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Reviewer

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The Handbook of Global Education Policy by K. Mundy, A. Green, B. Lingard, and A. Verger (eds)

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Short bio

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Review of The Handbook of Global Education Policy by K. Mundy, A. Green, B. Lingard, and A. Verger
(eds), by Andrew Wilkins

In 2018 the World Bank published its annual report in which it presented evidence on the learning outcomes of children educated in low- and middle-income countries. Exceptionally poor numeracy and literacy, especially pronounced among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, led the World Bank to conclude that many developing countries are experiencing a 'learning crisis' (World Bank 2018, 3). Later in 2019 a new partnership was announced between the World Bank, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development to develop and pilot a new data-collection instrument called the Global Education Policy Dashboard (GEPD). Designed to provide governments in developing countries with greater oversight of their education systems, the GEPD proposes to use performance indicators and output measurements to calculate teaching quality, school management, inputs and infrastructure, and learner preparation, as well as determine the impact of wider systemic drivers of learning such as government agenda setting and policy making decisions.

It remains to be seen how such a data dashboard will be implemented and for what purpose it will be used by schools and subnational and national governments to shape education in the future.

Should GEPD implementation among the participating countries in this pilot programme run according to plan, we can expect schools in developing countries, like most schools in developed

countries, to emerge as purveyors of 'performativity' as their internal operations are made more readily auditable and amenable to capture from standardised testing regimes, globally circulating discourses of 'good governance', and new accountability frameworks. In this sense, the GEPD is likely to function both as a tool of education governance for subnational and national governments but also as a gateway for interested transnational corporations, philanthropic organisations, professional bodies, and business communities keen to influence and profit financially from the reorganisation of schools in developing countries through the packaging and selling of 'what works' solutions. On this understanding, the GEPD will make possible the technocratic embedding and influence of global standards of education and improved conditions for international flows of policy making, exchange and profit-making in many developed countries.

In their new edited book, *The Handbook of Global Education Policy*, Karen Mundy, Andy Green, Bob Lingard, and Antoni Verger turn their critical attention to such issues and others through a consideration of how, why and to what extent and effect different subnational and national education systems around the globe are bearers of global policy processes – or what they call 'new global policy spaces for education' (p. 2). A key focus of the book and its contribution to the wider literature on international and comparative education is a series of wide-ranging, theoretically-engaged accounts of the political and economic conditions and consequences of globalised education. Moreover, the book provides the reader with a range of relevant conceptual tools and perspectives, be it World Culture Theory, critical constructivism, cultural political economy, human

capital theory, or historical institutionalism, to better navigate and understand this complicated and contested terrain, even for the purpose of intervening upon and reimagining it. Yet despite the focus on global standards of education and the increasingly powerful role played by multilateral, transnational, non-governmental organisations in the spread and maintenance of these ideas, the editors are circumspect of concepts like policy borrowing and transfer since such concepts imply the unidirectional flow and homogenising effects of globalised discourses. Instead, the editors draw attention to the ‘increasingly complex, pluri-lateral, and cross-scalar flow of ideas’ (p. 7), that is, the complicated distribution of ideas both regionally and nationally and their uneven development (or non-development) within different geo-political settings and through the actions of different multi-scalar actors and organisations both public and private. To this end, the contributors to this book trace empirically the contingency of global patterns of rule to illustrate the extent to which there is policy convergence or divergence in the way that certain global policy ideas ‘travel’ and are taken-up, revised or resisted to complement existing political-administrative structures and values systems.

The book is structured into four sections. The first section, Education and a Global Policy, addresses the origins, drivers and development of global education policy and its intended and unintended outcomes for different nation states. A focus of this section is the adoption and transformation of global education policy within different geo-political settings and the extent to which and why there is a tight or loose coupling of national government policy making with broader global policy

ambitions. Ramirez, Meyer and Lerch, for example, present a vision of global policy processes as cultural diffusion to indicate the gradual emergence of stateless, albeit consensual forms of nation education reform taking place within a supranational environment. The second section, *Educational Issues and Challenges*, shifts the focus towards the multiple interacting forces that flow vertically (through international agenda setting and policy making) and horizontally (through new policy communities and entrepreneurs, civil society organisations and business interests) to compel certain kinds of institutional orders and social arrangements in the field of education. Bajaj and Kidwai, for example, focus on human rights activism and education policy making in several South Asian countries to document how globally circulating discourses of education as a human right are adopted within a national framework and used by civil rights activists to help shore up support for anti-colonial and independence movements.

The third section, *Global Policy Actors in Education*, traces the multi-scalar activities and influence of different global policy actors, both government and non-government, and the points of overlap and synergy in the development of these activities as they sometimes contribute to the construction of a 'global education agenda'. Srivastava and Baur, for example, examine the interventions of philanthropic organisations in the restructuring of education in the Global South and their preference for market-based solutions and privatisation. Similarly, Bhanji explores the ways in which transnational corporations influence the global governance of education through corporate social engagement mechanisms that blend and blur business and social benefits goals. At the same

time, the contributing authors to this section are keen to retain a focus on issues of policy divergence to illustrate how some ideas and perspectives collide and conflict with each other to produce a messy, contested policy field. The final section, Critical Directions in the Study of Global Education Policy, demonstrates the value and application of different conceptual and methodological approaches to the study of global policy processes in education, from network analysis and neo-institutionalism to theories of policy borrowing and postcolonialism, with a focus on how power and politics is structured and reproduced in the field of education according to the differentiated selection, variation and retention of global policy ideas. Bartlett and Vavrus, for example, document the influence of global policy processes on children and children's literacy, specifically how early grade reading among children in Zambia has been profoundly altered by a network of global education policy actors.

In this empirically rich, theoretically innovative text, the editors and contributing authors demonstrate just how politically relevant and critically engaged the field of international and comparative education has become. For this reason and others, it is a text that is likely to appeal to a wide readership, especially researchers whose work spans disciplines of education, political economy, sociology, and geography.

References

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