Reconsidering Phase 1 of the IEA Civic Education Study

Doyle Stevick
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DOYLE STEVICK, University of South Carolina

ABSTRACT The comparison of qualitative data across a large number of cases has great potential for research into civic education worldwide. The IEA study made important strides in collecting appropriate data and in developing techniques to analyze that data. The Octagon Model used in the study captures the complexity of political socialization, but systematic research into all of its dimensions is virtually impossible. Ethnography has different emphases, but has great flexibility to adapt to many contexts, while research designed for comparability often excludes important differences. Together, they can provide a rich set of perspectives on the development of citizens around the world.

Introduction

“A common response to new trends is to ignore them,” wrote Gerald LeTendre, prophetically, at the beginning of his chapter in New Paradigms and Recurring Paradoxes in Education for Citizenship: An International Comparison (LeTendre, 2002a, p.239). Paradigms, published in 2002 and edited by Gita Steiner-Khamisi, Judith Torney-Purta, and John Schwille, was the culmination of the qualitative phase of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement’s (IEA) Civic Education Study. It presents nine comparative analyses of the study’s qualitative data, most of which was published in Civic Education across Countries: Twenty-four National Case Studies from the IEA Civic Education Project, (Torney-Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo, 1999). Five years after its publication, Paradigms merits reexamination both for its contribution to scholarship on citizenship education and for its methodological innovation. This essay will concentrate on the latter contribution.

As a foray into large-scale, comparative study of qualitative data, Paradigms constitutes a landmark. Like any research methodology, comparison of qualitative data across many cases has strengths and limitations, particularly in a field as diverse as citizenship education. When scholars are first developing new methodologies, their possibilities and constraints are not fully understood. Paradigms sheds light on what we can and cannot learn from large bodies of qualitative data collected in a parallel way across countries and the approaches used to analyze them. Paradigms and the data collection on which it was based may not be sufficient to justify further large-scale qualitative cross-national research, but I believe that we have not yet tapped the full potential of this approach, which remains under-utilized by comparative scholars.

This article considers the large-scale comparison of qualitative data on civic education from an ethnographic perspective. Large-scale comparisons and ethnographic work often have divergent goals, and I approach this task as an
interested and sympathetic, if somewhat skeptical observer. Together with
anthropologist Bradley Levinson, I edited two recent books that are compatible with
this approach: one sheds light on how diverse societies in twelve countries form
democratic citizens (Reimagining Civic Education, 2007) and the other explores
American influence and democracy promotion in education (Advancing Democracy
through Education, in press) through a wide range of qualitative and ethnographic
approaches. The first book differs from the IEA study in four important ways: it
does not focus on the country-level of analysis; it is ethnographic, not simply
qualitative; it includes infrequently examined countries (e.g., El Salvador, Indonesia
and South Africa), and it extensively addresses the civic education of teachers and
other adults as well as young people. Because civic education has become an arena
of international ideological competition and of borrowing and lending, the second
volume explores the transnational dynamics of civic education policy and practice.

The IEA Civic Education Study and the question of inclusion

The IEA Civic Education Study applied mixed-method approaches in a large-
scale international comparison. The phase 1 qualitative data were collected by
researchers appointed by representatives of the member countries of IEA that
decided to participate in the research. The study was conducted primarily in
European countries. Twenty-four countries were included in this phase, during
which scholars from each country gathered qualitative and documentary data about
civic education. Six documents were developed by each country team: a research
proposal describing how data were to be gathered, answers to fifteen initial policy
questions, responses to eighteen closely related “framing questions,” which led to
the identification and investigation of three core domains (democracy, national
identity, and diversity/social cohesion), a case study chapter based upon these
documents constructed to conform to a common outline, and a report on the methods
used (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2002b, pp. 9-11). Paradigms’ contributors were able to
draw upon this material, but only the case study chapters were published. When the
Phase I data collection was nearly complete, several other countries requested to
take part in the quantitative survey phase; Canada, which provided a case study, did
not participate in the survey.

To conceptualize the research, the IEA team developed the Octagon Model of the
Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999, Steiner-Khamsi
et. al., 2002b, p. 9). It captures clearly the complexity of the relationship between
society and political socialization. The octagon itself represents the macro system,
and is closely related to the IEA’s country level of analysis. It includes such
considerations as religion, economics, language, history, law and the media. The
transnational level is not particularly well accounted for in this study. The Octagon
Model’s micro system identifies five “carriers of goals into action:” the formal
community, informal community, family, peer group, and school.

The octagon’s equal sides are not intended to imply that each domain is equally
significant, and data-gathering across all of these domains is scarcely feasible. In
fact, for a field as diverse as civic education, each country’s model would display
different shapes and ratios. The main (though not exclusive) emphases of the Civic
Education Study were the school and the peer group, meaning that large swaths of
the model did not receive detailed analysis. Ethnography offers more flexibility than
the IEA study (with its quest for comparable data) could; ethnographers can adjust
their research design to the particular configurations of a particular context.
The selection process inevitably left out much that was distinctive about the different countries. In one of the few published reviews of Paradigms, Buk-Berge (2006) notes that little attention was given to religion, despite its central importance in countries such as Poland (other recent studies linking religion and civic education include Gaylord, 2007, Alsayed, 2007). This example illustrates one of the central challenges of qualitative comparison: the need to reduce the complexity of the picture without losing sight of critical elements of cultural variation. While the particulars of cultural variation are a central concern for ethnographers, who are sensitive to the varying sources of meaning in different contexts, they can make comparison beyond two or three cases unmanageable. Although the IEA study excluded important sources of cultural variation from consideration in the name of comparability, most authors in Paradigms relied upon differences that remained in order to draw their conclusions through the use of contrastive analysis (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2002b, p. 26).

The IEA team struggled to craft common points of reference: “it cannot be overstated how important it was to discuss and sometimes argue at length about differences in the meaning of such concepts as ‘democracy’, minority’, national identity’, ‘human rights’, and the many other politically and socially highly charged terms that are indispensable for describing civic education” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002b, p. 25). As an ethnographer, I am at least as intrigued by the differences that emerged in these conversations as by the constructs that ultimately prevailed.

It should also be noted that this reference to the internal workings of the project is one of the book’s strengths. The authors and editors are quite forthcoming about the research process, the dissension among members, the large number of decisions that were made and the frustration of some that the conceptualization of the research was too narrow. This book will be an invaluable resource for anyone who attempts to pursue cross-national qualitative research at any scale.

**Taking culture seriously: Civics experts and ethnographic methods**

The editors reject the overdrawn distinctions often made between qualitative and quantitative research and attempt to integrate the contributions of each set of approaches. Among the concerns of ethnographers that are too seldom addressed by quantitative research is culture. The IEA researchers take culture seriously, integrate it throughout the research process, and innovate methodologically. Still, crucial differences remain even within qualitative and ethnographic approaches. Some cultural anthropologists are firmly rooted in positivism and aspire to make anthropology a science on the model of the natural sciences. Robert C. Hunt’s 2007 book, Beyond Relativism, Rethinking Comparability in Cultural Anthropology, is an important statement of this position, aiming to construct language free from “cultural contamination” and ambiguity so that we can conduct valid observations of events that belong in categories whose objective dimensions can be compared. It is unfortunate that he was apparently unaware of the IEA study, because it fits into his framework. However, ethnographers would argue that rather than working with the unambiguous and culturally uncontaminated definitions of the sort that Hunt endorses, one needs to clarify both common cores of meaning and dimensions on which there is variation.

In fact, the IEA study is not ethnographic, as LeTendre notes (2002a, p. 269), even though there was “exploration and clarification of how civic education is actually conceptualized and understood within each participating country” (LeTendre, 2002a, p. 245). Such questions of meaning are central to ethnographic
research within cultural anthropology. The IEA Study selected civic education specialists, rather than people trained in ethnographic research methods, as data-collectors and authors for the national case studies. Nine of the IEA case studies came from the former Soviet bloc, where ethnography, qualitative research and critiques of positivism scarcely had a toe-hold even by the late 1990’s.

For those who haven’t been forced to grapple with Geertz’s famous phrase about thick description, its complexity and meaning may be lost: “to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode. It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 296). Ethnography is distinct from case-study research in ways the IEA authors do not always recognize. Another confusion arises when authors misconstrue their selection of cases for analysis as a form of sampling parallel to that in quantitative research.

Although expert commentary has a prominent role in several chapters, some authors noted its limitations (Mintrop, 2002, pp. 62-3; Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2002b, p. 30). Such experts have important knowledge and insights to offer, but also have commitments and expectations that shape their perspectives. Finally, although individuals can conduct research on their own societies, outsiders often see and perceive things that insiders take for granted. When these observations are used to create a cross-cultural dialogue between insiders and outsiders, through such techniques as member checks, a richer multi-perspectival view can emerge. Even with these weaknesses, the twenty-four national case studies from the first volume, Civic Education across Countries, remain a repository of information on civic education in the countries in question in the mid-1990s and provide crucial historical context for anyone interested in exploring civic education from the point of view of educators within these societies.

Civic education, qualitative research and comparison

Paradoxically, the nature of civic education itself both justifies the qualitative, comparative approach and tests the approach’s boundaries. Of all the prominent fields of study in schools, civic education likely takes the most diverse forms and is most influenced by local, national and cultural variation. Qualitative approaches are well equipped to represent this diversity. This very diversity, however, complicates the task of finding comparability, making civic education a problematic proving ground for this methodological approach.

This is also true because large-scale qualitative comparisons do not have a long history or a developed set of methodological principles. Paradigms does not fit neatly into any particular pre-existing methodology. The book attempts to bring different traditions into dialogue and to chart new methodological ground, as (LeTendre’s essay, “Cross-national Studies and the Analysis of Comparative Qualitative Research” suggests, 2002b). In the introduction, the editors try to bridge the research traditions of quantitative and qualitative approaches: “the group of authors presented in this volume attempt to seriously challenge the contention that those who compare are unable to understand, and those who understand are unable to compare” (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2002b, p. 2). While this argument is something of a straw man, the gaps are real and significant. We could also include gaps between researchers and practitioners, social studies and social philosophy specialists, and European, American and Asian specialists in civic education.

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Qualitative work struggles both with timeliness and with representing ongoing change, and the IEA study is emblematic of these challenges. Most of the data were gathered between 1995 and 1997. The national qualitative case studies were published in 1999, but the *Paradigms* volume did not appear until 2002. These were eventful years especially for the post-Communist countries. One Estonian civics teacher expressed a common sentiment: “For us, the Second World War ended when the Russian troops finally left in 1994” (Stevick, 2007, p. 231). By the end of the year in which *Paradigms* was published, Estonia had been guaranteed admittance into both the European Union and NATO. The educational system was no less active during this period. Indeed, during the decade and a half preceding the publication of Paradigms, citizenship education had been perhaps the most dynamic and contested field in education across the former Soviet bloc.

Qualitative, comparative research is not an efficient method for identifying emerging trends. Once a trend has been identified, however, the large qualitative database permits scholars to explore variations in its meaning across countries. Lee’s methodologically innovative chapter, “The Emergence of New Citizenship: Looking into the Self and Beyond the Nation,” shows how two well recognized patterns in civic education can generate new insights when a large qualitative database is subjected to fine-grained analysis. “The most striking finding, although not entirely unexpected, was the great variety of subjects used for civic education” (Lee, 2002, p. 39). Similarly “deideologization…in citizenship education is particularly obvious in the post-1989 Eastern European countries” (2002: 48).

Although these insights are not new, the qualitative database permits additional comparative analysis. Despite the variety of subjects used for civic education, for example, the “self” emerged as a pervasive theme, including “self definition,” “self-respect”, “self determination” and “self-realization” (Lee, 2002, 39). With respect to the second pattern, it is fascinating to discover that deideologization and depoliticization were not restricted to Central and Eastern Europe (contrary to the editors’ assertion, Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2002b, p. 13), but were occurring in other countries, particularly ethnically diverse countries. Lee singles out Belgium, Israel and Switzerland, where depoliticization and neutrality are priorities (Lee, 2002, p. 47). The extent of the data permitted Lee to look deeply and conclude that the causes of depoliticization vary: some countries embrace it for the sake of peace between their “diverse cultural groups, religious groups and political groups,” while other countries feel that “internal political debates and party politics are…only a minor concern for citizens” (Lee, 2002, p. 47).

**Unexpected company: Clusters of cases**

Qualitative databases help to uncover unexpected clusters of countries that share characteristics for comparative analysis. Lee’s insight about Belgium, Israel and Switzerland is compelling in part because it emerges from an analysis of data gathered independently in the three countries. It would also be possible to test expected differences: Do predominantly Catholic countries show differences with Orthodox countries that cross-cut Western and Central & Eastern European countries? Do different themes emerge in small countries and larger countries?

Some intriguing groupings also emerge in Matrai’s chapter on national identity, which considers minority issues and the political/cultural nation continuum. She explicates clearly the concepts of nation, nation-state, and state, terms too often used loosely in comparative education (Matrai, 2002). She groups Germany and Hong
Kong as countries that first split and subsequently reunited; Palestinians in Israel are a group that aspires to transform their cultural nation into a political nation.

**Additional contributions**

This discussion, focused upon some of the methodological challenges of the project, cannot do justice to each of the analyses in the book. It is worth briefly describing each chapter, because their subject matters and empirical basis make them indispensable for scholars whose work touches these areas. Mintrop examines civic education teachers and their pedagogy, by drawing upon seven diverse case studies. He uncovers a paradox: although great importance is attributed to civic education in each country, teachers and policy makers do not make it a real priority (Mintrop, 2002). Schwille and Amadeo, the only authors besides Lee to make use of most or all of the cases, help us to think more concretely about the significance of the octagon model by identifying policy areas that are critical to successful reform in civic education, including curriculum, pedagogy, student participation, school organization, and the responsiveness of schools to external issues (Schwille & Amadeo, 2002).

Kontogiannopolou-Polydorides (2002) engages post-colonial and modernist frameworks to explore the divergent paths of countries that she groups according to another promising set of clusters: postcommunist countries, democracies with active citizenries and democracies with apathetic citizenries. Steiner-Khamsi’s chapter is one of the most intriguing of the book for its theoretical work, which builds upon Hannah Arendt to conceptualize four spheres of citizenship—the moral, constitutional, civic and economic. However, her attempt to link those four spheres to countries that seemed to be prototypical cases of each sphere fails. This failure may actually be more enlightening than success would have been (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). Finally, Kerr’s chapter is notable for integrating the comparative, qualitative material collected by the IEA-associated researchers with the comparative curriculum archive known as INCA in the U.K. (Kerr, 2002).

**Unexpected limitations**

One of the most surprising themes to emerge in *Paradigms* is the pervasive sense that, despite the masses of data available, the authors nevertheless felt restricted in the types of analysis they were able to undertake. We noted above that significant dimensions of the octagon model were not covered, and that the eighteen framing questions could not be considered separately. The net effect of these negotiated decisions was to limit some possibilities for analysis. As a result, Lee observes that,

*A further grouping and analysis of these subjects [used for civic education] would doubtless uncover an even greater richness of meaning attributed to civic education. However, I was unable to do this analysis, mainly because the country reports provided little detail on the subjects....Several other themes with potential for more in-depth analysis, such as teaching approaches, teaching and learning activities, teacher training, and national identity, similarly were not further developed, [some] because of a lack of detailed information in the reports. (Lee, 2002, p. 39).*
Lee, Kontogiannopoulou-Polydorides and Steiner-Khamsi “found the original conceptual framework of the IEA Civic Education Study too narrow” (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2002b, p. 33). Some case studies did emphasize issues beyond the selected domains, in particular, the economic dimensions of civic education curricula and the emergence of supranational citizenship questions (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2002b: 34), but some authors felt limited by the parameters set for the research.

Conclusions

Perhaps this qualitative study could only have been conducted as part of a larger mixed-methods research project that had a quantitative component. A danger, of course, is that the quantitative may overshadow the qualitative (as happened to some extent here). Still, it prompts one to think about how a comparative study would look if the qualitative research were the end instead of functioning primarily as “context” or as the “first phase” for something else. Perhaps more refined research questions would have been addressed. It might have been more valuable in bridging the quantitative/qualitative divide to have a volume that explored the integration of the qualitative and quantitative phases. Such a volume might have provided a better demonstration of the potential contributions of qualitative research. To the extent that is happening with this project, it is through secondary analysis and through some IEA project leaders writing for other volumes (Torney-Purta, 2007).

Phase 1 of the IEA CIVED study as a whole made important contributions to the conceptualization of large-scale qualitative and comparative research and to data collection for that purpose. Paradigms and Paradoxes grapples with the critical issue of how to analyze the data produced by Phase 1, an approach with few if any available models. More systematic exploration of the methodological dimensions of comparative, qualitative research, both in terms of data-generation and data analysis, is warranted.

Finally, LeTendre laments that there has not been substantive interaction between comparativists and qualitative researchers during the previous two decades (2002a, p. 239). To some extent, this is a result of different goals. Each group tends to focus upon the data and questions that the other group is ready to dispatch without much deliberation. This gap, however, can be bridged, and the dialectic between the two can only expand both perspectives.

Correspondence: DOYLE STEVICK, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29206. USA

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