

Education policy, neoliberalism, and leadership practice: A critical analysis

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Education policy, neoliberalism, and leadership practice: A critical analysis

by Karen Starr

New York, NY, Routledge, 2019, \$35.96 (paperback)

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In *Education Policy, Neoliberalism, and Leadership Practice: A Critical Analysis*, author Karen Starr provides readers a comprehensive introduction to the impact of neoliberalism in education. She describes in detail how education leaders have struggled with, and strategically responded to the consequent social changes brought about by neoliberalism.

The book consists of 15 Chapters organised in two Parts. In Part I (Chapters 1 through 11) the author discusses intersectionality between globalization, free market economy, and neoliberalism, and elaborates on the main tenets of neoliberalism. In Part II, Starr supports her arguments with the findings from her three decades of interviews with international education leaders.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the rest of the book. It begins with a simple yet thought-provoking question, “What is education for?” Starr suggests that education is perceived by many as having gone “off course” (p. 4). Education institutions and leaders are pessimistic about the reality, and “[w]e can no longer assume we know what education is for” (p. 4). Starr describes the purpose of this book as exploring the causes of this wide-spread anxiety, what it means for education, and how education leaders are reacting to such reality. This discussion is followed by the definition of the term “policy” and description of the research methodology.

In Chapter 2, Starr explains the interconnected concepts of globalization, free market economy, and neoliberalism as well as their impact on education and its leadership. Readers will come to understand that why and how the global trends of neoliberalism have restructured education and its leadership “irrevocably” (p. 10), and that business terms such as ‘global competitiveness’, ‘productivity’, or ‘efficiency’ have also become major concerns for educators and educational institutions as a consequent. As will be explained in later chapters, such restructuring of education tends to exacerbate social inequalities and alter the goal of education from contributing to social welfare to producing profitable human resources.

Chapters 3 through 11 elaborate on the main tenets of neoliberalism and their impacts on education: individualism (Chapter 3), privatization (Chapter 4), choice (Chapter 5), competition (Chapter 6), improvement, innovation, and entrepreneurialism (Chapter 7), efficiency (Chapter 8), productivity (Chapter 9), performativity (Chapter 10), and accountability (Chapter 11). For example, in Chapter 3, Starr explains that individualism and autonomous governance of institutions are valorized under neoliberalism, granting schools more flexibility as to school management. Although this “flexibility” may enable local decision-making depending on local needs, it has ironically made school leaders busier than before, detracting them “from their so-called ‘core business’ of teaching and learning” (p. 39).

Theoretical discussions in Part I are corroborated in Part II (Chapters 12 through 15), where neoliberal themes that were repeatedly heard from education leaders are described under four themes: Education has lost its way (Chapter 12), the meaning of equity has changed and become diluted (Chapter 13), the development of IT has increased the sharing of anti-educational sentiments (Chapter 14), and the meaning and requirements of leadership have changed (Chapter 15). Part II enables readers to envisage how the tenets discussed in Part I play out in reality, and how such tenets are experienced by education leaders. While Part II describes an educational system that has gone “off course”, the author also gives readers hope to fight against neoliberal trends. For example, the author explains in Chapter 15 that however much policymakers try to restructure education by imposing new policies, due to its complexity and contextuality of education, “[i]t would be nigh impossible to ‘implement’ policy and other bureaucratic directives as they might originally be intended” (p. 156). In light of this policy-practice gap, education leaders discussed in the book “appropriated” neoliberal policy to best serve their students. This

is a hope where education leaders “buffer students and education colleagues from a full onslaught of neoliberal intentions” (p. 159).

While I found the book to be excellent as a whole, given the abstract nature in the extreme breadth and complexity of the issues discussed, I would have liked to see more concrete examples and/or data in some areas. For instance, the author states that despite governments’ intention to implement neoliberal agendas, education is “fertile ground for government intervention, regulation, and oversight” (p. 25) due to the complex nature of education policy implementation. This makes governments “more interventionist” (p. 25) in education, and education policy making is “effectively restricted to bureaucratic and government levels” (p. 25) so that they can control creation of neoliberal education policy. Although this account likely resonates with most educators, other researchers’ or even policymakers’ voices might have been used to illustrate how governments are being “more interventionist” in education.

This book is an excellent resource for anyone who is interested in the impact of neoliberal ideology on education leadership. Neoliberalism is so pervasive that it not only drives political-economy but has become “incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3); education is displaced by market rules, fear and corruption, and social conformity (Connell, 2013); and critical thinking in education has been suppressed in order to produce obedient labor power (Hill & Kumar, 2009). This book will help the readers critically examine this reality and envision how we might re-establish a more egalitarian education.

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