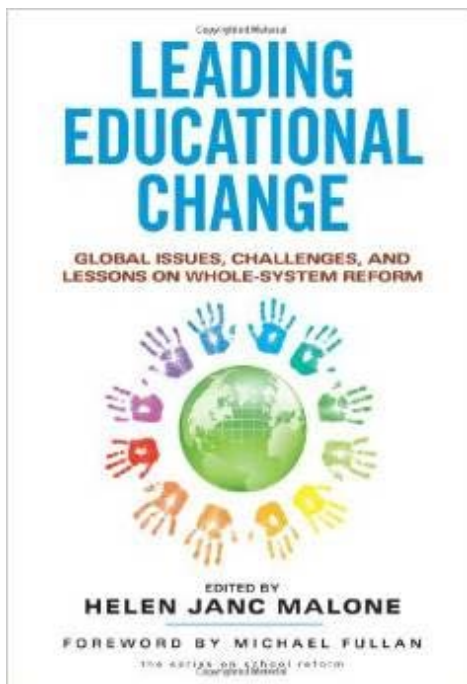


Book Review

Lessons on Whole-System Reform

“Leading Educational Change” by Helen Janc Malone

By Matthijs Koopmans



Leading Educational Change sets out to discuss the state of the field of whole-system reform in education in the United States as well as in other countries in twenty-five brief chapters divided equally over five sections: 1. emerging issues in educational change; 2. improving practice; 3. equity and educational justice, 4. accountability and assessment systems, and 5. whole system change. The book is part of Teachers College Press' School Reform series, which counts 63 titles on the inside cover, including several edited by scholars who also contribute to this volume (Andy Hargreaves, Ann Lieberman, and Pasi Sahlberg).

As for the current book, its fifth chapter, entitled “From the Periphery to the Center,” includes an outline by editor Helen Janc Malone of the book’s orientation: educational policy needs to shift its focus from the externally driven top-down reforms (e.g., those driven by labor market arguments and competitive international rankings) to intrinsically formulated educational goals such as student-centered learning objectives, out-of-school learning experiences, and engagement of all front-line stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, and community) in the reform efforts. To describe such work, some chapters in this book focus on particular countries or regions (China, Latin America, United Kingdom), while others focus on a particular aspect of educational reform (technology, equity, student assessment).

The volume pays due attention to the external input conditions that may vary widely from country to country. Examples of such conditions include the difficulty of the educational system in South Africa to emancipate itself structurally from the racially charged legacy of colonialism and apartheid (Chapter 14); the curricular and systemic changes required in Hong Kong’s schools after assimilation into the People’s Republic of China (Chapter 17); and the long shadows of poverty cast on the school systems in Latin America as evidenced by high dropout rates both at the elementary and secondary school levels, low graduation rates, and high illiteracy rates

(Chapter 15 and 22). And then there are, of course, the obligatory lessons to be learned from Finland, where a clear relationship is observed between the prestige of the teaching profession and educational outcomes measured on standardized tests, which parenthetically are de-emphasized by its educators (Chapter 24).

While much of the material discussed in this book is very interesting and valuable, the short length of the individual chapters does not permit more than a sketchy depiction of issues that are inherently complicated. In the foreword, for instance, Michael Fullan makes the important point that neither top-down nor bottom-up reform efforts can be expected to work by themselves. The better question is how good ideas can be made to travel widely through the system. Answering this question invariably brings up other issues pertaining to the problem of change: How does change transpire in systems generally, and in educational systems in particular? There is also the problem of scale: How can we facilitate the spread of desirable changes through all parts of system (classrooms, teachers, school buildings, regions) rather than just some? The book rightly touches upon these issues (see e.g., Chapter 6, 7, and 8), but its format does not permit the deeper discussion to which the reader is appetized here.

Likewise, in Chapter 2, Hargreaves notes that reform tends to not travel well when cultural and historical background factors differ. Yet the reform initiatives described in this book reveal some common threads across national boundaries, such as the professional learning communities in Japan (Chapter 8), California and Canada (Chapter 9), and in Wales (Chapter 21). Did these regions and countries learn from one another, or did their reforms simply get them to approximately the same end state? In Chapter 3, Yong Zhao compares the increasing reliance on standardized testing in the United States to the decreasing reliance on such testing

in the People's Republic of China. Four pages are not nearly enough to substantiate, let alone cover the implications of this very intriguing contrast. Additionally, a brief concluding chapter to the book misses an opportunity to meaningfully tie these stories together, but instead provides a workmanlike chapter-by-chapter summary of the book's contents.

There clearly is a role to play for books such as these for practitioners and policymakers in need of a quick overview of the lay of the land in international school reform. A more intricate introduction is needed, however, to provoke a debate about whether we, nationally and internationally, are heading in the right direction, or need to re-negotiate the boundaries of our reform paradigm.

“Leading Educational Change: Global Issues, Challenges, and Lessons on Whole-System Reform.”

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About the Editor

Helen Janc Malone, Ed.D., is an educational researcher dedicated to connecting research, policy, and practice in support of student learning and positive development. Her work centers on educational change, whole system reform, expanded learning, and K-16 pathways.

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