Book Review

Reforming Education in Developing Countries:

From Neoliberalism to Communitarism

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Book Review

Copious literature has been published concerning educational reforms and the factors that influence and challenge their success in improving education systems in developed states (see: Cuban, 2013; Green & Luehrmann, 2007; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009; Levin, 2001; Riggs, 2006;). Scholars have discussed this issue from a comparative viewpoint, relating to the effect of reform on administration, and policy-making and even examined psychological aspects of the education staff who perform the reforms. However, there has been very little scholastic consideration of reform in developing countries, despite the growing evidence that culture, context and regime shape the appearance of an education system. The similarities and differences between societies and their cultures have formed the

subject matter for educational research, analyzing the effect of these factors on the shaping of education. It has become clear that the particular values, norms and behaviors prevalent in developing countries may differ substantially from those in developed countries and this obviously affects the functioning of the education systems in these countries and any efforts to introduce change (Oplatka, 2019). According to Philips and Schweisfurth (2014), comparative studies of education systems in different countries help to promote the emergence of an increasingly sophisticated conceptual framework aimed at describing and analyzing education phenomena and promoting intercultural fertilization of knowledge and practice.

Although, Levin (2001, p.19) stated: "Education reform consists of programs of educational change that are government-directed and initiated based on overtly political analysis". Educational reform is therefore a complex phenomenon involving ideological, political, structural and organizational aspects and the need to consider human history and culture. While Oplatka (2019) adds: Reforms aim to transform existing structures, regulations and processes to improve the functioning of the education system. Yet, Wrigley et al. (2012, p.4) expanded this definition, explaining that:

> *Educational change involves negotiating a tangle of taken-for granted ideas, practices, identities, histories, and deeply held 'truths', bringing about change in systems that have evolved over long periods of time, and in which there are powerful vested interests committed to the status quo. It is not an easy matter but requires hard intellectual and emotional work against the odds and, often prevailing policy trends (p. 4).*

Building on scholarly views in the field of international educational administration, which note the diversity between different education systems due to different cultures, organizations,

communities and behaviors and relying on the 'communitarian' approach, Izhar Oplatka argues that developing countries need educational reforms that are tightly entwined into their cultural, social, and organizational contexts. Criticizing the main elements of neoliberalism in education he questions the applicability of neoliberal reforms in developing societies. He highlights the critical role of community and suggests new and alternative lines of thought when initiating and implementing educational reform in developing countries.

The author clearly has profound knowledge of the studied issue from his previous research that clarified the way in which culture influences the nature of educational administration. Moreover, his studies concerning different levels of educational change and leadership in developing countries have made an outstanding contribution to this field, meaning that he is most suitable to write such an important and unique manuscript. The book explains extant scholastic thinking about reform relating to terms such as "shared leadership" and "community a step forward". It documents the different streams of research and scholarship, pointing up the key role of cultural and social contexts in educational change. Relying on the work of Levin (2001), the author notes that the difference between successful and failed reforms can be attributed to the influence of the larger social context.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first chapter lays the conceptual foundation noting the diverse cultures and societies that influence the nature of educational reforms and changes in different contexts. It points up the need for recognition of diversity that has been shown to influence the perception of educational reform, its nature, substance, procedures and practices. The author discusses how

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educational reforms that detach themselves from understanding and sensitivity to the experiences and cultures for which they were intended, have withered and failed. He relates to situations where the reform constituted a sort of clash between different projects. The chapter concludes with a clarification of the behavior of principals and teachers as they are formed by the culture, values and norms that shape their attitudes and functioning patterns in schools. The author stresses that: "It is likely then that the dominant cultures in traditional and transitional societies will have a greater impact on the implementation of externally designed reforms (Oplatka, 2019, p.7)".

Against this background the author stresses that it is impossible to import knowledge to change the appearance of an education system, school or its management, from other states in which the knowledge was created. This is because of differences between the two locations in values, culture and norms. Although the motivation for change in an education system is primarily economic, relating to the need to train the next generation to contribute to future economy, nevertheless, globalized programs cannot ignore local culture and cultural and organizational structures which influence the functioning of the school and its teaching and learning styles.

The second chapter describes the main features of neo-Liberal reforms in the world's education systems, and criticizes the nature of these reforms and their achievements. The chapter's summary questions universal, particular and neutral dimensions involved in neo-Liberal educational reforms.

In Chapters Three and Four, the author outlines a conceptual distinction between modern (developed) and traditional (developing) societies including different regime characteristics, cultures, norms,

socio-economic structures. The author clarifies differences between current neoliberal reforms and the characteristics of traditional societies. This distinction, is sharpened through the definition of terms such as "national development", "modern theory". Confronting two distinct models one with the other the author compares the supposedly "sublime" model of modern society with traditional society. This sets the foundation for the clarification of the failure of imported educational reforms in developing societies, due to the contradictions that their introduction produces in the structural dimension and in teaching and learning practices in these societies, where the teacher stands at the center of pedagogic work. The author summarizes the main reasons for the failure of these reforms.

Chapter Five establishes the basis for an alternative way of reforming education in developing countries by presenting the main characteristics of the communitarian perspective, the theoretical framework that underlies the book. Chapter Six describes major educational ideologies and beliefs in non-Western societies that are not widely known in educational theory and practice in the developed world. In Chapter Seven, the author returns to discuss the key role of local communities in reform implementation in developing countries and allows us to better understand the educational perspective and worldviews of people in developing countries. At this point, the author highlights philosophical writing over many centuries concerning education that evolved in Asian and African societies (eg. Confucian, Islamic and African education) allowing the reader to form an alternative view of reform implementation in these countries. Needless to say, as the author clearly points out in Chapter Seven, any education reform that ignores the role of education in preserving community and

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its heritage and avoids recognition of its role in education, is doomed to failure.

As a researcher of educational administration and leadership, apart from the significant contribution of the first seven chapters, I found Chapters Eight and Nine were most enlightening, since they suggest a method for the introduction of reform in developing countries, at the macro-level (Chapter 8) and at the micro-level (chapter 9), while setting the cultural element at the forefront of reform. The author suggests three distinct stages to guide such reform that necessitate the involvement of the local and educational communities, highlighting the need for collaboration to bring about the consensual change of norms and behaviors. The author suggests that there should be an integration of both modern and traditional (indigenous) educational purposes and values. He draws an interesting picture of the way in which it is possible to overcome the challenge of change, with a culture-sensitive strategy for change in developing societies.

I sincerely recommend this book. The reader should especially note the last chapter, Chapter 10 that succinctly summarizes the underlying theoretical rationale of the book, the prominence of culture in any educational reform and the essential differences between different cultures that hinder the success of imported neo-Liberal reforms that attempt to impose a "one size fits all" solution to the ills of education systems in the developing world. The author clarifies that the way to overcome the contradictions between global solutions and particular local solutions is to initiate dialog and enlist the community, and to acknowledge difference, avoiding coercion and unification. Finally, the author offers a dynamic model for the construction of reform in developing countries at the state level, with initiative to be

shared with stakeholders in the education system and also at the level of the school-community.

The book concludes with an epilog, from which I quote the author's words:

> *I wrote this book to evoke policymakers, reformers, change agents, school members, and community leaders to think 'out of the box' during their attempts to reform the local education system in developing world. In my view, reformers in this world face a host deep potholes and ought to cross them in ways rooted in the culture and society (Oplatka, 2019, p. 158).*

To sum up, this book offers new strategies to better schools in developing countries. The plausible contribution of this manuscript, beyond shedding light on the particular needs of educational systems and educators in developing countries, the book joins those who aim to at improving the quality and relevance of education worldwide in the generation and identification of knowledge for effective policy-making.

The book is a treasure trove of information and will interest educational researchers, students of educational policy and educational leadership, researchers studying educational reform at the systemic and school level, and those interested in comparative education and the sociology of educational systems in developing countries. Moreover, the book provides a special contribution to policy makers and suggests "culture and context sensitive" methods for educational intervention that can inform supervisors, principals and leading education teams. Above all, the book offers interesting perspectives and ideas to promote critical thinking and the development of new understanding concerning educational reform and change.

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