

CONFERENCE REPORT

COMPARATIVE EDUCATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Reflections on the second MESCE Conference held at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt, 4-7th February, 2006

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The magnificent newly built Bibliotheca Alexandrina in the heart of the ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria was the venue of the second Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education (MESCE) conference. The first conference took place in Catania, Sicily, two years ago. The Catania conference gave birth to the society that is the brainchild of Giovanni Pampanini and which adopts the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* as its recommended journal. The Alexandria conference was by far the larger of the two. Adopting the general theme, 'Community Participation, Decentralization and Education for Democracy in the Mediterranean Area/Countries,' the conference was intended to place MESCE on a firm footing.

The choice of Alexandria, Egypt, as the venue was appropriate to ensure a strong Arab participation, given the lack of funds that prevents Arab academics, ensconced in Arab universities, to participate at conferences abroad. As expected, there was a strong Egyptian presence at the conference. More pleasing was the fact that there was a strong female presence at this conference both in terms of speakers and convenors. Alas, with the exception of one participant from Lebanon, there were hardly any other Arab countries represented. There were few representatives from Southern Europe. There were presenters from Italy, Turkey and Malta. In addition, there were presenters from Canada, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, as well as participants from Germany. One wonders what more aggressive marketing strategies should be adopted to render the participation more regionally representative next time round.

There was the distinguished presence of the Editor of *Comparative Education Review* (Mark Ginsburg) at this meeting; he is currently residing in Cairo in view of his role as Director of the Reform Division of the Egyptian Education Reform Program. Together with Nagwa Megahed (*MJES* Editorial Advisory Board member) from the University of Ain Shams, Cairo, Mark Ginsburg presented an empirical piece on 'Social Inequalities, Educational Inequalities, and Teachers' Perspectives in Egypt'.

One other prominent figure from the Comparative Education field, with a strong interest in Arab and Islamic educational politics, is Linda Herrera (Institute of Social Studies, The Hague). She provided a critical perspective on ‘Targeted Democracy: Educational Reform and the New Development Hegemony’ in what was an intriguing piece.

Linda Herrera, well versed in Middle Eastern studies and the Arab language, is the co-editor, with Carlos Alberto Torres, of an important compendium of essays on Egyptian education (SUNY Press, forthcoming), entitled *Cultures of Arab Schooling: Critical Ethnographies from Egypt*. One of the key contributors to this volume, Kemal Naguib, from Alexandria University’s Faculty of Education, that lies across the road from the Bibliotheca, made important and perceptive contributions to the debates, especially those concerning Egyptian education and Mediterranean education in general.

Suzanne Majhanovic, from the University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, gave a paper with the title ‘Decentralization of Education: Promising Initiative or Problematic Notion?’ that reminded us of the Neoliberal scenario that engulfs much of the activity in formal education these days, including, one should add, the policies of donor agencies that are very much involved in educational restructuring in many countries of the Southern Mediterranean.

The Maltese contribution, by the present author, focused on ‘Adult Education in the Mediterranean’ while there were two Turkish contributions, one by Ismail Guven and Yasmin Gulbhar from the University of Istanbul, regarding the ‘professional learning possibilities and ICT competences of the Turkish teachers in the field of History’, and the other by Fatma Gök, Bosphorus University, Istanbul, drawing on statistical data concerning the ‘Right to Education in Turkey’.

Power-point presentations were very much the norm at this conference, as with most other academic conferences these days. Sunethra Karunaratne, from the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, used video-clips concerning teaching experiences conducted in Sri Lankan schools, and among teachers in in-service training activities. This was a feature of her presentation on ‘Capacity Building through Activity-based Workshop’. The Malaysian contribution, by Ruhizan M. Yasin, Norani Salleh and Norzani Azman (Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), was about ‘Computer Literacy and Civic Development in Malaysia’.

All these were interesting contributions. With the exception of a few papers, there was a slight bias towards quantitative data. The Egyptian contributions were many. Some were descriptive while others struck the analytical chords of many of the participants who actually engaged critically with the presentations and policies involved. Particularly interesting was the presentation concerning the prestigious and ancient Al-Azhar University. This was given by Ibrahim Marai and Mohamed

Fathy from the same Cairo university. It proposed a renewed role for the traditional Muslim University in the training, through e-learning and therefore a virtual university, of Imams all over the world. Being so topical in light of recent events in the Western world, this presentation led to a huge debate concerning the nature of Islam and the role of Imams.

Equally instructive were the debates about the role of 'civil society' in Egyptian Education (especially with regard to women) involving Raouf Azmy, Nagy Shenouda Nakhla and Omima Gado, Cairo.

In addition to all these presentations, there was an important address by Traugott Schoefthaler, Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation for the 'Dialogue among Cultures'. Organising future conferences of this kind around the theme of 'Dialogue among Cultures', without ignoring the political economy dimension involved, would be one important suggestion to make for the future, also in view of possible funding, by this foundation, of prospective Arab participants.

All told, Giovanni Pampanini, now first Past President, and Faten Adly, new vice-President of MESCE, did a great job in getting this conference going. There were simultaneous translations in Arabic and English. The translations were carried out on a voluntary basis by researchers at the National Center of Educational Research and Development in Cairo. In Mediterranean conferences, it is very important to have this kind of facility if a proper exchange among scholars is to be carried out. The overall organisation was impeccable; no registration fee was charged and yet all the necessary accoutrements for a successful conference, including lunches and coffee-break food and drink, were in place. The cultural highlight was no doubt the guided tour of the newly constructed architectural gem that is the Bibliotheca with its fine manuscript museum.

The splendid organisation of the conference augurs well for the future of this Society that now has a new Executive Committee led by the new MESCE President, Adila Kreso, University of Sarajevo. The next stop is, in fact, Sarajevo, the venue for the 2007 World Congress of Comparative Education, in which MESCE will play an important part.

Alexandria was the venue of another important conference last December, the fourth Mediterranean Adult Education conference, sponsored by the Institute of International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (IIZ-DVV), which led to the setting up of the Mediterranean Adult Education Association. If one adds all this to the Mediterranean educational research network that the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* spearheads, it is clear that there is a lot of creative and organisational energy circulating around this part of the world.