

Bookreview

Edwards, D. Brent Jr. (2019). *Global Education Policy, Impact Evaluations, and Alternatives. The Political Economy of Knowledge Production*, Cham/Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 162 pages, £20.04, ISBN 978-3-319-75142-9 (ebook).

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The author makes clear that this book aims to spell out: “(a) what it means to view knowledge production in the field of global education policy from a political economy perspective, (b) what it means to critically review impact evaluations, (c) what it means to place a critical review of impact evaluations within the political economy of global education reform, and (d) what methods can be used for carrying out such a study. The goal is to help shed light on knowledge production methods that are often seen as objective and neutral but which in reality contribute to serving certain interests while marginalizing others” (p.v). In short, the book points to methodological shortcomings of impact evaluations and suggests that vested political interests determine outcomes that emerge from a neo-liberal position. The argument is made generally and then with detailed reference to evaluations of EDUCO (Education with Community Participation) in El Salvador. EDUCO was concerned with neo-liberal accountability and efficiency in education with responsibility for key decisions devolved to community participants.

The book contains 7 chapters:

- A political economy perspective on knowledge production
- Critically understanding impact evaluations: technical, methodological, organizational and political issues
- Situating a critical review of impact evaluations within the political economy of global education reform: definition and method
- The case of EDUCO: political-economic constraints and organizational dynamics
- Impact evaluations of EDUCO: a critical review
- Reconsidering the EDUCO program and the influence of its impact evaluations
- Impact evaluations: persistent limitations, alternative approaches, possible responses.

The book is well-organized with each chapter having an abstract, key words, main sections, notes, and references. The book is part of the Palgrave Pivot series which aims to provide pieces of work longer than a journal article but shorter than a monograph, produced swiftly for maximum impact.

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This book is relevant for this edition of JSSE as it is about researching impact and because it has been produced swiftly and concisely there is a clear intention to achieve impact for the book. The argument that the author wishes to impact on others is clear from the beginning. That argument is perhaps best summed up by Robin Broad who provides a supportive comment in the opening pages. This is a “case study into how the World Bank produces ‘policy-based evidence’—rather than ‘evidence-based policy’—to reinforce its neoliberal bias”, (p. ii).

Edwards argues that international organizations are driven by particular ideas and values; they want stability; and they want organizational longevity. The focus is on the extremely powerful and high profile World Bank (although the arguments are meant to apply more generally). Edwards suggests that “the World Bank has, over the years, repeatedly emphasized and/or funded policies geared toward school fees, school competition, parental choice, accountability, and, more recently, low-fee private schools, to mention a few examples” (p. 6). The World Bank if it is to achieve impact “must be able to demonstrate that its policies are successful” (p. 8). The argument is field specific and methodological as well as relating to substantive matters. There is, Edwards argues, a need for action by educationalists. He suggests: “it is crucial that education scholars grasp the uses and limitations of impact evaluations, else they risk being hostage to researchers from other fields who can and do conduct impact evaluations in the realm of education” (p. 11). This would involve “a critical understanding of impact evaluations in five senses: conceptually, technically, contextually, organizationally, and politically” (p. 23)

Edwards discusses the most common forms of evaluation: regression analysis “as well as the form that is seen to be more robust, that is randomized controlled trials (RCTs) (p. 23). Throughout the book he makes “explicit the methodological assumptions, technical weaknesses, and practical shortcomings of both regression analysis and RCTs” (p. 57) and discusses the contexts and wider political assumptions that effect evaluations. That context includes: “policymaking processes, organizational agendas, personal careers, and discursive context, among others” (p.69).

He argues for “going beyond (a) a consideration of the stated results and methodological limitations of a corpus of studies, though this is an important step (as, e.g., in Bryk, 1981); it also means (b) understanding those studies within the multi-level (i.e., international, national, local) political-financial-intellectual complex out of which they emerged; (c) appraising the implications of those studies (in terms of their stated findings but also in terms of their political meaning) for the vested actors and institutions that facilitated, utilized, and/or otherwise benefitted from the studies; and (d) tending to the ways that the studies contribute to oppressing certain perspectives or policy preferences while elevating others at each level from the local to the global” (pp. 70-1).

In his particular discussion of EDUCO, Edwards describes the context within which the initiative was developed (including civil war, neo-liberalism, US interference). He undertakes a careful review of 6 key studies that were produced as impact evaluations and argues that there are methodological errors and political biases. Edwards suggests that the studies “provided a basis from which these organizations and individuals could promote an extreme form of community-based management (one where parents are responsible for hiring and firing teachers, among other things). Crucially, it is also shown that, due to the knowledge base that has been created by the World Bank in the form of impact evaluations, EDUCO has taken on a life of its own and continues to live on in the literature on decentralization as well as school- and community-based management” (p. 123).

While there is careful academic analysis there is also trenchant argument:

“by placing this critical review in the political-economic context of the 1990s, it has been shown that EDUCO, on the whole, (a) was a program which did not improve key indicators of quality, (b) imposed costs on the rural parents (who volunteered their time on the ACEs and who helped to build and repair the schools in their

communities), (c) sought to weaken the teachers unions (by instituting one-year contracts for EDUCO teachers), and (d) was directed at incorporating FMLN communities into the official education system (by replacing their popular education teachers and schools with the EDUCO program and with teachers from outside their communities). Of course, this alternative interpretation highlights the political motivations behind EDUCO. But it needs to be remembered that EDUCO was always a political decision.” (p. 127)

In the final chapter Edwards makes clear what he thinks should be done. In addition to what is already widely practised, he argues for more sophisticated research:

“... vertical/horizontal case studies (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006), process tracing (Bennett & Elman, 2006), realist case study (Pawson, 2006), systems thinking (Gillies 2010), ethnographic evaluation (Whitehead, 2002), participatory evaluation methods (Upshur, 1995; World Bank, 2011), and narrative research (sometimes also known as life history research) (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Moen, 2006).” (p. 143)

And he suggests that “new political-institutional-financial arrangements are needed” (p. 146).

This book is fascinating and important. It emerges from careful academic work. There is a wealth of detail based on experience and expertise. There is a clearly stated and generally very well presented argument. And there are constructive suggestions for what could be done better by researchers and policy makers. The book takes us a long way from a simplistic ‘what works’ agenda. The argument will not be persuasive to all but it is an important and coherent approach to research within turbulent social and political contexts.