Transforming education: global perspectives, experiences, and implications

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Situating itself in the overarching global discourse of neo-liberalism, the volume by DeVillar, Jiang and Cummins provides a panoramic overview of educational reform efforts by polities in different parts of the world. The common aim of these reforms is to educate their future generations in preparation for current and anticipated changes in their respective globalised economic and social environments. Through empirical case studies around the world and theoretical contributions, the authors explore implementations of internationally popular educational reforms, such as the student-centred approach and experiential curricula. They document struggles and issues generated in those reforms and search for appropriate leadership styles to suit specific reform contexts. Macro and micro factors that contribute to or hinder education transformation in specific contexts are identified and illustrated, and lessons for wider contexts are drawn. As a whole, the book signposts a growing awareness of the interrelationship and interplay between education quality, equity and economy, revealing a concern shared by other scholars of neo-liberal educational reforms (e.g. Ward 2012) that such discourse may threaten or even undermine equity of education.

Book chapters describe studies on educational reforms, detailing their research methodologies and rationales, in ways that can serve as valuable references for researchers in a similar field. Rather than simply identifying factors affecting the outcome of educational reforms (e.g. contextual features) in the final concluding remarks, a number of contributions in the volume incorporate such factors into their research design. For instance, in the case study of the School to Work: Science and Mathematics programme in South Australia (Chapter 3), the authors decided to incorporate the contextual characteristics of the case schools into the design of their research and evaluation of the reform. To illustrate, in customising the national reform, a school serving a socioeconomically underprivileged community was able to customise the national reform, focusing on motivation- and confidence-building, a prerequisite for academic learning, rather than rigidly being asked to come up with a reform more directly related to science or maths learning. In evaluating the reform efforts in each school, survey results were
analysed in conjunction with case reports generated by individual schools, thus incorporating participant schools’ perspectives, which revealed subtle but significant impacts of the reform that the statistical analysis of the Programme for International Student Assessment survey outcomes failed to capture.

The book also makes a significant contribution into researching educational equity. For instance, through documenting an unsatisfactory reform initiative in China that aimed to improve educational equality, Heng Jiang (Chapter 5) affirms insights made by previous researchers (e.g. Ainscow et al. 2012) that recognition of minority students’ values and identities deserves comparable attention, as does redistribution of resources. Henan Cheng (Chapter 7) and Srikala Naraian and Poonam Natarajan (Chapter 10) vividly report on the struggles of minority children and their caretakers under well-meaning reform initiatives, forming a significant, updated body of empirical research into learner diversity.

Through the equity-in-education lens offered by the editors, the reader also discovers some interesting trends. Developing and newly developed countries such as Sierra Leone, China and India seem to have considerable difficulty in minimising the inequalities of minority learners because of dominant cultural values, school practices and, in particular, insufficient resources. Reform efforts in more developed societies including the USA, Singapore and Finland seem to have fewer concerns over these issues and have moved forward to improving the quality of education-for-all rather than accessibility of equal educational opportunities. This provides more empirical grounding for a catch-22 situation: resources determine educational outcomes; however, a major proviso for economic advancement is general education.

As a commendable attempt to encourage dialogue between the disciplines of educational management and educational reforms, which have remained largely discrete in contemporary academic discussions, the final two chapters present practical lessons on leadership development in a reform context. They illustrate that leadership will be best fostered through close mentorship rather than short-term training, despite the prevailing trends stressing efficiency; the compatibility of leadership styles is culture-specific and therefore models of leadership cannot be simply imported from one context to another.

This book will prove useful to educational practitioners and leaders such as school principals and policymakers in education, as well as researchers of education reforms. The detailed description of relevant features of educational contexts, reforms and outcomes will help educational practitioners and policymakers make informed decisions and deal with similar issues. The volume will also prove an essential resource to educational reform researchers. The rich new information on contextual characteristics will prove valuable to researchers designing or conducting investigations in the
case contexts introduced in the volume. The book deals with issues that are gaining importance in response to worldwide changes, informs varied disciplines of current debates and areas for future research, and sheds light on reform with exemplary research case studies. A very minor suggestion for a future edition is to include a brief abstract for each chapter and a conclusion for the entire volume to highlight international trends and directions in educational development as reflected in the case studies.

References

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This volume, part of the series Oxford Studies in Comparative Education, adds to a growing literature on the increasing movement of education policies across national borders, fuelled by large-scale studies carried out by global organisations like the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The book aims to ‘contribute to a widened understanding of educational policy-making as an open-ended and complex process that cannot be reduced to a rational process of linear implementation, or a deduction of world models of education’ (9). The book is divided into three sections: the first explores the contribution made by three figures in the history of the field. The second section considers the emergent European educational policy space, with chapters on both the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the IEA, as well as a chapter on the 1985 International Education Encyclopaedia. The final section of the book contains five chapters specifically concerned with the effect of Europeanisation on national education policies.