



**Ian Macpherson, Susan Robertson, & Geoffrey Walford (Eds.): Education, Privatisation and Social Justice: case studies from Africa, South Asia and South East Asia. Symposium Books. 2014. pp 310.**

Hungarian Educational Research Journal  
2014, Vol. 4(4) 83–86  
© The Author(s) 2014  
<http://herj.lib.unideb.hu>  
Debrecen University Press



DOI: 10.14413/herj.2014.04.10.

***Reviewed by Sanja Španja***

As the title indicates, this book looks at education from a different angle, that of privatisation. The authors of the fourteen essays investigate a number of challenging questions about privatisation in education and the implications that arise for social justice. The book includes case studies from Africa, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, and Ghana and offers new insights into private educational systems in these countries. Overall, the collection aims to increase public awareness on the provision of private education and stimulate debate on alternative education services from those of the mainstream.

The book has been produced by the organization *The Privatisation in Education Research Initiative*, which, since 2011, has convened a number of regional conferences and roundtables on privatization in education. From a European and American educational perspective on privatisation and social justice, the contributions provide readers with relevant and accountable information that may well have implications for future governance of educational services on a wider international scale.

In the first chapter, the editors summarise the research and case studies presented in the volume. They point out that "... education itself is being recast; as a sector it is increasingly being opened up to profit-making and trade, and to agenda-setting by private, commercial interest" (p. 9). They recognise the role of education in shaping the conditions for both individual and societal development with strong connections to social justice and see these relationships as important and interconnected. The book has three strands; first, private education is growing, pervasive and influencing the mainstream public provision of education, second, education itself is being recast as it is opened up to commercial interests and third, the learner is increasingly seen as a consumer and education as a consumer good.

Each case study provides a snapshot study of the impact of private education on the different societies investigated. In comparative case studies from Ghana and Nigeria it is

shown that, even though government policy in both countries is to improve the quality of learning in government schools as a matter of social justice, pupils in private basic schools progress more promptly and gain better educational results. The authors conclude that there is a need to strengthen the links between the public and private sectors so that public schools can learn from innovation in the private educational sector and partnerships can be developed between the two.

In rural Punjab, where free public schools are available, the researchers find that parents still opt for low-cost private schools. Here private enrolment varies by socioeconomic status, gender and region with richer families more likely to choose the private sector and female's enrolment higher than that of male pupils. The authors suggest "a shift in the government's focus from "providing" education to "facilitating" education" (p. 63). In Nepal too there is a growing parental desire to send children to private schools and a "...perception that private schools are inherently better than public and can enhance the life chances of those who participate in them" (p. 84).

Christine Sommers investigates various primary education in Bangladesh ranging through private schools, fee charging schools, non-formal schools, and religious schools for Islamic education. She finds that public schools often fail to develop pupil's abilities to read and write, with significant consequences for their individual and social development as well as for their future progress in life and careers. Sommers defines social justice as parity of participation and stresses that: "different educational options in Bangladesh mainly serve to increase inequalities between those who can afford it and those who cannot" (p. 109) noting that government has failed to create practices and policies that provide affordable and successful primary schooling.

In the next study of education in Nepal, the authors focus on the status of education from different perspectives. In their research findings, they find that the current policy discourse in the Nepalese educational system is more likely to aggravate social and economic inequality in their society. "A considerable proportion of pupils (more than 20 %) are in private schools, and this will inevitably produce highly segmented and polarised societies" (p. 134).

Monazza Aslam and Paul Atherton start an interesting debate about "shadowing education" in India and Pakistan. The shadow education system is parallel to the public and private educational systems and provides paid supplementary tutors outside normal school hours. In their research, the authors find that "...socio-economic implications of neglected educational phenomenon, private tutoring, could be potentially dramatic" (p. 155). Wiliam C. Brehm and Iveta Silova explore shadow education even further from the standpoint of ethical dilemmas in the educational market place of Cambodia.

The law "The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education" (RTE) changed the system of education in India in 2009. The writers here conclude that RTE has *de-facto*

further institutionalised the participation of private unaided schools in expanding schooling to disadvantaged groups, most concretely through the provision of 25% of places provided without charge. They also find that the potential of the Act to redress equity issues seems to be compromised in various ways, with the result that only a small number of disadvantaged children could use state funds for private education, thus leaving the majority of children behind.

In Vietnam, the author describes various types of non-public educational institutions and stresses that, without targeted support, children from poor families can be denied access to education, as evidenced by the low participation rate among the poor at all educational levels.

In the Philippines, the aim of the government is to have a school in every village, at least at the elementary level. However, about 20% of Filipinos who complete public elementary education are not functionally literate. A mass transfer of students from private schools to public schools because of low family income has resulted in overcrowded classrooms and a low quality of educational service. The authors of this chapter recommend that various stakeholders should be invited to participate and create partnerships to provide an educational framework and educational strategies that will raise the provision of public educational services. This already happens in Pakistan where the World Bank has a role in the private education sector and is one of the largest educational donors in the country. The author of this paper seeks a better understanding of why and how the Bank supports the privatisation of education in Pakistan.

In Ghana, the government has failed to provide "education for all" (p259) but here the Omega Schools Franchise, one of the fastest growing chains of low-fee private schools in the world, aims to reach the largest number of students at the lowest possible cost. The author of this chapter examines the motivation that gave rise to these schools, and asks whether they are affordable for the poorest in society. In an ironic aside, he quotes from a post on their blog, "Who would ever have thought that money could be made from educating poor African kids?" (p. 274).

Issues to do with private education and social injustice surface throughout this volume and they arise with regard to policymaking and administration as well as in education settings and out of school provision such as private tutoring and "shadowing education". The case study approach is effective in that it highlights the tensions between the provision of public education as a matter of social justice and the competing private sector where profit making and prestige seem to outweigh the case for social justice. There is a weakness however, in that often the essays are critical of public education as offering poor chances for future career development and, even worse, not providing basic literacy skills. This seemingly tends to 'glorify' private education at the expense of the public sector.

It is extremely interesting, especially from a European perspective, that education is a huge and profitable business. That also accents another problem, namely that of the polarization of various European societies. In the American perspective, this process has been in the works for a very long time. It has served there to accent the rift between rich and poor. While this is particularly true at the levels of tertiary and quaternary education, it is certainly true of elementary, pre-elementary, and secondary education. Further, in my view, this book emphasizes the need for local, regional, and national governments and international organizations to re-examine the role and quality of public education and to decrease social injustice.

From a European and North American perspective there is much to be learnt and certainly, it would be interesting to see a similar volume from these parts of the world where there is a rapid growth in the number of private educational institutions at all levels. The issues discussed here have implications for education and social justice in general and the intimacy of the case study approach forces us to question how we can conceptualise education, learning and teaching and, at the same time, advocate education as a means of emancipation.

This is an important volume. It raises questions about the involvement and motivation of the private sector in education and it raises concern about the social injustice of education available only to those who can afford to pay for it. There are some suggestions that 'partnership' and 'facilitating' might prove to be ways ahead and certainly some hints of innovative approaches to learning. Overall the volume addresses complex and urgent questions and should be of interest to all those concerned with the future of education. The book serves as a solid reference for teachers and students as well as for civil society organizations, but also for educational authorities and educational policymakers.