thousands of schools using the same outdated curricula and poor delivery methods, Nigeria will still not fulfil her huge potentials. Therefore, they concluded by saying that the study of CE is necessary because it provides individuals the knowledge to understand the ills in the Nigerian education system better and the workability/functionality of other countries' education with the intention of improving and solving the problem in Nigeria's system. Additionally, Ibrahim was categorical with his narrative when he said that "*currently, education is practical in nature and it is now taken as any consumer good, therefore, any system of education that has no practical utility has to be reformed.*" In a similar vein, Ene portrayed his point by citing examples on the necessity of CE in the contemporary era.

In United Kingdom, the government supported primary education whose main objective is to teach the children how to read and write in order to enable them work better in the industrial society, this system has survived with modification and improvements. In Russia and China, work experience is emphasised and is much reflected in the curriculum. In United States of America, comprehensive education which is based on principles of utility and practicability replaced grammar education whose main focus is on theory. In light of the above, the study of CE is necessary in Nigeria so as to revolutionise our education system to make it more practical and of utility oriented.

Promotion of Innovation in Education

Glory reported that CE is necessary in the 21st Century era in Nigeria because it initiates innovation in our education system. She narrated that in Nigeria today, there are many innovations such as development of technology and video to facilitate learning which is completely a new method of organising learning and the method is borrowed from the developed world. Furthermore, Christiana narrated that the study of CE opens persons' horizon to the use of radio, Television and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to deliver knowledge. Christiana specifically concluded that the innovation in knowledge delivery in Nigeria was introduced by USA and adapted in Nigeria through the study of CE.

For international relations

Responses from the participants have shown that CE is still very necessary in the 21st century university education due to its internationalisation and the promotion of peaceful coexistence among nations of the world. In fact, Chinyere chronicled CE as one of the courses in the university that brings about international peace, harmony and co-operation among nations of the world. She went further to explain that CE promotes world peace through the peoples' appreciation of other countries' culture, language, religion, geography, democracy, history and economics which shape the education sector. In a similar circumstance, Adeola held that the understanding and appreciating the happenings in other countries replaces national pride and prejudice with the objectivity of judgment that facilitates international harmony. Adeola concluded by saying that most conflicts between/among countries are promoted by lack of understanding and poor international relationship. Additionally, Stephen was categorical in his statement from the interview when he said;

Nigerian students' understanding of other countries' philosophies, education, sociology, religious belief, customs, traditions and culture is absolutely necessary in understanding of how these dynamics affect education system and it is a clear concept of internationalism. Aside from this, students' exchange program between or among countries is a clear manifestation of internationalisation enunciated through the study of CE.

Discussion of the Findings

Findings from the study indicated that most education students in Nigerian universities developed phobia for CE due to its complexity in the contents and wideness in the scope. The majority of the students interviewed indicated that the scope of CE is unlimited, therefore, they wonder how an average students would be able to cover such as huge contents within a semester. From all indications, it was established that students' phobia for the discipline was based on their strong believe that it is absolutely impossible to study any discipline in abstraction. This suggest that the hatred developed for CE may be as a result of its theorisation and abstraction in the concepts and contents unlike pure sciences which are more of practicality. The position of this finding is in line with the earlier one held by Kubow and Fossum (2007) who reported that CE is only present scatteredly in our universities due to the fact that students are not introduced to the full range, depth and possibilities of the discipline.

Findings also established that education students in Nigerian universities exhibited negative attitude towards the study of CE due to the non-employability of competent and qualified education comparativist by university management. It was argued that a visit to most of our universities in Nigeria revealed that CE is mostly taught by non-expert. Therefore, the concepts, contents and nitty gritty of the discipline could not be explained exhaustively by the non-experts. From all indications, it may be argued that one cannot give what he/she does not have, therefore, the compulsion of non-experts to teach CE indirectly leads students to exhibit negative attitude towards it. This invariably results to students' poor academic performance. Walterová (2013) had earlier reported that the aims of CE in every model are theoretical, methodological and practical hence it should be taught by the professionals, failure in this direction is an invitation to chaos.

Findings from the study have shown that the study of CE is of great importance in the 21st century due to the revolutionisation of education system in Nigeria. For instance, an official report by UNESCO indicated that Nigeria has the largest population of out-of-school children in the world. Aside from the above notion, with the advent and utilization of digital technology in teaching and learning process, the study of CE is necessary in order to address the education crisis gripping the nation and also adjust in line with the contemporary situation in the world. The finding goes to affirm the position held by Wolhuter, O'Sullivan, Anderson and Wood (2011) that Greek and South African students study CE in order to illuminate and guide the domestic education reform project for societal reconstruction.

It was discovered from the findings that the study of CE is necessary based on its importance in promoting innovation in education sector. Currently, most developed nations of the world have developed economically and technologically. In fact, most of the developed world have advanced in terms of manufacturing of sophisticated equipment for the betterment of mankind. Whereas, most African countries (Nigeria inclusive) are lagging behind industrially and

economically. Therefore, to achieve the needed industrial and economic advancement as their developed world counterparts, the study of CE by education students in Nigerian universities is a critical factor that would bring the needed innovation. The findings corroborate Holmes's (2018) assertion that CE has always been explicitly or implicitly reformative on the grounds that it undertakes areas which revitalise one system by incorporating elements from other nation(s). The promotion of international relationship between/among countries is one of the factors derivable from the study of CE by Nigerian students. Aside from the issue of understanding and appreciating other people's language, culture, tradition, religion, geography, democracy, history and economics which promote harmonious relationship between Nigeria and other countries such as United States of America, Russia, Germany, United Kingdom, among others. It was argued that students' exchange programme between Nigeria and other countries of the world is made possible through the study of CE. This finding was earlier canvassed by Holik (2013) who argued that CE promotes both the mobility of students, teachers and academic partners, in the spirit of equal opportunities, in order to unify the common World Higher Education Area. Additionally, Klerides (2023) asserted that CE is a necessary discipline due to its ability to entangle international relationship between/among countries.

Conclusion

CE is one of the compulsory courses offered at the undergraduate programme level, while at the postgraduate level, the course is a discipline to be specialised upon by the students. Despite the importance of the course to prospective teachers, education planners and policy makers, the course has been relegated to the background due to the phobia developed for it by the students and teaching methodology adopted by the non-experts in teaching the course. Be that as it may, it was established that CE is very necessary in the contemporary era due to its ability to revolutionalise education sector, promote innovation and enhance international relations between/ among countries.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were reached;

- i. That Nigeria government should ensure that it provides enough funds to each university governing council to hire competent and qualified experts in comparative education, who knows about the discipline and ways to teach it.
- ii. Secondly, as part of the criteria for the qualification on the discipline, students should be made to visit any particular country of his/her choice for field trip in order to understand the geography, language, culture and economy of the people. By doing that students' interest and awareness in the discipline is risen and they will be willing to specialise in it.

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