

THE MEDITERRANEAN SOCIETY OF COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

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Introduction: an overview

If one views the current scenario of comparative Education Societies around the world (of which there are about thirty), it can be easily noted that there is no one specific Society of Scholars devoted to the study of Mediterranean issues. This is even more astonishing if we think that nowadays anything ‘Mediterranean’ has become almost a trend (from diets to cruises). Sadly, however, it is also famous for the high number of illegal immigrants who die in their attempts to cross the sea and reach the rich ‘Fortress Europe’. Naturally, a scientific society needs some specific criteria in order to exist, beginning with its own objective. What exactly should a Society of this kind compare? The first obvious answer is: the school systems of the Mediterranean countries. But here we come up against the first problem: would it be possible to compare—and if so to what extent—school systems with such different traditions as those of the Mediterranean countries? To answer these questions means to enter *in medias res* of this problem, something that this article will specifically try to do.

Let us start from a very general overview of the Mediterranean situation from a historical, political and educational point of view. The north coast of the Mediterranean is formed by Southern Europe, countries, therefore, having Latin and Greek-Orthodox traditions, with the addition of Turkey. There are few problems on the western side of the north coast: Spain, Portugal, France and Italy. Passing over to the eastern side the problems increase, not so much in Greece (although the old problem of the relationship with Turkey still persists) as along the Adriatic coast. Even here, the northern part (Slovenia and Croatia) is not so problematic as the south: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, the Macedonian Republic and Albania. In these areas problems of historical and political identity are strictly connected to those of Education, beginning, in particular, from History and Religious Education textbooks.

Another problem in this area, that cannot be ignored, is that of the island of Cyprus, a new member of the European Union since May 2004 but still effectively divided between the Greek and Turkish parts.

If we now pass to the east coast we find ourselves in the Middle East, an area full of current international, political tensions due both to the proximity of Iraq and

Iran and also because of the complex 'game' carried out since the end of the Second World War by the Syrian government and the expansionistic aims of the USA. Beirut is the city that, more than any other in the area, has paid the biggest tribute to the conflict and still bears the visible signs. There follows Israel which, depending on whether the government in office was right or left wing, has practised policies of aggression or instituted peace talks with its Palestinian and Jordanian counterparts. Undoubtedly the assassination of the Labour party leader Rabin, in November 1995 constituted a loss that has yet to be filled.

The African coast presents a diversified front, even though the present situation of financial crisis in this part of the Arab world is objectively functioning in favour of Islamic fundamentalism (see the case of Algeria in the last decade). Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco remain alert to what happens in the Mediterranean area (while it would seem that the same is not true for the present Libyan leadership which is looking towards Central Africa), being open to eventual proposals of economic, cultural and religious exchanges and advantages.

What do they have in common?

All this, clearly, is a minimal response to the question: is it possible to compare the school systems of the Mediterranean coastal countries? My first counter-objection when faced with this question is that the general picture traced above already indicates a certain interest in adventuring in this direction. If, strictly speaking, the GNPs of all the Mediterranean countries make it difficult to consider a direct comparison between educational policies (how is it possible to compare educational supplies and school buildings of countries with very different national wealth?) it should be remembered that agreements already exist for the creation of a free trade area in the Mediterranean by 2010. This is, of course, only an economic agreement and not a cultural one but it is something in common. It also means that some common areas of discussion are being created, not only at the leadership level of these countries, but also among their 'public opinions'. Certainly, there is still a long way to go before the creation of a common, Mediterranean 'public opinion' but clearly some shared problems are creating a common agenda and all Mediterranean citizens are in some way called upon to express their opinions, if not to organise their own specific activities with the aim of creating well-being and mutual understanding.

As regards the field of education, the first most visible problem is that of reciprocal recognition of school qualifications, especially high school qualifications. This is an area of economic interest due to the investment that families make in education and the choices that students make for their futures.

However, an even more important and relevant problem is the creation of a common or comparable curriculum and textbooks.

If we look at the first levels of the educational system, considering both the curriculum and didactic methods, a number of common traits appear that link all the Mediterranean countries. Beyond the differences—some of them notable—that we find in the ‘phenomenologies’ of the different school systems we can easily recognise some common and very fundamental cultural bases transmitted by schools (and also by the non-formal educational institutions). A comparative survey of a general and preliminary nature could highlight these common cultural bases (in Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Law and the Arts) and the common status symbols overtly or covertly transmitted by schools (and socially) in all the Mediterranean countries.

This consideration leaves room for critical reflections of the following kind: in Southern Europe it is permissible (and people effectively do) to criticise the cultural models promoted by the educational systems; but to what extent is it possible to exercise the same criticism in North Africa or the Middle East where the political systems are democratic, but also authoritarian? However, if we look more closely into this idea again a common trait appears linking the Mediterranean countries. It is true that it is not the same thing to pass criticism, if only in an educational sense and not politically, in regimes having diverse degrees of freedom as regards the expression of dissent. However, it is also true that some ‘democratic’ countries exist where the most diffuse mass media (both private and public) are the property of the same body that holds political power (as is the case in Italy). In other words, objectively very difficult conditions can exist, preventing a free expression of cultural criticism both in regimes that are not fully democratic (like those of North Africa or the Middle East), and also in those that proclaim themselves to be open and democratic, but which substantially offer little room for real criticism (as is the case for most of those Southern European countries presently having centre-right coalition governments).

What is the ‘mission’ of a Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education?

This said, the questions regarding the ‘legitimacy’ of a Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education seem to boomerang back: everything depends on what we mean by ‘promoting comparative studies’. In addition, and more particularly, it depends on if we intend to compare only the ‘present’ or if we want to promote policies favouring the idea of school as giving all children and adults a critical awareness of their own cultural roots. The ‘present’, in fact, has a clear

configuration and is there for all to see: the liberal, educational policies followed by governments in Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, which all answer to the logic of the 'Human Capital Theory'. This theory is technocratic and highly subject to economic power and is imposing a precise direction on schools, especially higher education. The liberal school excludes (or moves onto a different track) all those disadvantaged sectors of the population who are unable to keep up with the ever increasing acquisition of technical knowledge required by the school, or those who simply do not agree with the non-critical adoption of the social-climbing models implicitly transmitted by the educational system.

In that case, if we wanted to compare the 'present' school systems in order to assess which Mediterranean country has a school system that is closest to its government's current policies, maybe the 'sceptical party' would be right: it is very hard to compare countries which have very different GNPs (how could Tunisia or even Egypt ever 'exceed' Italy or France?). If, instead, we would like to promote *critical* studies, then there is really a lot of space for a Mediterranean Society—and its scientific usefulness would be enormous. We would, in fact, open up a whole arena for the creation of a humanistic curriculum, based on common values, to combat racism and xenophobia in the Mediterranean basin (following the *desiderata* of UNESCO and UNICEF). Along with the IEA researches on literacy and basic skills in science, we would have another area in which to consider the common Mathematical and Logical roots of the Mediterranean basin, of which our educational public should become conscious. Furthermore, both at this initial level, and at advanced levels of education, we educators, along with our publics, should become aware of the non-Mediterranean people present in our region: Sub-Saharanans, Indians, Chinese, and Latin-Americans. These populations are, nowadays, a statistically perceptible, social reality and really representative of non-Mediterranean cultures and civilizations, that is to say, non-monotheistic (in Religion), non-Aristotelian (in Philosophy) and with some traditions in Literature and Law that do not come from the Greek, Latin or Islamic pillars of Mediterranean culture (on the possibilities and limitations of a Mediterranean Hermeneutic Cycle see Pampanini, in the press). The comparison that we should critically and democratically make between 'our common Mediterranean culture' and that of the *others*—would lead us to results, in terms of educational policies, which vary greatly from typical and easily understandable forms. In addition, if we move towards the field of 'vocational training', the 'mission' of such a Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education would be even more evident. Imagine what it would mean to provide an intercultural and Mediterranean 'vocational training', especially if open to non-Mediterranean cultures, for doctors in Medicine, psychologists or lawyers, and so on, not to mention teachers.

The steps towards the constitution of the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education

We have spoken about the ‘ratio’ and the ‘mission’ of such a Society, from a critical perspective. We must now consider the strategy to follow in order to create *de facto* and *de jure* this Society. As Scholars of Comparative Education of the Mediterranean area, we already have a brief history (about which I spoke extensively on the occasion of the XXI Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE) Conference, held in London in July, 2002) beginning in the early 90’s, since which time we have met several times in Sicily and on the occasions of the CESE Conferences. This is useful to us, because it has been a history of understanding, co-operation, friendship and reciprocal help. Let me briefly recall the main events.

Following on from the Peace agreements for the Middle East signed in Madrid in October, 1991, I myself, with the help of other Scholars, such as Prof. Aldo Visalberghi (Professor Emeritus of Education, ‘La Sapienza’ University in Rome), Prof. Hamadi Ben Jaballah (Tunis University), the National Commission of UNESCO in Morocco, Devorah Kalekin Fishman, Sociologist of Education at Haifa University, Prof. Charles Farrugia, Malta University, Prof. Jerzy Smolicz, University of Adelaide (Australia), Profs. Turgut from the University of Izmir, and Guçluol, at that time Rector of the University of Bolu (Turkey), Prof. Pieter Batelaan, co-ordinator of the International Association of Intercultural Education, and others, organised the first Euro-Arab Seminar on Intercultural Education, held in September 1992 in S. Croce Camerina, in the province of Ragusa (partly sponsored by Ragusa Province, and with the scientific patronage of the University of Messina) (Pampanini, 1993).

After this Seminar, following on from a suggestion made by the late lamented Prof. Ricardo Marin Ibanez, Professor Emeritus of Education at the National University of Madrid, the *Centro Mediterraneo di Educazione* (Mediterranean Centre for Education—CEME) was established in 1993, serving as a friendly network of Scholars of the Mediterranean and of educators from other regions of the world. Thanks to this network, the number of Scholars involved in the new field of ‘Mediterranean Education’ is larger than before, and scholars who were once far removed from this discussion arena, such as Prof. Lê Thành Khôi or Prof. Juergen Schriewer, have come closer to it, opening up new areas of scientific co-operation. As a consequence of this activity, 1996 saw the publication, in Italian translation, of the books edited by them, respectively: *Education. Cultures et Sociétés*, and *Theories and Methods in Comparative Education* (see *Bibliography*).

Also in 1996, thanks to a financial contribution from the Catania Town Council, and under the scientific patronage of Catania University and the

President of the Italian Republic, I organised the National Conference on Adult Education which focused on the Mediterranean dimension (see Pampanini, 1997), with the participation of an Italian Co-ordinator of the Italian Society of Adult Education (Paolo Federighi, Florence University), Prof. Guçluol (Rector, Private University Cankaya, Ankara, Turkey), Prof. Kalekin Fishman (Haifa University), and Prof. Sultana (Malta University). Prof. Sultana, thanks to a really numerous network of contacts which he had established over the years, not only with myself and other Mediterranean educators, but also with American Comparative Educators, set up, in the same year, the editorial board of the Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies (co-sponsored by Malta University and other organizations), with a high scientific status.

In 1999, thanks to the initiative of the Catania Town Council, I organised a new Mediterranean Conference under the scientific patronage of Catania University and the President of the Italian Republic. On this occasion there were contributions from the following Professors: Lê Thành Khôi, Robert Cowen, Ahmed Mo'atassime, Ettore Gelpi, Kemal Guçluol and Aicha Maherzi, among others. In the Proceedings I inserted the original contributions of the late lamented Prof. Mauro Laeng, Professor Emeritus of Education at Rome III University (Tor Vergata) (see Pampanini, 2000).

The Sicilian (and Mediterranean) agenda has run in parallel to CESE activities, one of the most prestigious Societies in our field. In October 1996, along with Ronald Sultana, we held a special session on 'Mediterranean Education' (Athens, October 1996); again, I held another Mediterranean special session along with Kemal Guçluol on the occasion of the 1998 CESE Conference, organized in Groningen (The Netherlands); finally, in 2000 at the CESE Conference, in Bologna, I held the Mediterranean special session along with Ettore Gelpi. This activity has extended the discussion regarding the proposal for a 'Mediterranean Education' to really international levels (that is, going beyond the Mediterranean).

That has been all, up to the present time. Prof. Mark Bray, present General Secretary of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (and Dean of the Faculty of Education at Hong Kong University), greatly encouraged both Ronald Sultana and myself to work towards the organisation of a specific Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education. Ronald had to decline the invitation due to his many university engagements and his work with the Mediterranean Journal. On my side, with only the responsibility of my jobs as Head of the Adolescent Centre of the National Mental Health Service in Catania, and Lecturer at Catania University in Intercultural Education, I accepted the invitation. The undertaking was titanic—I know; but the satisfaction coming from the awareness of making a serious contribution to reciprocal understanding and

peace in the Mediterranean area is enough. From the beginning of 2003 up to the present day, self-sponsored, I have conducted a series of 'tours' for consultations with educators in the Mediterranean Countries. I have collected hopes, perplexities, and also suggestions from these Mediterranean colleagues. Here, I would like to thank all of them: Prof. Antonio Novoa (Vice-Rector of Lisbon University) and Dr. Ana Isabel Madeira (of the same University); Profs. H. Ben Jaballah (Scholar in Education), T. Ayadi (Scholar in History), and M. Kerrou (Sociologist) of Tunis University; M. Masmoudi (ex-director-general of the Lifelong Education Programme of the Ministry of Education, Tunisia); Prof. M. Habibi (director of the Education Sector of the Alecso, Tunis); Prof. M. Zabach (director, Education Sector of the Isesco, Rabat); M. Z'gor, Dean of the Faculty of Education Sciences, University of Rabat, along with Prof. M. Souali (of the same University); Dr. Linda Herrera (at that time sociologist at the American University of Cairo); Dr. A. Youssuf and Dr. F. Adly (Scholars in Adult Education), Dr. K. Mougheeth (Scholar in History), and L. Zikri (Psychologist), all of the National Centre for Educational Research of Cairo University; the late lamented Prof. Abu Zahra, secretary of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Alexandria; Prof. K. Naguib (Scholar in Comparative Education at the same University); Prof. Muna Darwish (Scholar in History, Bacalureat, Amman); Prof. A. Kreso (Scholar in Comparative Education at the University of Sarajevo); Prof. M. Djudja (director of the Centre of Rehabilitation in Neuropsychiatry 'V. Nazor', Sarajevo); Prof. Fatma Goek (Department of International Studies in Education at the Bosphorus University, Istanbul) and Prof. Rifat Okçabol (of the same University, Scholar in Adult Education); Profs. K. Guçluol, H. Simsek and A. Yildirim (comparative educators of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara); Dr. A. Balci (educator at the University of Ankara); Profs. P. Xochellis (University of Thessaloniki) and A. Gotovos (scholar in Education at the University of Ioannina); Dr. Maha Siad (Head of Education at the UNDP, Damascus); Prof. K. Bourjaili (Scholar in Sociology of Education, ILDES, NGO in Beirut); Dr. Elena Phtiaka (Special Education, Nicosia University, Cyprus); Profs. Peter Mayo and Ronald Sultana (Sociologists of Education, University of Malta); Prof. Miguel Pereyra (Scholar in Comparative Education, University of Granada); Prof. W. Mitter (Professor Emeritus, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Mein and Past President of the World Council of Comparative Education societies); Dr. K. Amos (of the same University); and Prof. A. Carry (University La Sorbonne, Paris-IV, and President of the Association Francophone d'Education Comparée). Let me express special thanks to Prof. Lê Thành Khôi, Professor Emeritus, University La Sorbonne, Paris-V, of whom I am a disciple.

Could ‘cohabitation problems’ exist within the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education (M.E.S.C.E.)?

Obviously the answer is ‘yes’. If we look again at the Mediterranean basin as a whole, it is clear that there are areas of, by now, traditional tensions that have been waiting for an answer—above all political, for a long, perhaps too long, time. It is enough to think of the Greek-Turkish area and the problem of Cyprus, or the Israeli/Palestinian area. Could those problems be an obstacle to a sincere co-operation within the new scientific Society? Certainly, elements of concern and of reciprocal suspicion exist and at times they can even become very strong. Naturally, even the scientific arena, as much as we can presume it to be ‘neutral’, is made up of men and women, who although they are academics, educators or in any case ‘disinterested’ in the political aspects of their work cannot be indifferent to what happens to their peoples, above all if this depends on a neighbouring, hostile population..

The following Comparative Education Societies exist in the Mediterranean region:

SICESE, Italian Section of the Comparative Education Society in Europe;
CESE, Comparative Education Society in Europe;
AFEC, Association Francophone d’Education Comparée;
Spanish Society of Comparative Education;
Greek Society of Comparative Education;
Israeli Society of Comparative Education.

There are no Arabic Societies (there was, and now is again, a Comparative Education Group in Egypt).

Of course, as Mark Bray once observed, there is nothing to stop anyone being a member of more than one Society for example a member of the Italian Society and the new Mediterranean Society.

My wish is that the themes for discussion proposed by the new Society will be such as to encourage a peaceful and sincere exchange of opinions. At the moment we can preview the constitution of some permanent working groups, devoted to:

- International Relations;
- History, Philosophy, and Theology;
- Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Education;
- Sociology, Politics, and the Economics of Education.

The official languages of the MESCE Conferences are Arabic, French, and English. Given that the Constitution is registered under Italian Law, all the official papers must be translated into Italian.

The inaugural Conference was held in Catania from 4th to 6th March 2004, under the patronage of the University and the Province of Catania. Apart from myself (I have been nominated President for the first period 2004-2006) the following Colleagues took part: Adila Kreso, University of Sarajevo (Vice-President), Murad Jurdak, American University of Beirut, and Fatma Goek, Bosphorus University, Istanbul.

The calendar of the MESCE produced by the Conference foresees the following meetings:

- 2006: Alexandria, Egypt, in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina;
- 2007: Sarajevo, hosting the World Congress of Comparative Education;
- 2008: Tunis.

We have decided to apply to be a Member Society of the World Council (already affirmed) and to candidate Sarajevo as the venue of the next World Congress of Comparative Education. As President, I officially promoted the candidature, that was discussed and approved at the Havana World Congress, held in October 2004.

Defining the goals of the new Mediterranean society of Comparative Education

On summarising the ‘price’ of such a civil, pedagogical and scientific undertaking, we could list the general objectives of the new Society as follows:

- to develop the perception of a Mediterranean framework for Education;
- to increase dialogue and mutual knowledge among Scholars of Education and teachers and the educators from all the Mediterranean countries;
- to promote the setting up of programs of research, co-operation and intellectual exchanges in Education among Scholars from all the Mediterranean countries;
- to explore the possibilities of greater co-operation among Scholars in Education and Scholars in other disciplines, both humanistic and scientific, at a Mediterranean level;
- to implement studies in Comparative Education at a Mediterranean level;
- to reinforce educational policies aimed at guaranteeing all children and adult citizens the right to education in the widest sense possible;
- to avoid, via education, the dangers of ignorance, intolerance, miscomprehension, and racial hate;

- to guarantee all the citizens of the Mediterranean area the right to discuss their participation in, and make an informed choice regarding, the different development models and the ways of civil cohabitation in multicultural societies all around the Mediterranean Basin where they live;
- to open the way, by means of education, to cultural studies and discussion between the Mediterranean cultures (European and Arabic) and the others (Chinese, Indian and sub-Saharan) which are present in the Mediterranean area, as a means of preventing further misunderstandings.

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