

HARD QUESTIONS ON GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Policies, Practices, and the Future
of Education

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How Do Educators Respond to Hard Questions on Educational Change?

We followed the graduation ceremonies of the Harvard Graduate School of Education class of 2016 with mixed feelings. On the one hand, we were proud of these students and their accomplishments during the year. Many of them left behind promising early careers in fields that would have most likely brought them wealth and prosperity to attend the school of education. They had decided to dedicate at least part of their working life to improving education for children and youth in different parts of the world. On the other hand, we were perplexed because we were not sure whether these new graduates actually knew and would be able to follow through on what is necessary in the complex, rapidly changing field of education today. We were saddened to know that only a handful of these hundreds of graduates would go back to the classroom and use their new knowledge to teach children. As they walked in their regalia through the aisles of Longfellow Hall to the Radcliffe Yard to receive their diplomas, did they understand what they didn't yet know? Had we accomplished our goal of teaching them how to deal with hard questions on education?

Our overall aim in teaching students at the graduate school of education is to help them to become changemakers. In the beginning of each course, when asked of postgraduation plans, students commonly answer that they want to change the way education systems and schools operate today. Some envision working through international development organizations, while others intend to become social entrepreneurs and focus on some specific aspect of education, such as children living in poverty or girls' education. Changemakers, we thought, would need some foundational skills to succeed, including understanding the hard

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questions, the importance of the global education reform movement, and effective op-ed writing. Graduate school programs rarely provide courses on these skills critical for a changemaker.

The world of educational changemakers and others who try to improve current education systems is more complex than ever. Information, knowledge, and skills that young people are expected to possess, understand, and embody are not only continuously increasing but also changing in terms of their significance and relevance for the future. The need to adjust entire education systems quickly to deal with new realities has become obvious around the world; this is also relevant for those education systems that are performing better than most others, but probably the most important single reason for increased complexity in educators' worlds has been the widening canyon between what schools do and how the world works. We now debate whether young people need to host knowledge in similar ways than they did before because Google, Watson, and other technologies can bring all necessary knowledge to us in a blink of an eye (Wagner, 2012). Some argue that because the need for routine skills in labor markets has rapidly declined, many traditional vocational training programs have become irrelevant or redundant. In other words, those working in education—whether in practice, policy, or reform—must have much wider and deeper understandings of social, economic, and political contexts of education. Many essential questions in education today are global in nature (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012), bringing yet another dimension to the competencies that we expect from education changemakers.

Globalization has also led to synchronization of education systems from an international perspective. This means that similar, if not the same, educational issues are debated and argued from one country to another. Increased global mobility of labor, students, and businesses has brought standardization of curricula, examinations, and qualifications as a central theme in many education policies around the world. The growing cost of education due to increasing enrollment has made efficiency, performance, and accountability the key characteristics that education system leaders in different countries are giving their attention to today. As a consequence, various data-driven education policies are often offered as the way forward. For example, international student assessments, such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and surveys about teaching and learning, such as OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey, or TALIS, are increasingly used as the principal source for national education policies and reforms. Global education statistics and performance indicators are also

examples of a data-driven approach that are now common tools of any education expert or changemaker. In this book we call the controversial, complex questions that globally shape education policies and practices *hard questions on educational change*. While these questions are infinite, seven of the most pressing are included in this book. We encourage readers to phrase new hard questions and use them in expanding your own understanding of education.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS THAT EDUCATION CHANGEMAKERS NEED

There are no international standards or common expectations for what graduates from schools of education should know and be able to do. One reason is that graduate programs in education are very different in their scope and content depending on education systems and universities. Some students, like the chapter authors of this book, earned their master's degrees after studying 1 year at a graduate school of education. Many of their peers in other universities in the United States have spent 2 years and, therefore, studied a wider range of courses in education. Education school graduates in Finland, for example, have typically studied 5 years and written two research-based theses for their degree (Sahlberg, 2015). In the United States and most other countries, new graduates in education complete their degrees with significantly different knowledge and skill sets. We argue that regardless of the program, degree, or university, present-day education changemakers need to possess three essential skill sets that are not systematically required today: identify and cope with hard questions on educational change, understand global trends and their drivers, and write clear and convincing opinion-based essays.

The Importance of Understanding Hard Questions

Education has become increasingly politicized with the growing involvement by commercial interest groups. This is true not just in the United States but around the world. In particular, educational research and educational change knowledge, that is what makes educational reforms work, have increasingly been influenced by funders that now include corporations, philanthropists, think tanks, and various national and international organizations. As a consequence—particularly when issues of school choice, standardized testing, the teaching profession, data-driven governance and accountability, educational technology, or perceiving education as commodity and private good arise—the evidence becomes situational and fragile (Mundy, Green,

Lingard, & Verger, 2016). The purpose of this book is to bring more light to some of the hard questions in today's education debates and, therefore, raise awareness of the subjective nature of evidence in policy making.

In the past 30 years, countries around the world have diverged in their approaches towards governance, curriculum, funding, and leadership, positioning themselves along a spectrum from public, state-based to market-based economic approaches. Broadly, state-based approaches can include models that view education primarily as public good over market competition. Governments in these countries—Nordic countries, Canada, or Germany—typically levy higher tax rates used to provide better and more equal social services such as health care and education. On the other side of the political and economic spectrum, market-based policies encourage competition between private firms and public organizations to provide educational services. This is known as the neo-liberal approach, and it is favored in England, some parts of Australia, increasingly the United States, and now in the developing world in Liberia, Kenya, and Philippines, for example. This approach privileges deregulation and use of public funding to support private entities and public-private partnerships for their delivery of education and other public goods (Adamson, Åstrand, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). Internationally comparable education data that is now available can facilitate an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these different approaches.

In the past 15 years, data from new international student assessments, especially that of PISA administered by the OECD, has created a whole new geography of educational performance. Many of the previous international education models have lost their place to new countries and systems that have demonstrated high performance in these benchmark surveys. Data from PISA and other comparable international statistics together with case studies and surveys that include entire education system (jurisdictions or countries) now provide an alternative way to discuss and debate some of the central policy questions in education.

In an era where private enterprises leverage new complex evaluation systems to market their educational reform interests, changemakers need to be savvy consumers of data and policy. Most importantly, education experts and those aiming at improving education should have sufficient knowledge to identify and skills to cope with hard questions on educational change. This means that changemakers should

- utilize research to identify successful models of educational change;
- be able to formulate new critical questions based on that change knowledge and research;