Learner-centred education in international perspective. Whose pedagogy for whose development?

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PISA success; and Daniel Tröhler, in his analysis of ‘PISA-shock’ and the subsequent discussion in Germany, offers some original and thought-provoking insights such as the hidden connections between the concept of ‘competence’ employed by PISA and the German tradition of Bildung. In the ‘Coda’, Bob Cowen situates PISA in relation (and contrast) to the traditions of the field of Comparative Education. In an annex, Antonio Luzón and Mónica Torres investigate how PISA was discussed in scientific literature and the mass media across OECD countries.

The broad range of perspectives and issues the book presents is its strength and its weakness at the same time. The reader gains many insights into a wide variety of aspects of the topic; to a certain extent, however, this happens at the expense of the book’s coherence and focus. Coherence might perhaps have been strengthened by making the book more ‘dialogic’, i.e. letting authors enter into a dialogue. This might have been done, e.g. by letting authors in related areas comment on each other’s texts, especially as authors presumably did comment each other’s work at the symposium on which the volume is based.

The pleasure of reading the book is lessened by the fact that something seems to have gone wrong in final copyediting. There are large formatting errors, and the copy editor’s notes keep popping up in the text. In a book that costs almost €50, this is slightly irritating.

These minor irritations notwithstanding, PISA under examination demonstrates how PISA has led to a wide variety of educational research in a broad range of areas, often far removed from the field of educational measurement and often in a critical spirit, enhancing our understanding of education in far more ways than could be anticipated when the first PISA results came out in December 2001.

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Michele Schweisfurth defines learner-centred education as a ‘pedagogical approach which gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content and the process of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners’ needs, capacities and interests’ (20). To investigate this concept comparatively, Schweisfurth draws on her personal research in The Gambia, China, Russia and South Africa, and organises this text as a series of case studies. Overall, the theme is investigated as a ‘discursive borrowing’ issue, which – here – is said to be leading to a wide and varied range of practical configurations in school systems.

The volume is organised in three parts. The first engages with a definition of the concept. Then, the author identifies, as three ‘justificatory narratives’, cognition, emancipation and preparation. These may variously uphold the LCE policy worldwide. Finally, the contextual levels in which it may be embedded – global, national and
local – are discussed. The author investigates not only the policy emphasis on LCE, but also the global rhetoric. She notes the empirical variations on a continuum: ‘from less learner-centred to more learner-centred’ (11) and from major impact in certain countries to lesser in others. In Russia and China, this policy has a more consistent impact because it builds upon previous traditions in teaching and learning. In other contexts, it is a matter of rhetoric and ‘misinterpretations’, particularly in South Africa.

The second part of the book includes the national case studies and investigates implementation in lower- and middle-income countries and this part also includes a chapter on mobile students moving from these countries to the more developed world. Three particular situations – change in government, movement towards democracy and state fragility – are deployed as devices to investigate learner-centred education in context. A significant source of empirical evidence for this volume comes from UNICEF’s Child-Friendly Schools Initiatives (2004).

The third part of the book focuses on key lessons from theory, evidence, and cases and also puts forward the major thesis: in order to be successful, various versions of LCE have to work together with traditional practices. In the author’s words, a ‘contextualised learner-centred pedagogical nexus’ (142) is required.

The volume’s concern with LCE as a concept is relatively rare in comparative studies and the author engages with the object of study from a wide-ranging interdisciplinary perspective, pointing out that the LCE idea cannot be stretched to mean all sorts of practical developments. Thus, the author provides a yardstick, proposing ‘agreed minimum standards’ for defining LCE. Her book thus represents a contribution to theory-building through empirical evidence gained from various contexts.

The discussion of how different pedagogical strategies may be equally efficient in various contexts is a strength of this volume. In this sense, a main motif is the question: Is LCE desirable in different contexts? A maths lesson in Shanghai in the primary section of a key school was a highly engaging and motivating lesson, though tightly managed by the teacher. Therefore, ‘[t]he cognitive benefits of LCE seem pale in a context of high academic achievement through traditional means’ (94). For Schweisfurth, apparent paradoxes and dichotomous pedagogies may be a sign of the incapacity to ‘grasp in an emic way the realities of teaching and learning in China’ (94). Her main endeavour is ‘depolarising pedagogy and contextualising it’ (142). In other words, she shows that different pedagogies, normally seen in contrast, may coexist and generate a ‘nexus’. For instance, the classic dichotomy between whole class teaching and LCE should be overcome. This is supported by findings from the school improvement perspective. In this research tradition, direct instruction should precede more constructivist, LCE strategies. Their subsequent combination is also valued. This volume stresses the value of what works in specific contexts, as does the school improvement research.

Engaging with LCE as education policy in contexts where it is mostly implicit is one of the less convincing aspects of this volume. Given the ‘huge disparities between policy discourse and classroom realities’ (65), it may be hazardous to imply a link between policy and practical configurations. In fact, education policy often includes different rhetorical themes that may assume myriads of configurations in practice.

Schweisfurth’s volume proposes and draws upon a perspective of educational change. This is culturally sensible, as it acknowledges the continuity with previous pedagogical traditions. In addition, it is informed by an optimistic perspective, in the author’s own words, of ‘what works together’ (153) in resilient developing countries.

This volume represents a fresh contribution to the understanding of pedagogy. A less formal use of comparative education, here a more general ‘comparative gaze’ is
at work. This approach helps to avoid the pitfalls of normative pedagogy still very much in use around the world. It proposes instead a conceptual map of LCE which requires that its profile and desirability should be carefully assessed while it is being adopted in different contexts. For these reasons, the volume is necessary reading for both scholars and practitioners.

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Many articles and books related to OECD’s education work, including its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have been published over the last decade and *PISA, power, and policy* is the second edited volume recently dedicated to this topic. Given this increasing scholarly attention to PISA, which has now become the centrepiece of OECD’s activities (Seller and Lingard, in this volume), my intention here is not only to review Meyer and Benavot’s book but also to use this review as a starting point for a larger conversation around various engagements that comparative education researchers pursue vis-à-vis PISA and the kind of epistemological and normative dilemmas associated with them.

PISA places the community of comparative education researchers in peculiar predicaments. On the one hand, PISA provides comparative education researchers with ‘the extensive resource of data supplied by multiple supplemental background questionnaires, relatively clean of data error and easily accessible’ (Owens, in this volume, 34), thus allowing for their fine-grained secondary analyses. Taya Owens (in this volume) maintains in the conclusion of her meta-analysis of the secondary analyses of the PISA data set that they ‘can make genuine contributions to the theoretical progress of core social science disciplines’ (43). It is in this spirit that other contributors, such as Xin Ma, Cindy Jong and Jing Yuan (Chapter 10: ‘Exploring reasons for the East Asian success in PISA’), Jaap Dronkers and Manon De Heus (Chapter 11: ‘Immigrant children’s academic performance: the influence of origin, destination and community’), Yong Zhao and Heinz-Dieter Meyer (Chapter 12: ‘High on PISA, low on entrepreneurship? What PISA does not measure’) and Stephen Heyneman (Chapter 13: ‘The international efficiency of American education: the bad and the not-so-bad news’), undertake various secondary analyses to question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the topics of their chapters. These studies no doubt allow us to move the discussion of PISA beyond its league tables upon which various countries’ policy responses to PISA have largely been based (Wiseman, in this volume, 305).

These secondary analyses – their methodological and conceptual contributions to the field of comparative education notwithstanding – rather uncritically enter the discursive policy terrain set up by PISA. They accept as a given the empirical basis of the PISA data set despite the numerous criticisms of its data validity briefly discussed by the Editors in the Introduction (10). In so doing, these studies reinforce the legitimacy of the ‘ideology