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The Brazilian Comparative Education Society (SBEC)

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The field of Comparative education is gaining relevance as an academic area in the globalized world, because of the interdependency between the nations and the similarity of the educational challenges faced by all countries. In Brazil the interest in Comparative studies is growing, and because of the technology, today is very easy to collect information about educational systems of different regions and countries. One limitation is the lack of knowledge of English language by Brazilian educators, but the new generations we hope will be better prepared to communicate in a second language. Comparative education in Brazil is marked by two conditions. First as citizens of a 'developing' country we tend to look out at what happens outside Brazil because what happens there shapes the life and conditions of the population. The second condition relates to the lack of graduate programmes in comparative education and professional preparation to work as specialists in the area, or look for jobs as do graduates from the 'developed' countries.

The Brazilian Society of Comparative Education (*Sociedade Brasileira de Educação Comparada*-SBEC) was founded in 1983 by a group of professors of education, and is a relatively young society in the Brazilian educational context. The more traditional societies like the National Association of Policy and Educational Administration (ANPAE) are more than 40 years old. The SBEC seems to be reaching adulthood, if we compare it with the same age range for humans, but in several respects our society is still in its adolescence, trying to find a role and identity in the social environment.

The main objective of the SBEC is the promotion of comparative research and studies through the teaching of comparative education and the integration of researchers at the national level. Cooperative studies and international studies in education are publicised through seminars, conferences and meetings. The Society is small with 121 members in 2005, and one objective of its leadership is to increase the number of associates and the visibility of the SBEC. The members in general have some form of international background or they studied abroad, they speak more than one foreign language, usually English; and they are related to the academic world. The meetings and seminars are the main activities of the Society, and people become members during the events. The Society has long published a bulletin three times a year and has planned a digital journal to

increase communications with the membership and to disseminate comparative education studies.

The Early Years

The foundation of the Society in 1983 and the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies held in 1987 were key events in the history of the society. The World Congress in Rio de Janeiro brought the theme of comparative education to the Brazilian educational arena. This paper is based on interviews with comparativists who played a major leadership role in those and subsequent years.

Eurides Brito da Silva,¹ who was president of the society from 1983 to 1990, was very active, and participated strongly in the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES). In her vision, the society was founded to express the interests of a group of professors of school administration within the ANPAE. They organised a special interest group with the focus on comparative studies. There were two groups of professors, one from the University of Brasília and another from Rio de Janeiro. Jacira Câmara, Eurides Brito and Clélia Capanema formed the Brasília group, which was later enriched by the participation of Cândido Gomes. The group from Rio was formed from professors of different universities in the region: Sonia Nogueira from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Fátima Cunha from the Federal Fluminense University, Mabel Tarré C. de Oliveira, also from the initial group. During the years 1981-1982, a Seminar was held in Brasília with the presence of international scholars such as Robert Cowen, from the University of London stimulating interest in international education and comparative themes.

In one meeting of ANPAE, this group decided to organise the society. The initial members were professors of educational administration and attended international meetings promoted by the World Council, and they brought the structure of the World Council to the Brazilian Society. They shared common interests in comparative education and read international publications such as the *Comparative Education Review*. In that phase, there were links with scholars in France and England including Brian Holmes. The society organised support from different scholars around Brazil, according to Eurides Brito in a personal interview. She remembered Roberto Ballalai with the Center for Comparative Education at the Federal Fluminense University, Cândido Gomes in Brasília, Maria Luiza Chaves from the Federal University of Ceará. Robert Verhine from the Federal University of Bahia, Eurides remembered, had very good contacts at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and helped the society in its initial phase.

The role of Roberto Ballalai as Secretary General of Eurides Brito's presidency was very important. The Center for Comparative Education in Niterói provided the

¹ The data used in this article were obtained through personal interviews with the former presidents of the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education. Cândido Gomes and Clélia Capanema were interviewed by telephone in 2004, and Eurides Brito was interviewed in 2005.

institutional support for the activities of the Society and kept the initial groups in touch. It was also the venue for the final meeting of the WCCES Executive Committee after the World Congress in 1987.

Eurides Brito and Sonia Nogueira attended several international meetings and in France they established a personal contact with Michel Debeauvais. He was the President of the World Council at that time, and suggested the idea of holding the World Congress in Brazil. Eurides Brito, looking back at the experience, reframed it as an act of courage and an effort to disseminate comparative education in the Brazilian educational context. The first big decision was about the city for the meeting: Rio de Janeiro was selected because of its tourist attraction and because there was a group of scholars able to organize and promote the event. The meeting was organised in a cooperative way from the two initial groups, Brasilia and Rio.

Another chapter in the SBEC history was the fight to receive funds from Brazilian agencies for the meeting. In 1986, they tried national funding agencies with no success, and in 1987, Eurides Brito and Sonia Nogueira went to the Ministry of Education and received funds sufficient to pay for air tickets and room for the invited international speakers and scholars. That support was essential for the success of the World Congress. It was held in Rio in 1987 with the theme Education : Crisis and Change. and it was considered a success by Eurides Brito, and the organisers. Participants from 73 countries joined the event, the SBEC membership had a three-fold increase, and the president of the Brazilian Society was elected Vice-President of the World Council. Clélia Capanema recalled that 500 papers were presented.² The Brazilian participants were exposed to international scholars in education, and the event was a national landmark. The Brazilian participants came from diverse universities around the country, and the theme of comparative education was disseminated to a large number of Brazilian professors. Cândido Gomes states that a publication resulted from the World Congress it was a book organized by Robert Verhine and had as a title the thematic of the World Congress, it was published in 1989.

Although the expectations were very high of the effects of the Congress, in a 2004 visit, Robert Cowen³ expressed the idea that after the World Congress little happened in relation to comparative education in Brazil. He may be right if the expectation was that the World Congress would drastically change the situation. But Cândido Gomes points out that as result of the World Congress in Rio, he saw increased participation of Brazilian in several commission in the World Council, and Sonia Nogueira was President of one commission, and the number of Brazilians participating in Comparative Education events increased in a significative way. As pointed out in the initial part of this paper, comparative education is not an area of professional preparation in Brazilian educational programmes, despite the fact that the Brazilian Graduate Programs in education are meeting international standards of quality.

Comparative Education used to be a regular field in the curriculum of the Pedagogy Program in most universities. Later this changed and the field was excluded from the

² In a personal phone interview given in 2004 to the author.

³ Robert Cowen, made a conference in a local meeting of SBEC in September of 2004, and during his talk he made the comments I am citing in the text.

curriculum. It remains today an area of growing interest, but not of professional preparation. This fact made the role of SBEC even more relevant, keeping an international and comparative education perspective in the Brazilian educational context.

As Eurides Brito was the first president of the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education, and perhaps because of her political position, the SBEC was considered politically conservative by other educational associations in the country. She commented that some traditional societies did not accept SBEC as a new academic society and openly opposed it. It was a difficult moment in Brazilian history⁴ with the, and everything had to be black or white, leftist or rightist. The fact that SBEC was considered rightist created unnecessary resistance to the Society.

Cândido Gomes was president of the society from 1990 to 1993, and his term was marked by several activities. When interviewed, he mentioned a study done by the World Council in 1988, involving five continents, and a scholar from Chile made the presentation about it in a seminar held in Brazil. He remembered two seminars held in Brasilia, during the 1990s. One was held in the Brazilian Senate in 1992, which had discussions of the relations between research and educational policy and involved Brazilian educational leaders including Darci Ribeiro and João Calmon. The other event was held in Brasilia in 1994, and concerned diminishing resources in education. It was held at the Catholic University of Brasilia. The proceedings were published in the *Revista Universa* from the same university. During his presidency, he published an article about education in Latin America printed in the *International Review of Education* (Gomes 1993). In this article, he presented a view of education in Latin America stressing its dependence on technical, managerial and financial problems and especially the political nature of the problems. He finished the article with a statement about the interdependence of economies that he considered very relevant to the understanding of comparative education in today's world (Gomes 1993, p.77):

Fortunately or not, today's world is so small that all of us depend on each other. Comparative and international education knows and teaches this lesson well. If Europe's discovery of America was disturbing to the world of its time, the greatest finding of this century is the growing understanding of our global interdependence. Each of us is a link in a chain of being.

From 1993 to 1997 Clélia Capanema was the president of the society. In her interview, she said that her presidency was very difficult because the Secretary General left, and she was alone to do all the work. It was a difficult time for academic societies in Brazil, in general and the experience of SBEC was not different.

From 1997 to 2003 Robert Verhine was the President. His terms were marked by activities of consultancy, research, publications and promotion of seminars. He participated in several international events, keeping the society connected with international scholars. In 1997 the Brazilian society organized a seminar with the theme "New Tendencies for Education in the Third Millennium" It was held at Federal University

⁴ In 1964 with a military coup an authoritarian political regime was established in Brazil, and it lasted until the 1985 when elections were held, and the country moved in direction of a democratic government

of Bahia, and attracted a great audience. A second event was organized in Salvador, Bahia in 2001 with a focus on International and National Tendencies in Educational Evaluation. A number of the periodic *Gestão em Ação* published the conferences and papers presented at the meeting. A website for the SBEC was developed and an electronic Bulletin was produced with news about events, seminars and reports of research and small articles. It was very useful for the communication between members, and it was a service offered for the associates.

Two international events one in 1999 and another in 2003 were promoted by the SBEC at PUCRS (Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul). The two events brought scholars from the area of Mercosul, and were marked by the quality of papers presented. One book was published with a selection of papers produced in 1999 (Castro & Werle 2000). And a number of the *Revista Educação* –PUCRS was edited in 2004 with a selection of papers presented in the International event of 2004.

In 2000, there a meeting in Brasília, promoted by SBEC that looked at Directions of Educational administration in Contemporary Brazil, and in that meeting Verhine was elected for his second term.

The author of the chapter was elected the new president in 2003, at the event in Porto Alegre, and we have plans to publish a digital journal for the Society to disseminate low cost academic studies in the area of Comparative Education and to offer an additional service to members. A new web page was developed and can be assessed at the electronic address www.sbec.org.br. An e-mail is available for easy communications with associates. On the page of the society, the President and Vice-Presidents are presented, the associates, the by-laws, a brief history and the papers of three international members are free to be downloaded by visitors. The idea is to provide in the web page papers and studies related to Comparative Education. There is a list of related links to the World Council and other societies around the world to be explored by associates and students.

We are organizing a book on the methodology of comparative studies; this idea grew out of the meeting in 2003 in Porto Alegre, RS, and have the collaboration of scholars from Portugal, Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Italy. We hope that will become a reference for Comparative Education in the Portuguese language.

An increase in the number of members, the development of a system to collect the annual fees, the digital journal, establishing the legal situation of the association, and continuing to publish the electronic bulletin are the objectives we are working on.

The theme of comparative education in Brazil is gaining growing interest because of the globalisation process, and the SBEC is doing good work, disseminating knowledge about the theme. Perhaps more courses in graduate and undergraduate programs in education will be reinstated. Comparative education was part of the curriculum of majors in education, but it was excluded by Resolution 262 of the Ministry of Education regarding the curriculum of education courses. A study of publications (Castro & Werle 2000) in Brazilian educational periodicals provided evidence that comparative education is a growing interest in Brazil. In a more recent study regarding the national educational publications (Werle & Castro 2004), it was observed that the majority of the articles, classified as comparative (72.73%) focused on the educational problems of Latin America, keeping the interest in international education restricted to that geographical area. The

themes of a large number of articles were educational reform, higher education, pedagogical trends and globalisation.

The process of globalisation of the economy created space for new alliances, such as among Latin American countries, and countries that face increasing poverty and inequalities all over the world. The idea of collaboration and search for solutions of common or similar problems is another area for further development. Brazil as a rich and vast country can learn from other countries' experiences, but can teach too, tolerance and openness to many developed countries. I emphasise here the need for the World Council to be a model of openness giving voice to different languages, ethnic groups and countries. Overcoming prejudices comparative education societies around the world should listen to the voices of all, in order to create the better world that we all deserve. I think that the Brazilian Society of Comparative Education should develop and express a voice of hope, tolerance and openness within the context of the World Council.

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