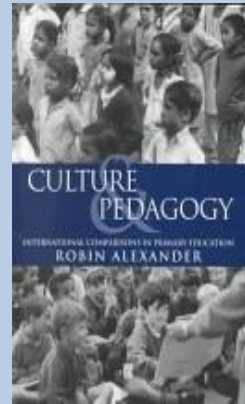


BOOK REVIEW

Culture and Learning in the Early Years of School in International Contexts: A Comparative Appraisal of *Culture and Pedagogy*

Reviewer: Dr. Batool Atta, December 7, 2021.

Title: Culture and Pedagogy:
International Comparisons in Primary Education
Author: Robin J. Alexander.
Publisher: Malden, Mass., and Oxford:
Blackwell Publishers
ISBN: 063122050X, 9780631220503,
Pages:642, Year: 2001



Title: Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited
Author(s): Joseph Tobin, Yeh Hsueh,
Mayumi Karasawa
Publisher: University of Chicago Press
ISBN: 0226805042, 9780226805047,
Pages: 279, Year: 2011



The intricate bond of teaching-learning within the contexts of respective cultures has become the focus of comparative education researchers in recent decades. Social activity such as teaching cannot be devoid of cultural context and thus, cannot be successful if cultural intricacies are not considered. Alexander's *Culture and Pedagogy* (2001) and Tobin, Hsueh, Karasawa's *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* (2011) are two contributions in comparative education literature with 'culture' shared in the titles of both books. Alexander's work is an excellent study of five cultures started right from the educational histories moving from macro to micro and ending in elementary classrooms. Tobin et al., on the other hand, contributed in the form of a sequel to an earlier book with a revisit to the same cultures after two decades to explore the themes of continuity and change in the preschools of these countries.

This collective review draws on the comparative themes, structure, strengths, and limitations of both books. This comparative review aims to familiarize the audience in Pakistani contexts with the research trends in early childhood education in international settings. With the new focus on early childhood education in Pakistan in recent years, this comparative review highlights the research practices in other countries with methodological nuances in the said area of research.

Culture and Pedagogy by Robin Alexander (2001) is an empirical work that discusses the teaching pedagogy in five countries' cultural contexts. The work justifies its title on comparative research while dealing with elementary education practices in five cultures: England, France, Russia, India, and the United States. The study aims "to describe, illuminate, and explain primary education in five countries in terms of ideas about culture and power, schools, curriculum and pedagogy" (p 271). The study is significant, and so is the book as a contextual study of classrooms and schools situated in the national systems of these five countries. The book opens up with different historical and systematic domains of education in these different countries.

The other book, *Preschool in three cultures revisited* (2011), is a sequel to Tobin's earlier book, *Preschool in three cultures*, published in 1989. This book and its earlier edition studied preschool in three countries: China, Japan, and the US. However, the later edition (2011) is unique as it takes the idea of comparison to another level of time and space, separated by 20 years' period. The book is unique in terms of the use of the methodology. The study's sequel develops new interpretive domains of differences and similarities recorded through videotapes and analyzed by multiple audiences, which Tobin himself termed as "video-cued multi-vocal diachronic ethnography." The book looked at the issues of change

and continuity in teaching pedagogy in the same schools and cultures over time and addressed connections between and across these themes.

Alexander's book is based on a grand project as compared to Tobin's book. There is no explicit culture or cultural pedagogy domain explained in Robin's book, which is noticeable as culture is the first word in the title. The author develops illustrations and connections between different practices and cultures across all the five cases selected for the study. The United States, for example, has been connected with the notions of community, teamwork, and patriotism. It is intriguing to see Alexander connecting the notions of 'individualism' with 'decentralization' and 'localism' in US education. However, it is hard to see any missing venues in these great cultural pictures as they are too broadly captured and narrated.

On the other hand, *preschool in three cultures revisited* is unique in its selection of topics. The idea of pre-schooling is itself a comparatively new concept in modern education, and its selection for a comparative study reveals a closer connection of a family and other institutional units of education regarding schools. The earlier edition, published in 1989, studied preschool education in three cultures – China, Japan, and the United States. In the sequel, Tobin, the lead author developed another team and returned to the same schools he studied twenty years earlier; he also extended his study to three new progressive schools. Tobin et al. (2011) used the videotaping methodology in both books to capture a typical school day.

In terms of structure, *The Culture and Pedagogy* has five parts which are:

Settings (part I – Chapter I): This sets the comparative education context across the selected five cultures for the book.

Systems, Policies, and Histories (Part II – Chapter 2-7): Deals with the details and background of primary education in five selected countries.

Schools (Part III – Chapters 8 -10): School descriptions in the five countries.

Classrooms (Part IV – Chapters 11 – 16): Describe the classrooms and the pedagogical practices inside these classrooms in the selected countries.

It is noticeable that the book is primarily written for the British audience and educationists by offering more depth, space, and energy for UK's context compared to the other cultures selected for the study. The author suggests improvement in the British education system by providing an international comparison of primary education practices in other countries

(four others in this book). The countries' selection for this comparative task is intriguing and raises questions for the appropriate justification for selecting these particular contexts. Education systems selected are used to describe the 'notions of national identity and collective values.'

Preschool in three cultures revisited, on the other hand, offers a more straightforward layout. This book provides a compact and nuanced description and analysis of a "typical day" in the preschoolers' lives in all three selected cultures. The book has an introduction, three chapters – one devoted to each culture and a conclusion –an analysis of the data on the grounds of similarities and differences noted across the three cultures and time – in terms of earlier data.

Tobin's (2011) book has an appeal in its use of an innovative methodology, which offers multiple interpretations based on the data provided for the readers of this book. The authors of *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* have used a video-stimulated discussion to trace the themes of differences and continuity across cultures and time. The authors justified the sequel with a need to record the change in preschool over time. However, Tobin state in the conclusion that a sense of change is relative, "like beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder."

The book contributes to the comparative education literature as it gives access to not only what is recorded but also how it is interpreted. The historical dimension of the book is unique that makes this edition a sequel to the first book. The authors have added pictures in the book from different schools and cultures to "add visual support to –written descriptions of continuity and change in each culture's preschools" (p xi). The authors accept that the book can only record the change but cannot address the questions of quality or change for good or bad parameters as they consider this beyond the book's scope. The authors, however, claim that the teaching practices reflect the culture, society, and time in which these are operating. The authors present a clear description of the procedures and study, which is another strength of the book.

The voices that Tobin et al. used to narrate the cultural perspectives of preschools in selected contexts include teachers whose classrooms were videotaped along with other educators at these schools, focus groups of teachers and directors in the US, early childhood educators from the other two countries, and researchers in early childhood education. The book synthesizes all these participants' comparative and contrastive concerns on ideological, historical, and pedagogical lines in and across the cultures. In terms of continuity in the same culture, the authors, for example, did not find China much different than what it used to be despite the demographic shifts. Japanese teachers' approach to independent resolution for the kids

themselves is very much different from the US mediated conflict resolution approach for the kids and is an example of comparative differences in cultures. The book also identifies the conflict within systems, such as the dilemma of US educators to be 'developmentally appropriate and academically rigorous.' The authors' selection of the US, Japan, and China for the study is also intriguing as it necessarily disrupts a much-discussed east-west dichotomy.

The data for *Culture and Pedagogy: International comparisons in primary education* is collected through fieldwork in 30 schools in 5 countries and include 60 or more English schools. One hundred sixty-six instructional lessons are videotaped, out of which 75 have come from the English schools. Alexander argues for the "range of data sets" used for this study, but the issues of representativeness remain there. The choice of Michigan, for example, as a representative of the US culture or Dehli, Haryana, and Utter Pradesh as Indian representatives have limitations that are not explained. Along with the questions of representativeness, there are also questions about using in-equal data sets for the study in terms of quantity and quality, which are not addressed appropriately.

Alexander's description of the teaching and learning activities in the classrooms, starting with chapter 10 of the book, is vibrant, and this is where his claim of culture and pedagogy holds well though not in explicit terms. His descriptions of videotaped lessons in this part address a range of topics relating to the differentiation of lessons in five countries, such as time frame, duration, and structures (chapter 11); organization, task, and activity of classroom (Chapter 13); differentiation and assessment (Chapter 14); Classroom interaction, time and pace (Chapter 15), and learning discourse and classroom dialogue (Chapter 16). These chapters compare multiple dimensions across the five countries and give readers access to the different pedagogical practices in selected countries. The author, for instance, observes that most of the classroom interactions in the US he observed were individual, while in the case of Russia and India, classroom interaction involves the whole class. Alexander identifies the comparative clashes of social values and modernity in different countries such as India. To him, "time" and "pace" in schools represent the values in "their respective cultures that are deeply ingrained" that cannot be eliminated by the efficiency-driven school effectiveness critics (p 426).

Both the books by Alexander and Tobin et al. are contributions to the field of comparative education and present a research record in early childhood education practices in different contexts. Critically reviewing, there is room for future improvement in the contexts of research these two books address. For example, Alexander's work contributes to comparative

education to better understand the teaching and learning practices across the selected five cultures. However, his claim that this work is seminal in revealing the relationship between the 'state and the educational system' is not convincing. There is no section or chapter on culture separately devoted to Alexander's book. In general, the book is a detailed overview of the teaching-learning practices in the five selected cultures than their critical or analytical analysis. On the other hand, Tobin et al. work, though is a methodological move in a new direction in terms of the use of videotaping as a means of data collection and its comparison with earlier data with the involvement of multiple interpretive voices, however, did not explain the challenges of videotaping with such young kids and the likely amount of effect that camera presence can bring on observation.

To conclude, both books contributed to comparative education in different ways and have been in the market for some time by now. Both more or less addressed the intricate connection of culture and pedagogy, but the methodological differences, structural layout, and data treatment made the work appear very different, even in the physical format and volume of the books. With the new focus on early childhood education in Pakistan in recent years, this comparative review highlights the research practices in other countries with methodological nuances in the said area of research.

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