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Changing Modalities in International Development and Research in Education: Conceptual and Ethical Issues

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the nature of changing modalities in international development and related research in education. The consequences of contemporary trends and trajectories in these domains are considered with particular reference to their conceptual and ethical implications. Drawing on contemporary social theory, comparative and international research in education, and research ethics, the analysis focuses on North-South research and development partnerships, conceptions of 'best practice' in the arenas of education and development, the emergence of large-scale social and educational research modalities, and the potential and limitations of 'one size fits all' ethical frameworks in the field.

Keywords:

Educational development cooperation
Educational development partnerships
Best practice in educational development
Ethics and international education development

1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen major changes in approaches to both the processes of international development and to research in educational development worldwide. The impact of these parallel trends is especially significant in the field of comparative and international education, where research has long played a substantial role in informing, challenging and shaping the nature and direction of related international development cooperation (Crossley and Watson 2003; Crossley 2019).

Simon McGrath, for example, has examined the political economy of research in British comparative and international education (2001); Kenneth King (2000) has done much to document how multilateral agencies have contributed to the construction of global agendas in education; and, more specifically, King and McGrath (2002; 2004) have explored how the influence of some of the most

prominent development agencies, and notably the World Bank, has increasingly been promoted through 'knowledge-based' aid and research. Work by Phillip Jones (2007) has contributed further to our understanding of the changing nature and reach of World Bank policies in the arena of education, and of the place and global impact of research. Others, such as Joel Samoff (2003; 2009), have paid critical attention to the rhetoric of much development discourse, documented the failure of many agencies and projects to realize successful implementation, and interrogated the prevailing power differentials that continue to privilege international agency priorities and control.

Connecting to this trajectory of work, our own research has engaged closely with both critical analysis and active participation in the advancement of innovative international research and evaluation partnerships (Barrett, Crossley, and Dachi 2011; Crossley 2011, 2014; Mason 2011). Drawing on contemporary social theory and extensive field experience of research collaboration in contexts as diverse as Belize, Tanzania, Kenya, China, India, South East Asia, Malta, and the small island developing states of the South Pacific, we have examined the evidence that underpins much contemporary interest in collaborative research and international development modalities. In doing so, we have become increasingly aware of the need for greater attention to be given to what, at the broadest level, can be seen as the uncritical international transfer of research and evaluation modalities in the arena of international development cooperation.

In this article we combine our interests in comparative and international research in education, in political philosophy and social theory, and in research ethics to look more closely at a number of key conceptual and ethical issues that arise from the experience of such changing modalities. Our analysis thus revisits the challenges that are emerging from the advancement of international and collaborative research partnerships, from contemporary enthusiasm for the transfer of 'best practice' in both education policy and research, from the emergence of what are now becoming known as 'big science' research modalities, and from the apparently trans-cultural normative reach and application of internationally legitimated ethical frameworks. The article is not intended to be an exhaustive or comprehensive analysis of all such issues. Rather, it is designed to draw attention to a number of central dilemmas, and to stimulate further in-depth consideration of the conceptual and ethical implications that arise from changing research modalities in the international education and development arenas.

2. Contemporary social theory and changing modalities in development and research

There is a rich literature on education and international development and on the changing nature and role of related research. In this section we focus on the challenges that are emerging from contemporary shifts in social theory, from recent critiques of international development experience and, most notably, from the partnership and 'big science' research modalities that are receiving increasing support worldwide.

With reference to broad development paradigms, Mark Mason (2011) has pointed to some of the more substantial theoretical critiques that have been articulated in recent years. These include, in order of publication, William Easterly's *The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' adventures and misadventures in the tropics* (2001); Thomas Dichter's *Despite Good Intentions: Why development*

assistance to the Third World has failed (2003); David Ellerman's *Helping People Help Themselves: From the World Bank to an alternative philosophy of development assistance* (2005); Easterly's *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good* (2006); Roger Riddell's *Does Foreign Aid Really Work?* (2007); Jonathan Glennie's *The Trouble with Aid: Why less could mean more for Africa* (2008); Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa* (2008); and Pablo Yanguas's *Why We Lie about Aid: Development and the messy politics of change* (2018).

For many analysts, the failures documented by these and other authors (see also McGrath 2010) have contributed to a changing *zeitgeist*, to a generally more sceptical 'spirit of the time' that is reflected in postmodern, post-structural, post-positivist and post-colonial perspectives. These shifts in perspective, reflected in both the epistemological and the axiological domains, have been linked to processes associated with increasing rates of globalization and the proliferation of information and communications technology. But it is more than that. Following Mason (2011, p. 450), our increased recognition of diverse claims to what might be the right or the best course of action is also a consequence of a scepticism arising from what we witnessed in the twentieth century:

In an age of high modernity, when we had available to us the constitutional arrangements of liberalism and democracy, we have witnessed a scale of terror never seen before, made possible by the technology and bureaucracy of modernity, which allowed the rationally planned, large-scale executions and systematic destruction of lives in the Soviet Union under Stalin and in China under Mao, in the genocide of Auschwitz, and in the engineering of an entire society along ethnic lines in apartheid South Africa. These are some of the factors that have contributed to the 'postmodern turn', and to the concomitant scepticism towards such Enlightenment tenets as the view that our knowledge of society is holistic and cumulative, and that we can attain universal, objective and rational social scientific knowledge of society, upon which we can act to produce emancipation and social upliftment (see Gregor McLennan 1996, p. 638).

In a world where phrases such as 'the celebration of diversity' and 'respect for difference' are common currency, many have less faith in what we used to believe to be right, good and true. Zygmunt Bauman conceptualized the postmodern perspective, which is associated with this 'collapse of faith', as concerned with the unmasking of the 'illusions' of modernity, arguing that the essence – if of course it has one – of the postmodern approach lies in "the rejection of ... the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations in theory" (1993, p. 4). This search has been tempered by arguments that suggest that "ours is a plural world, with a diversity of perspectives and claims to truth and goodness", (Mason 2011, p. 449). While the moral thought and practice of modernity may have been "animated by the belief in the possibility of *non-ambivalent, non-aporetic codes*", what is postmodern is the "*disbelief* in such a possibility", (Bauman 1993, pp. 9, 10). The postmodern view is that in an era when the range of choices and the consequences of actions are more far-reaching than ever before, development researchers and practitioners are unable to rely on a universal code that would yield unambiguously good solutions.

The fact that contemporary development paradigms are diverse and contested reflects both this scepticism (see Arturo Escobar 1995, for example) and also the nature, values and motivations of the

different constituencies involved. Policy-makers and planners, and many of the most influential international development agencies, may acknowledge such postmodern scepticism and the postcolonial critique, but in practice the overall trajectory of ongoing policy and action continues to draw more directly on the neo-liberal perspectives, values and principles that have shaped international development modalities since the latter decades of the twentieth century (Brock-Utne 2007; King and Mcgrath 2004; Jones 2007; Peters 2011).

In this broad policy context it is not surprising that challenges to the dominant educational and social research paradigms came to the fore at the turn of the twenty-first century. In the USA and UK this led to repeated calls for educational research to be more cumulative, authoritative and accessible (Hargreaves 1996; Kennedy 1997). This movement has, in turn, influenced international development agencies, such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), and reinforced their commitment to research that can 'deliver' 'evidenced-based' policy that is 'statistically robust' and generalizable across contexts (DFID 2010). The epistemological perspectives and language in such discourses not only reflect positivist assumptions characteristic of the natural sciences, but also privilege large data sets and the search for transferable 'best practice'. While not rejecting the potential of such work, Graham Vulliamy (2004, p. 277) recognizes the challenges to the diversity of qualitative approaches to research, and to postmodern and postcolonial perspectives, that have been developed in the post-war era when he argues that:

This global discourse threatens to undermine the findings and analyses of comparative education research by either completely disregarding cultural context or relegating culture merely to existing as an extraneous variable to be statistically analysed.

In 2001 Michael Crossley and Keith Holmes began to consider the implications of these multiple, parallel and contested paradigmatic trends for the future of international development cooperation. In doing so, attention was given to the implications of such tensions for the generation of more 'genuine' international development research partnerships and capacity building in the coming years. At the same time, it was argued that:

The contemporary challenge to educational research may be understood at various levels. Most fundamentally, it is a political debate in which issues relating to knowledge and power are unavoidable (2001, p. 397).

This is the multi-faceted context within which this analysis is conducted: an international development context in which partnership modalities are widely endorsed, but in which a resurgence of positivist 'big science' assumptions is increasingly visible. The Research on Improving Systems of Education programme (RISE), for example, is a £43 million, seven-year, six-country research programme, funded in the main from sources in the UK, USA and Australia, which seeks to improve education systems in developing countries to the end of enhanced learning for all at scale. We therefore take up the challenges noted by Crossley and Holmes (2001), build upon more recent analyses, and focus directly on what we identify as some of the more important conceptual and ethical implications and dilemmas that deserve closer attention.

Before continuing, it is important to note here that the points emphasized above by Vulliamy (2004) and by Crossley and Holmes (2001) about the importance of culture and context in international

education are at least as old as the field of comparative education itself. Raymond Williams, author of *Culture and Society* (1981), *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (1985), and *The Sociology of Culture* (1982), and acknowledged as one of the greatest historians and theorists of culture, asserts that the use of the term 'cultures' in the plural was the “decisive innovation” of the German philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder: not only “the specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation” (1784, cited in English by Williams 1985, p. 89). As Mason (2014) has suggested, at the same time, surely, was the impetus to compare between and among them born. Perhaps here, then, lies the first formal assertion in early modern social science of the importance of context.

This tension, between positivism and relativism, or between universalism and particularism, which underlies one of the major thematic strands of our argument, is of course a tension that runs throughout the field of comparative education. As is evident in these references to Herder, it is an argument still older than K.D. Ushinsky's mid-nineteenth century discussion of the importance of accounting for national character, pre-dating also Wilhelm Dilthey's defense of a hermeneutic approach to the human sciences around the turn of the twentieth century.

3. Partnerships in educational development cooperation: conceptual and ethical issues¹

Given the increasing degrees of scepticism, which we described in the last section, towards modalities that assumed, for example, Western truths as universal, partnerships in development cooperation have been offered as one response to some of the challenges facing international development assistance. This concept of partnership as a development strategy includes notions of shared rights, shared ownership, shared development objectives and policies, shared responsibilities, shared decisions about where aid is targeted, and shared implementation strategies. Partnership, rather than, say, the imposition by Northern agencies of ‘established best practice’ in a local Southern context, in terms dictated by the former has, since about the mid-nineteen eighties, become a central, if not *the* central, concept in the development field.

For example, in its submission to the UK Parliament's Science and Technology Commons Select Committee, the British Council (2012) underscored the importance of a strong sense of ownership by southern university partners in research partnerships. At the time, the British Council was managing the Department for International Development's *Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DePHE)* programme, a £15 million, seven-year (2006-2013) initiative that aimed to strengthen the capacity of higher education institutions to contribute to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to promote the development of knowledge and skills in the science and technology domain. Both North-South and South-South (where no UK partner university was involved) partnerships were developed.

During approximately the same period (2007-2011), DFID's Africa Policy Unit funded the *Mobilising Regional Capacity Initiative (MRCI)* of the Association of African Universities, a programme designed

¹ This section of the article draws on a shorter piece published in *NORRAG News 41* (Mason 2008), and on Mason (2011).

to strengthen partnerships among African universities and among their national and sub-regional higher education bodies.

Treffgarne (2019, p. 51), writes:

Both DelPHE and MRCI were designed to contribute to the implementation of the MDGs, with the former departing significantly from DFID's Higher Education Links Scheme by encouraging South/South partnerships (rather than solely focussing on North/South ones). MRCI swung further in this direction by being specifically restricted to inter-African university partnerships and network building. The Mid-term Review of DelPHE (October 2010) recorded some notable examples of strong linkage to specific MDGs (Allsop and Bennell, 2010, p. 27). Likewise, most of the 21 MRCI projects had policy implications for more than one MDG and succeeded in generating 52 policy briefs and strengthening 21 inter-African networks.

However, because the promotion of international development and research partnerships is too often un-problematized, and the politics and practicalities of collaboration remain under-explored, in practice such modalities often continue to perpetuate the dominance of Northern stakeholders and the related assumptions and values. Barrett, Crossley and Dachi (2011), for example, reflect upon the practical experience of sustained international research partnerships in education between African and UK universities to demonstrate how, even when a strong culture of collaboration has been established over many years, differential control over funding and imbalances in project leadership and management roles can generate unequal power relations that maintain Northern hegemony. Similarly, Gaby Weiner (2009) examines the impact of patriarchy and globalization in perpetuating gender imbalances in North-South higher education partnerships, and in the 'imported' culture of higher education in the South more generally. Sally Thomas and Wen-Jung Peng (2009) provide further examples from their extensive experience with externally funded education research partnerships with the China National Institute for Educational Research in Beijing. In doing so, their analysis does much to support our own position by identifying five arenas where partner differentials generate potential problems and demand greater critical attention. These relate to staffing, resources, structures, communication and cultural differences. It is for such reasons that we argue here for more critical attention to be given to deeper levels of analysis and to conceptual and ethical issues that have received insufficient attention to date.

Another factor contributing to the emergence of partnerships as a development strategy is the proliferation of information and communications technology. Access to 'the best' information is accordingly no longer the privilege of wealthy or powerful individuals or agencies in the North (and with our contemporary sensibilities, we are no longer convinced that it ever was 'the best' information). That these technologies have also enabled people to communicate with each other more easily and directly has contributed to a flattening of hierarchies and an expansion of networks. More widely available access to and sharing of information have thus further entrenched partnership as a dominant motif in development cooperation.

In 1969 the World Bank commissioned Lester Pearson to consider, in the face of the continuing poor performance of many developing countries, the sources of the growing doubt about the efficacy of development aid and, indeed, doubt about the very development aims upon which such aid was predicated. Pearson recommended, *inter alia*, the establishment of better partnerships between

agencies in the developed countries and institutions in developing countries. One such recommendation, reported by Richard Sack (1999, p. 9), was that

[i]t is necessary to create the building blocks towards mutual trust and respect and the establishment of better partnerships between the developed and developing countries. This requires dialogue about the ends and means, and the meaning of development. The Report raised process to the same level of importance as objectives, and recognized the importance of what we now call “ownership”.

Senegal’s President Abdou Diouf’s opening remarks to the 1997 meeting in Dakar of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) typify this approach:

In order to progress from the aid relationship to partnership, the first step lies in redefining the status and roles of those involved in a way that truly recognizes and accepts the equal dignity and responsibility of both partners, above and beyond differences in their cultures and levels of development. The type of partnership we should promote cannot be founded on a vertical relationship based on authority, constraint, the imposition of an imbalance of power, substituted sovereignty and the transposition of models, or, on the other side of the coin, paternalism and condescension. Instead, it should be founded on conditions such as authentic dialogue in a horizontal relationship in which the actors recognize each other as equals and participate in an exchange considered mutually useful and enriching by both parties.... This is necessary in order to achieve ... a common understanding of development goals and strategies (Diouf 1999).

Such partnerships, with their shared sense of ‘ownership’, envisage not only shared rights on both sides, but also, as President Diouf indicated, shared responsibilities. That responsibility has, of course, to be shared in failure as much as in success. And it is, in part, in the face of some continuing failures, despite the recent dominance of a paradigm of partnership in development cooperation, that Easterly, Dichter, Ellerman, Glennie, Moyo and others have asked critical questions about the modalities of international development assistance.

The Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE 1998) identified inequalities between donors and recipients as a major source of problems in the implementation of development projects, and created a set of *Guidelines for Research in Partnership with Developing Countries*, based on the following 11 principles:

- (1) Decide on the objectives together
- (2) Build up mutual trust
- (3) Share information; develop networks
- (4) Share responsibility
- (5) Create transparency
- (6) Monitor and evaluate the collaboration
- (7) Disseminate the results
- (8) Apply the results
- (9) Share profits equitably
- (10) Increase research capacity

(11) Build on the achievements

While Crossley and Holmes (2001) examine the potential of these guidelines for North-South research partnerships in education, we argue here that the practical and ethical implications of translating these into successful practice deserve much greater attention. How, for example, can the benefits of partnership modalities be shared equally – especially in a neo-liberal context where demonstrated leadership (and Primary Investigator status) is differentially rewarded. How can team status, publication and leadership disputes be managed equitably – and what evidence do we have of this in practice?

Another aspect of the rationale behind partnership as a modality lies in collaboration of this nature focusing on “the priority needs of low-income countries, while simultaneously strengthening the institutional and national research capacity of the Southern partners and reducing their dependency on Northern research organisations and expertise” (Barrett, Crossley and Dachi 2011, p. 27).

If, then, shared rights, shared ownership, shared development objectives and policies, shared responsibilities, shared decisions about where aid is targeted, and shared implementation strategies still leave us facing challenges in development as big as we have ever faced, is it time to consider the extent to which we have expanded the concept of partnership? In some quarters, partnership has indeed become a condition of Northern researchers working in the South.

Following the critiques offered by the likes of Easterly, Dichter and Moyo, we could say that a degree of modesty might be appropriate in development cooperation, but false modesty, especially on the part of Northern agencies, donors, NGOs and researchers, is surely to be guarded against. There are most worthwhile principles to be found guiding much Northern development work: principles that, for example, espouse fairness, transparency, accountability, and the moral responsibility to target efforts at the poorest of the poor. To compromise the latter principle, so as to enable some Southern governments to spend the development aid which they receive in budget support merely where it will make the most difference to their national education statistics, rather than where it might be needed most (as Keith Lewin [2008] has described), is, to continue the metaphor, false modesty indeed on the part of Northern donors in partnership cooperation. Reticence on the part of the latter in demanding more moral accountability with regard to the spending of SWAp (sector-wide approach) budgetary support would certainly be inappropriate. We readily acknowledge here, of course, that it could quickly be counter-argued that Northern donors might themselves be overly focused on targets that make the most difference to national education statistics – and might in many cases push local Ministries to deliver against such targets instead of, indeed, where the development aid might be needed most in that particular context. This has been demonstrated especially clearly, for example, in recent research carried out in small states, where many small education systems have long prioritized secondary and tertiary education in contrast to the focus on basic education that has dominated international agendas, resulting in pressures exerted on small states by development agencies with regard to access to related development assistance (Crossley 2010).

In guarding against false modesty in development cooperation, Northern donors in particular should not shrink from the fact that, while the concept of partnership commonly implies an equal

distribution of rights and responsibilities among those party to the arrangement, this need not necessarily be the case, and is indeed frequently not the case empirically either. It is hard to construct an equal partnership when one party, for example, controls the purse strings. The arguments in this domain have of course been well rehearsed, whether they have to do with colonial histories and the moral obligations of restitution, the venal politics of aid when real barriers to development lie in restrictions on trade, or with the construction and destruction of the Third World as argued by Escobar (1995). The truth, if it is to be found, of this most sensitive aspect of development assistance, probably lies, as it might do in other issues of partnership cooperation, not in the detail of a particular context, nor in the abstract ideals of perfect equality, but in both, and, inevitably, in the tensions between them.

4. 'Best practice' in educational development cooperation²

While 'partnership' has been a central concept in the development field for at least the last 30 years, the idea of 'best practice' is one that has been added to the lexicon more recently; and, as with the ideal of 'partnership', 'best practice' is not without its difficulties. In this section of the article we consider three assumptions frequently associated with the claim that 'established best practice' can and should be implemented in international development contexts. Following a preliminary consideration of the origins of conceptions of 'best practice', we continue our analysis of conceptual and ethical issues by addressing three questions associated with the implementation of 'perceived best practice' in international and local development contexts.

- 1) Is there such a thing as 'evidence-based best practice'?
- 2) If best practices could be quite specifically identified, *can* they be implemented elsewhere, given the dilemmas of uncritical educational policy transfer and the importance of contextual differences?
- 3) If the answer to this second question is yes, *should* 'best practices' be implemented in different, local development contexts?

The claim that 'best practice' can and should be transferred internationally and be implemented in differing local development contexts assumes first that there is indeed an established best practice in educational development. In its stronger form, this would be a claim of universal best practice. That such best practice may frequently have been developed in 'the West' or 'the North' raises further questions if it is to be transferred to developing world contexts through international development cooperation. As we do later in the article, we question here the assumptions that educational policy and practice can have transcultural normative reach or practical traction in different contexts. Indeed, for those who have adopted the scepticism of the postmodern turn, little trans-contextual efficacy or normativity is seen to be possible. Defendants of the best practice thesis, on the other hand, would argue that just because a particular practice or set of norms originated locally, there is no reason to believe that that practice cannot have normative and practical application across contexts. Mason (2005) has made this argument elsewhere. In the

² This section of the article draws on a shorter piece published in *NORRAG News* 39 (Mason 2007) and arguments developed in an earlier article in *Prospects* (Crossley 2010).

following section we pick up on some of these questions while examining the possible universality of ethical principles in relation to international and cross-cultural research in educational development.

This debate, however, still begs the question whether there can ever be evidence-based best practice in education and international development. The frequent use of the qualifier, 'evidence-based', is often employed to strengthen the claim to 'best' practice, and this invites consideration of deeper questions about the nature of knowledge. For example, in his Preface, *On the Non-Existence of Scientific Method* (Popper 1983), Karl Popper famously claimed that:

As a rule, I begin my lectures on Scientific Method by telling my students that scientific method does not exist and I ought to know, having been, for a time at least, the one and only professor of this non-existent subject within the British Commonwealth [M]y subject does not exist because ... there are only problems, and the urge to solve them.

In John Dewey's pragmatic epistemology, evidence provides us not with rules for future action, but merely with hypotheses for intelligent problem solving. There is obviously a substantial epistemological argument supporting this conclusion, but the constraints of space prevent further elucidation of it here. Interested readers could consult Dewey's (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. If, as Gert Biesta (2007, p. 17) interprets Dewey's conclusion,

we want an epistemology that is practical enough to understand how knowledge can support practice, we have to concede that the knowledge available through research is not about what works and will work, but about what has worked in the past.

We can, in other words, use this knowledge only to undertake further intelligent action. We cannot use it as a blueprint for 'best practice'.

Beyond these epistemological and methodological issues, there are further questions about whether there is or can ever be an established 'best practice' in education and international development. The notion of a 'best practice' for example often assumes a global or universal best. From a rather too shallow sceptical perspective, critics would claim that we would be naïve in assuming even the possibility of one 'best practice'. But such scepticism is perhaps not sufficiently well considered. It can be a cheap shot. A more considered response would question the simple choice between yes and no, and see the way forward on a continuum. From this perspective, an answer could tend towards the positive ideals that are described at a fairly general level. Many could thus agree with the ideal, for example, that 'best practice assumes the existence and enforcement of procedures to minimize corruption in any educational development work', or, that 'educational development work should aim to maximize the life chances of those most at risk in the prevailing context'. These are sufficiently general claims as to be widely generalizable.

But any answer to the question whether a universally applicable set of best practices in education can be identified would tend towards the negative if we were seeking ideals that could be described to a high degree of specificity. What, for example, is meant by 'maximizing the life chances of those most at risk in the prevailing context'? Could it mean, in a Freirean sense, their conscientization in their development of critical reasoning skills and a sceptical orientation to the unequal distributions of power, wealth and opportunities in their society? Or could it mean the development of their capacity and skills to secure a job? And how would either of these best be achieved? Second, who

would be construed to be ‘most at risk’? Would they be rurally located girls of an ethnic minority, mired in structural poverty? And how might the situation best be addressed: by building infrastructure (roads, electricity grids, piped water) for economic and social development, or by building schools and places of sanctuary? Analogous questions could be asked about the supposed potential of perceived ‘best practice’ in influential forms and modalities of research in the education and development arena. What, for example, are the implications and consequences of the positivist assumptions and values associated with the funder-driven, large-scale, comprehensive data-set, and expensive modalities of research commonly associated with ‘big science’? And are such complex, resource-intensive research modalities ‘best’ or appropriate to promote in, or transfer to, for example, resource-poor African countries or other low-income contexts? The uncritical international transfer of currently fashionable western social and educational research modalities is, therefore, an issue that, in itself, deserves greater critical interrogation from the comparative and international research community. Universally applicable best practices might, in sum, be described at high levels of generality, but might not be so easily expressed at the levels of specificity normally required to make a significant impact at the practical level.

This situating of the answer to the question about the very possibility of a universal best practice on a continuum leads to a consideration of the second assumption made in the claim that ‘established best practice’ can and should be transferred across and implemented in different contexts. As Crossley (2010) has repeatedly argued, ‘context matters’ more than many educational policy-makers and researchers often realize in the international development arena. Crossley and Watson argue that:

Studies of sustainable educational reform or sustainable national development – perhaps focused on successful [‘best’] practice – could benefit greatly from more in-depth cross-cultural analyses, enhanced reflexivity and a more critical and culturally informed [perspective] (2003, p. 81).

In similar vein, Oplatka writes that:

reform should be sensitive to local communities and apply local educational knowledge to improve education based on the conjecture that this knowledge is as professional as any ‘Western’ knowledge underlying externally transferred reforms.... In other words, we need to learn how we have to utilize local resources to make the reform ‘familiar’ to teachers, students and parents and how to combine local traditions, knowledge, customs and the like into the reform so as to make it more relevant to local students (2019, p. 102).

In India, the approach of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), led by the NGO, Pratham, demonstrates an educational intervention that is particularly sensitive to context – right down to students of particular achievement levels in particular classrooms. Children across Grades 3 to 5 are placed in groups not according to their age or their formally assigned grade, but in terms of their learning needs.

Additional dilemmas arise when we consider the third assumption, that ‘best practices’ *should* be implemented in different, local development contexts. An argument against this thesis arises from one of the difficulties of the discourse of evidence-based ‘best practice’: that the discourse implies

an 'applied science' of professionalism that rather too easily precludes the political engagement and commitment which theorists in the traditions of both critical theory (from Hannah Arendt and Paulo Freire to Jürgen Habermas) and post-structuralism (such as Michel Foucault or Jean Baudrillard) would argue is necessary for change. The technician orientation associated with the discourse of evidence-based 'best practice' promises, as Maggie MacLure (2003) has suggested, to relieve local actors of the responsibility of engaging in the risky, political and imaginative efforts necessary to make and remake their realities.

Apart from removing the political responsibility for finding appropriate procedures and solutions from local actors, it can be argued that the transplanting of 'best practice' from elsewhere also removes from those actors any sense of moral responsibility for the outcomes that follow the implementation of somebody else's 'best practice'. Biesta (2007) situates this issue in a tension between scientific and democratic control over educational practice and research, as do Simon McGrath and Rosemary Lugg (2012), who see it in terms of a necessary tension between the scientific and the political in policy-oriented research. Biesta draws on Dewey's pragmatism to conclude that it's not only about ascertaining the most effective ways to achieve certain educational or development ends. It's also about the desirability of the ends themselves, an inquiry which extends beyond scientific researchers to the community as a whole.

As Biesta remarks,

Evidence-based practice provides a framework for understanding the role of research in educational practice that not only restricts the scope of decision making to questions about effectivity and effectiveness but that also restricts the opportunities for participation in educational decision making. ... [I]t is disappointing, to say the least, that [almost] the whole discussion about evidence-based practice is focused [predominantly] on technical questions – questions about “what works” – while forgetting the need for critical inquiry into normative and political questions about what is educationally desirable (2007, pp. 6, 21).

Samoff has, for example, pointed out with regard to aid modalities that typically prevail, that Southern actors are all too often constructed merely as targets and as little more than recipients of aid: “With the foreign funding came ideas and values, advice and directives on how education systems ought to be managed and targeted”, (2003, p. 440). External resources exerted a substantial “direct and indirect influence on policy and programs” (*ibid.*). As external agencies provided

*funding and development advice, their perspectives ... shaped approaches, methodologies, and the definition of [educational] missions and more generally the scientific enterprise. Throughout Africa, [for example], unable to find local support, education researchers became contracted consultants. As they did so, those imported understandings of research, from framing questions to gathering data to interpretive strategies, were internalized and institutionalized, no longer foreign imports but now the apparently unexceptional everyday routines [of educational discourse, research and practice] (*ibid.*).*

There is of course almost no gainsaying the efficacy of practices appropriately based on good evidence. But there is also no gainsaying the efficacy (and not just the moral importance) of

democratic local participation in the process. The discourse of evidence-based 'best practice', it can be argued, seduces too many local participants rather too quickly into believing that they have a secure foundation for the 'borrowed' policy or practice they're about to implement. This can encourage a passive reliance upon what is perceived as 'best practice'. Echoing what we intimated in the earlier section of the article on partnerships in international education development, local participants are thus reduced to the status of observers or implementers. There is a certain disempowerment in the view that here we have a fail-safe recipe, an established 'best practice' based on 'international evidence', that can be relied upon. Any blunders and it's the recipe's fault, or that of the chef in the guise of the international agency. It's not ours. Neither the fault, nor the recipe.

We now turn to the ethical implications of this analysis.

5. 'One size fits all' ethical frameworks for international educational development and research

It has long been recognized in the ethics of international development that potential obstacles to effective partnerships created by inequalities in resources and knowledge are frequently compounded by

national sensitivities, cultural and ideological divides, inherited wounds and mistrust, and competing under-proven perceptions of options and effects in long term processes of massive change (Gasper 1999, p. 23).

A responsible moral orientation in such challenging circumstances should aim to support good judgment by all members of any partnership by providing shared points of reference that promote meaningful communication and action among the partners. It is to ways of doing that that we now turn.

Our earlier discussion of the possibility of universal ethical principles in educational development considered the transcultural normative reach of certain foundational educational ideals and moral principles. Specifically, Mason's (2005, p. 800) example of "the obligation to respect the dignity of each other, and especially of those who are different, as persons," is a strong contender. (For a full elaboration and defence of this ethical principle, which lies at the core of relationships in international educational development, see Mason's *The Ethics of Integrity*, 2001.) The key concepts of respect, dignity and difference are sufficiently plastic to be elaborated as values and behaviours shaped around differences in perceptions and thus contextually appropriate to different combinations in partnerships. Respect demonstrates mutual esteem and honour, which may be demonstrated by observation of etiquette, active communication and mutually supported actions. Dignity is the quality of being worthy or honourable. The combined effect of respect and dignity is to challenge any tendencies towards the pursuit of one-sided self interest, especially when tainted by colonialism or imperialism. They also challenge any moral complacency by a charitable donor to consider scrupulously whose interests are being served and what is being obscured by any uncritical zest for benevolence. Conversely, respect and dignity challenge any potential beneficiaries to avoid deference or subservience within the partnership. More importantly, when difference is set in a human context of respect and dignity, it no longer carries the socially regressive attribution of

inferiority, inadequacy, or blameworthiness. It requires all parties in the partnership to be open to the incompleteness of their knowledge and cultural perspectives. Difference represents a communicative challenge to be overcome in order to reach out to the other for the purpose of appreciating and developing understanding of lives lived in terms of unfamiliar points of reference.

We now consider the implications of an ethic of respect for the dignity of others at (1) the macro-level of strategic planning for international educational development and research; and (2) the micro-level of operational interactions between people, before turning to (3) the question of whether it is possible to envisage a single ethic in which 'one size fits all'.

5.1. Macro-level perspectives

Philosophically and politically an ethic of respect owes much to Western liberalism and its aspirations for peaceful co-existence among different regimes and ways of life by acceptance of value pluralism. Such a principle does not necessarily require acceptance of the other potentially incompatible theory that underpins liberalism (Gray, 2000), namely the quest for a universal rational consensus about the best way of life for all. Nor does it rule out reasoned agreement on the ways and means of enhancing justice in the interests of addressing injustices associated with poverty and oppression (Sen 2009, p. 131). The working out of such a principle is likely to favour positive actions informed by social justice. It is a principle that challenges insensitivity to context by single-minded promotion of economic growth alongside individual freedom advocated by neo-liberals or the imposition of Western knowledge and socio-economic systems characteristic of some post-colonial analysis. The principle of respect favours locally agreed actions for educational development and research, established through dialogue across differences (Crossley, 2008), without necessarily making claims to universal or generalizable knowledge and practice suitable for uncritical transfer to unfamiliar contexts.

One of the macro-level challenges of putting an ethic of respect into operation across social contexts arises from how social differences may impact on the capability of one or more partners to participate in that dialogue. Capability of respectful dialogue and action may be frustrated by a number of factors. Inequalities in knowledge, infrastructure and resources may need to be addressed in order to secure the capabilities for respectful dialogue between partners. Only when inequalities that constrain the capabilities of partners have been substantially addressed is it possible to develop strategies to overcome limitations created by ignorance and silence within a partnership. Unlike emergency aid, education requires sustained intervention over considerable periods of time to be effective. The motivation and stamina for sustained change are most likely to flourish when all partners understand each other's visions and aspirations.

This view of respect as creating a moral imperative for dialogue as the pathway to mutual understanding sits uneasily with the practical constraints associated with changing modalities in international development. Dialogue can be time consuming while the timeframes for projects are under pressure to shrink so as to control costs. In such circumstances, it is all too tempting to overlook the significance of silence on issues of importance to the partnership. Being silenced is a common social adaptation to powerlessness or fear. Some silences are the result of conscious choice, but the more problematic silences in partnerships are those arising from patterns of thinking, language and communication that are culturally endorsed in ways that deafen the advantaged and

render the disadvantaged mute. Boaventura Santos characterizes the dynamics of silence as a “sociology of absences” (Santos 2012, pp. 52–4) for which the countermeasures are a “sociology of emergences” (2012, pp. 54–6) as components of his epistemology of the South. It is not necessary to accept this particular view of the persistence of regional inequalities to recognize that an intrinsic component of respect is to be encouraging of voicing what may be silenced by the power relations between partners. Not to do so would be to frustrate the possibility of meaningful levels of communication. Giving voice to what is silenced may involve intercultural translation in order for it to be heard. It is only when heard that it becomes possible to reconsider any culturally endorsed assumptions which may be underpinning the retention of advantage and privilege, or resistance to effective change.

Most educational and development projects are not restricted to work undertaken by the core partners, but also involve their working with members of local communities, typically educators, students, families and community members. The selection of strategic values will have implications for the roles of these different stakeholders (Bond, 2002). Respect is not only essential within the partnership, but also needs to be extended to all affected by the work of the partnership. Education is an act of social engineering that works best when it serves the values of and is actively supported by the community in which it is located. The type of knowledge and capabilities developed in the population through education may vary according to the human interests that are prioritized. These interests may be determined on many levels, both within and external to the partnership. An interesting example of this is provided by Fran Martin and Helen Griffiths (2012) in their postcolonial study of power and representation in global partnerships, teacher development and North-South visits.

5.2. Micro-level perspectives

At the micro-level, the ethical challenges change over the life-cycle of any educational development or research project (Silka, 2009). This is particularly significant if the project is to be delivered *with* the active engagement of all partners rather than one-sidedly *to* others, who by virtue of the one-sidedness are partners in name only. The preparatory stage enables the clarification of expectations of each other and the appropriate etiquette between cultures that will support the development of reciprocal understanding across differences among partners. The importance of this can be seen in the few case studies of international research partnerships that can be found in the existing literature (Stephens, 2009). This is also a time for preliminary discussions to discover what is ethically desirable or particularly sensitive to each partner so that these issues can be incorporated within frameworks for working together from an early stage. The early stages of implementation involve agreeing the purpose and design of the project; unfortunately, our review of contemporary experience suggests that this is a stage when some contributors to research partnerships may dominate – to the impoverishment of the initiative. Alternatively, the full range of academic expertise, relevant contextual knowledge and practice may be actively valued and mobilized to the benefit of the overall success of the partnership. Norms, we therefore suggest, become established very early in the life of any research or development partnership and are much more easily reconfigured in the formative stage of the partnership before they become entrenched and resistant to change.

Middle stage issues typically concern specific research methods to be adopted by a research partnership. What data will be gathered, by whom and from whom? In more action-oriented projects, what will be done by whom to whom? What messages are being sent or received by the selection of people for inclusion or exclusion from the scope of the project? In the concluding stages, the question of who controls the interpretations of and reporting of the work may be particularly sensitive between partners. Similarly, where does the balance of any remuneration or other benefits fall between the partners? A project that ends with all partners considering that there has been a fair distribution of benefits in reputation and reward is more likely to have a legacy of sustainable empowerment and the potential for ongoing research partnerships. In practice, research cultures are increasingly driven by financial incentives and rewards that, despite the rhetoric of collaboration, reward individual and institutional leadership and ownership.

5.3. Research ethics as the quest for the right size that fits

In the previous sections, it has been possible to speak of the ethical basis for international development and research generically. However, there are some specific issues that relate primarily to ethical policy concerning research involving human participants. These issues are particularly applicable to university-based research that are subject to ethical review, although may not be relevant to many project evaluations that are not usually required to undergo such a review. The dominant, Western ethical requirements in most Western countries are, to varying degrees, problematic for international and comparative educational research undertaken in partnership. The current ethical review regime was initiated by moral revulsion at the abuse of research subjects as revealed in the Nuremburg Trials (1945-6), the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (exposed in 1972) and other incidents of harm inflicted on research subjects primarily in biomedical and behavioural psychology experiments. The key policy response in the USA, the Belmont Report (1979), has been very influential in the development of ethical frameworks and research across economically developed Westernized nations. Three of the resulting ethical strategies are particularly problematic to the development of culturally sensitive research that applies an ethic of respect in comparative and international educational research.

First, the established approach to research ethics in the West regards an independent ethical review process as an essential requirement for ethical approval prior to undertaking any social research. Such independence is designed to protect objectivity and impartiality in the review process but this can become an obstacle to research in some international partnerships. In practice, it can make the decision-making remote from one or more of the partners and frustrate meaningful dialogue designed to construct jointly agreed and contextually sensitive ethical models, agreements and ethical solutions. One possible remedy could be to delegate the ethical review process to a steering committee in which all partners and stakeholders from grassroots to senior policy levels are represented, and which remains in place across the lifespan of the research. The advantages of information and communications technology make such arrangements both practically possible and cost-effective. Such a system could have the advantage of actively engaging researchers in the cultural translation of ethical issues, without undermining their accountability to their respective authorities.

This type of arrangement could also help in resolving difficulties over the second issue, which relates to the researcher's responsibility to protect research subjects from significant harm. Here we suggest that what constitutes harm in social research, in comparison to physical interventions, is contested and requires contextually situated consideration to avert potential harm and identify appropriate and acceptable ways of working. A steering committee composed of representatives of the stakeholder groups would not only be better placed to make such assessments, but could also be more directly accountable for decisions made by their proximity to the lives and interests of the research subjects.

The third widely acknowledged ethical safeguard relates to research subjects participating on the basis of their freely given and informed consent. This recognizes the need to maintain the agency of research subjects to protect themselves from harm, and has developed as the implementation of an ethic of respect for their dignity. For many it could be surprising or counterintuitive that this could become problematic in some contexts. However, problems can arise, particularly when individual consent is counter-cultural in more collectively oriented social contexts, or where the research subject has to balance the risks of low standing or marginality in their society against expressing views as an individual. Both situations require cultural sensitivity and translation by researchers in order to obtain authentic consent and uphold an ethic of respect. Moreover, in cultures where universal education has been established for long periods of time, consent is evidenced in writing. However, this can be problematic within cultures that rely heavily on oral traditions, where a spoken commitment is considered sacrosanct, or where any documentation is seen as the sphere of influence of more educated and powerful members of society, while to the marginalized this may portend exploitation or oppression. The implementation of consent thus requires not only cultural sensitivity but also cultural translation to the practicalities of its implementation.

In concluding here, we argue that, especially at the micro-level of practice, an uncritical adoption of a 'one size fits all' approach to ethics processes for educational and international development could fail to address the challenges posed by the conscientious implementation of an ethic of respect for the dignity of partners and those served by those partners. An over-emphasis on the universal application of one approach may undermine the potential for meaningful dialogue around other cultural values and approaches to human advancement. International education research partnership and collaborations need humility and open-mindedness on behalf of all involved, combined with a carefully weighed respect (see Mason, 2005) for traditions developed within differing cultures and contexts. Nonetheless, at the broadest macro-level, we argue that an ethical principle of respect for the dignity of others remains a frontrunner as a guiding ethical principle for cross-cultural research partnerships and for international educational development because it conveys a duty of critical reflexivity for both the North and South (East and West) that challenges complacency and acknowledges the limitations of dominant forms of knowledge to support meaningful and balanced international collaboration. A serious commitment to the ethical principle of respect for the dignity of each other holds out the promise that the outcome will be sensitive to the contexts of all partners, shaped by dialogue and appropriate to the task being undertaken.

6. Conclusions

Recent decades have seen major geo-political change worldwide. This has been combined with dramatic advances in information and communications technologies, and related changes in modalities for both international development and research. Documenting and understanding these trajectories requires a multi-disciplinary approach – and one that is capable of assessing the impact of the interweaving of parallel, and at times contradictory, paradigmatic, intellectual and political trends upon international development discourse and associated research policy and practice. The field of international educational development is far more complex than might be apparent from its representation in the scholarly literature. We use the term *complex* deliberately, to flag the nascent work that has been done recently on understanding the field using the insights of complexity theory. Complexity theory suggests important insights into making development and change sustainable, and points, for example, to the importance of sector-wide approaches (see Mason, 2009) and to integrated service delivery (see Nordtveit, 2010). Existing work has begun to chart this and related territory (see, for example, Burns and Worsley, 2015; Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015; Green, 2016; Byrne and Callaghan, 2014; Hager and Beckett, 2019), but to date few substantial studies have focused upon the emergent tensions and the conceptual and ethical implications that arise from these developments.

In this article, we have tried to move these discussions forward by drawing upon our own research experience and our combined interests in comparative and international education, contemporary social theory, and the ethical dimensions of research. We have focused on a limited number of core issues relating to the influence of increasing rates of globalization and of the postmodern turn in the social sciences; changing conceptualizations of international research partnerships; the emergence of ‘big science’ research modalities; the influence of ‘best practice’ assumptions and discourse; and the nature, potential and limitations of a ‘one size fits all’ ethical framework in the international arena. In doing so, we intend that our contribution may point to some possible ways forward and assist those engaged in the practice of ongoing international development and research partnerships – and that it will help to stimulate further theoretical and methodological insights and advances for all engaged in such work worldwide.

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