
This edited collection explores the phenomenon of global education policies (GEPs) such as school-based management and learner-centred education, and is centrally concerned with why policy-makers in developing countries ‘buy into’ GEPs. The editors (Chapter 1) argue that “it is not always clear whether GEPs work or not, or under what conditions they do so” (p. 19), and direct attention to the processes through which policy-makers come to perceive GEPs to work. While GEPs are adopted by governments around the world, low-income countries are particularly susceptible to the agendas of well-resourced international organisations such as the World Bank, donor agencies and NGOs, which influence educational priorities and strategies at the national level.

In such contexts, Verger, Novelli and Altinyelken emphasise international organisations’ capacity to promote policies through high profile launch events, briefs and reports, in which policies are framed in technical, ostensibly neutral terms within the ‘common sense’ neo-liberal discourse of cost-effectiveness and efficiency gains (p. 20). An example of this is school-based management, which for the last two decades has been advanced by the World Bank as a means to “improve educational outcomes and increase client satisfaction” (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009: 1). As Poppema points out (Chapter 8), there is scant evidence that this policy has led to improved student learning outcomes, either in the USA or the global South; and in the absence of rigorous, impartial studies, the credibility of this GEP is sustained through assertion and repetition (Verger, Novelli & Altinyelken, p. 20).

The book offers engaging case studies of specific GEPs in Turkey, India, and a number of African and South American countries. Stenvoll-Wells and Sayed (Chapter 5) explore how ‘the same’ decentralisation policy of democratic school governance assumes markedly different forms in South Africa and Zimbabwe in line with their socio-historical contexts. Despite these contextual variations, common to both cases is the illusory nature of democratic stakeholder participation at the local level, and the fact that “what was actually devolved to the school was the need to raise funds to supplement state resources” (p. 115, my italics). These issues are explored further in Poppema’s (Chapter 8) fascinating study of school-based management in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the first countries in the global South to adopt this GEP. Poppema situates this policy within broader US political and economic interventions in Central America. In the 1980s, Nicaragua’s left wing Sandinista government prioritised education, tripling the teaching force and reducing illiteracy from 50% to 23%—during which period the World Bank and IMF suspended all loans, and the US government financed the Contra militia. When the right wing National Opposition Union came to power in 1990, USAID and the World Bank...
supported the decentralisation and privatisation of the state school system through school-based management, introducing school fees for teachers’ salaries and learning resources which amounted to roughly half the cost of sending a child to school.

The sole chapter on pedagogy (Altinyelken, Chapter 10) explores the practical effects of recent pedagogical and curricular reforms in Turkey and Uganda, and unlike the other offerings in this collection, it combines policy analysis with lesson observations and interviews. Since the 1990s educational reforms have increasingly been “couched in the rhetoric of constructivism” (p. 201), and Altinyelken questions whether this reflects a convergence of pedagogies around the world. As she points out, constructivism is a theory of learning rather than a pedagogical approach. Tabulawa (2013) emphasises the socio-cultural values implicated in the construction of pedagogies, and regards Western agencies’ promotion of learner-centred education (also child-centred pedagogy or active learning) as a form of neoliberal imperialism. In both Turkey and Uganda, Altinyelken finds that teachers identified learner-centred education with Western levels of development, and saw this approach as “the only alternative to the traditional teaching methods that were criticised by policy-makers, teachers and parents alike for being ineffective and boring” (p. 210).

In classroom observations Altinyelken finds the reforms to have effected certain changes, with increased student talking time and use of teaching aids the most common indicators of change in both countries (although the evidence base for these claimed changes is not clear). Ugandan lessons remained teacher-led, with students’ inputs generally limited to information recall and short answers to direct questions, while Turkish students were given more opportunities to tell stories or share experiences. In Uganda, group seating arrangements were adopted as a pragmatic response to large class sizes, while in Turkey few teachers followed suit. She concludes that while the reforms in both countries show convergence at a superficial level, the mediation of GEPs through socio-cultural and material realities leads to divergence in practice. As with Stenvoll-Wells and Sayed's work (discussed above), the comparative nature of Altinyelken's study offers an intriguing perspective on the complex interaction of GEPs with contextual factors in different countries.

When it comes to educational research in developing countries, policy entrepreneurs such as the World Bank and USAID have the loudest and most persistent voices. In pointing to the unsupported claims and simplifications of reality contained in some of their reports, this collection of studies by independent researchers performs a vital function, and usefully complements Vavrus and Bartlett’s (2009) collection of vertical case studies, though with a less empirical basis. While a core concern of this collection is the ongoing theoretical and methodological debates surrounding the study of policy borrowing and transfer, the book offers crucial insights for any practitioners or researchers involved with education or international development. Those less interested in theoretical debates can skip the
introductory chapters to the case studies, which provide an accessible introduction to the field. The book is an important addition to the reading lists of Masters programmes for both international development and education studies, and can offer a much-needed cross-cultural perspective to otherwise Western-focused courses.

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References

