

Education, Privatisation and Social Justice: Case Studies from Africa, South Asia and South East Asia edited by Ian Macpherson, Susan L. Robertson, and Geoffrey Walford. Oxford: Symposium Books, 2014. 312 pp. \$45.00 (paper). ISBN 978-1-87392-737-3.

In their introductory chapter, authors Ian Macpherson, Susan L. Robertson, and Geoffrey Walford observe the exponential growth of the education industry and propose the following question: “Why the fuss, and why now?” In particular, what they and the chapter authors attempt to explore in *Education, Privatisation, and Social Justice* is (1) the unprecedented “scale, scope and penetration” of the education sector by private interests and by commercial forces; (2) the regulatory framework in education that enables profit making, trade, and agenda setting by private commercial interests; and (3) the implication the boom in private education has had on how the learner is reconceptualized as a consumer and how education is reconfigured as a consumer good. In principle, these brilliantly formulated research questions, put forward by internationally renowned scholars in the field of international and comparative education, set the stage for a new approach to understanding the rapid expansion, policy context, and disastrous impact of privatization on equity and quality of education. The problem is that the authors of the case studies, with a few exceptions, do not reflect on the three questions but are rather preoccupied with recording various forms of privatization and public-private partnership in the countries of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Against this backdrop, the following introductory statement of the three coeditors reads somewhat like a disclaimer to the title of the book: “And though we [the three coeditors] ourselves have strong views about social justice and the right to quality education, we did not want to start from the premise that *a priori*, the idea of the private—as in private providers, private provision, private-sector logics and so on, in the education sector—were always and forever bad” (10). The introductory chapter includes a broader philosophical interpretive framework on the commercialization of education yet falls short of discussing the development context, in particular, the intricacies of the aid architecture or the rise of the middle class that account for the boom in private education. There is an apparent disjuncture between the introductory chapter and the rest of the book that deals with variants of privatization in developing countries.

The interesting title of this volume raised my expectations to the extent that I assumed I would find answers to questions commonly put forward on the topic of education privatization: What went wrong with aid that allowed commercial interests in education to spread at breathtaking speed in developing countries? Has the exclusive focus on universal primary completion (or even worse, a very special kind of early literacy) and the neglect of access issues created unprecedented opportunities for the education industry? Has standards-based reform created the necessary condition for turning public education into a lucrative business, and, did standards-based reform create an economy of scale that allowed the industry to sell a mass-produced reform package? How does neoliberalism or more specifically “endogenous privatization” (Stephen Ball) translate to the development context? Was the global education business perhaps the main beneficiary of the void that multilateral aid, under conditions of standards-based education, left behind? Did the global ed-

ucation industry successfully turn all the aid orphans—ranging from one-teacher schools in remote rural areas to secondary schools in urban areas—into a lucrative business?

The education industry relationship with aid is only marginally discussed in the book, but several chapters suggest that it banked on gaps and shortcomings in the public education system of the respective countries. For example, the chapters on Ghana and Nigeria (Caine Rolleston and Modupe Adefeso-Olateju) and Nepal (Pranod Bhatta) make the argument that private schooling filled a great demand in their respective countries due to the quality deterioration in state-run schools.

The book reads like an accumulation of research reports, funded by the Soros Foundation, that were put together under one book cover and supplemented with an introductory and a concluding chapter. Unsurprisingly, the chapter authors do not address the provocative questions raised by the coeditors. In fact, a few researchers advocate for privatization in education, both in terms of low-fee as well as high-fee private schools. Arguably, some of their conclusions are drawn on the basis of flaws in research design. For example, in one of the published studies, the researchers decided to only interview those parents who already enrolled their children in private schools. These and other methodological flaws, including studies that focus on extreme cases (e.g., Punjab in Pakistan, where the government with the support of the UK Department for International Development and Michael Barber stepped up to mobilize and fund entrepreneurs in education), rest their case on anecdotal evidence (individual interviewees that are then generalized) or use rough estimates based on hearsay or small samples sizes. This suggests that the coeditors should have been more selective in their choice of publishable reports. Any technical report, let alone a publication with a reputable publisher, that lists rounded percentage figures (“only 20% of private-school teachers,” “salaries were as low as 50–60% of”) should raise a red flag. Rounded percentage figures often indicate that the sample size was too small (in a sample size of five, 20 percent corresponds to one respondent), the researcher did not bother to present the exact figures, or the researcher suppressed information on the sample and total population size in the study.

On a positive note, the book includes studies that were produced *in* rather than *on* developing countries. For sure, the Privatisation in Education Research Initiative (PERI) of the Soros Foundation breaks new ground in that it funded studies produced in Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. However, a few chapters would have benefited from more guidance and editing; for example, one of the authors refers to the “report” rather than the book chapter. Likewise, the methodological flaws, mentioned above, should have been addressed before accepting a chapter for publication. It appears that PERI funded a wide spectrum of research projects; as a corollary, the range of chapters in terms of quality is also broad. I would like to end this review with three examples of outstanding chapters that reflect on social justice.

The chapter “Ethical Dilemmas in the Education Marketplace,” written by William C. Brehm and Iveta Silova, investigates a particular form of shadow education in Cambodia: private tutoring in which teachers tutor their own students, referred to as “extra study,” “supplemental study,” or “study for hire.” The study is fascinating from a theoretical perspective because it digs into the deeper question of which structural deficiencies in the Cambodian educational system have accounted for the great at-

traction of “extra study.” Thus, the authors attempt to understand the conditions under which inequality and social injustice flourish.

One of the most comprehensive empirical research projects presented in this volume is written by Chona S. Sandoval and Cecilia V. Soriano and deals with the Education Service Contracting scheme in the Philippines. The authors explicitly examine whether this particular public-private partnership scheme has benefited the marginalized and how it fared in terms of efficiency, equity, sensitivity, and social cohesion. While the findings are not that promising in terms of benefits for the target audience in the Philippines, the authors end their chapter with a list of nuanced and concrete policy recommendations on how to “fix” the scheme so that it benefits the marginalized.

Finally, Curtis B. Riep scrutinizes the claim of the Omega Schools Franchise in Ghana whereby it supposedly serves the poor. The franchise was established by education entrepreneur James Tooley and financial investor Ken Donkoh in 2009 and received ample financial support from the Pearson Affordable Learning Fund (PALF). I predict that the alliance between Omega and Pearson will trigger a myriad of fascinating studies on the end of education for the common good. In his chapter, Riep refutes the claim that Omega schools represent “low-fee private schools” and cites Michael Barber (chairman of PALF) for saying: “It’s absolutely for-profit. But get this right—it’s important to demonstrate profit because we want other investors to come in” (264). What follows is Riep’s thorough analysis that details the features of the Omega schools franchise that are in fact good (for) business, that is, standardization of services, brand reliability, pay as you learn, and cheap cost of labor/teachers.

As mentioned above, the chapters of *Education, Privatisation, and Social Justice* represent a wide spectrum of topics related to privatization without directly addressing the question of how privatization relates to equity or social justice. Nevertheless, the merits of this book lie in its thought-provoking research questions (which are presented in the introductory chapter), as well as its research about and from researchers in developing countries. These are not small feats for an edited volume that breaks new ground in terms of topic as well as the composition of its contributors.

GITA STEINER-KHAMSI

Teachers College, Columbia University

The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor by William Easterly. New York: Basic Books, 2014. 394 pp. \$29.99.

When my toilet stops working, I am grateful for the expert plumber. When I get giardia, I am grateful for the expert doctor who prescribes *Flagyl*. Experts in sanitation, health, and education offer huge benefits for the world’s poor. . . . This book is not about condemning all expertise, it is about distinguishing between good and bad ambitions for expertise in development. (16)