

Book Review

Book Review: Education to Build Back Better

Education to Build Back Better: What Can We Learn from Education Reform for a Post-Pandemic World

F. M. Reimers, U. Amaechi, A. Banerji, & M. Wang (Eds.), 2022

Springer

204 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-93953-3

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In response to any uncertainties, especially within the field of education, the book “*Education to Build Back Better: What Can We Learn from Education Reform for a Post-pandemic World*” provides insight into educational reforms specifically for a post-pandemic world. Essentially these reforms are at the macro, meso, and micro levels to recover academic losses caused by the pandemic. The macro level reforms concern specific policy implementation, the meso on curriculum reform and standards, and the micro level or school level on aspects including teachers' general training and schooling.

The book argues that advancing educational change to 'build back better' requires knowledge about implementing reforms at scale, as the reforms mentioned occur in more resource-constrained environments. The book explores and analyses the implementation of education reform in evolution, adaptation, and learning. We can characterize this process in four dimensions: the goals of the reform, the forces

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ISSN: 2091-0118 (Print) / 2091-2560 (Online)

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Journal homepages: ¹<http://www.kusoed.edu.np/journal/index.php/je>

²<https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/JER/index>



Published by Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal.

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supporting the reform, the strategy, and the mindsets about change undergirding the reform.

Moreover, the book analyses the impact of five conceptual perspectives on reform: cultural, professional, psychological, institutional, and political. The book aims to evaluate the reform's implementation and identify gaps in the theory of action that could affect its impact. For example, Chapter 4 focuses on successful policy implementation in Taiwan by highlighting that they considered all perspectives while introducing new reforms. On the other hand, in Egypt (referring to Chapter 3), the policy implementation could not work because they did not consider cultural, professional and political perspectives when they reformed their curricula. The cases of Taiwan and Egypt indicate that a unified 'buy-in' mindset of all stakeholders enables a meaningful change on a more significant level.

The book consists of seven chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion). Each chapter introduces a different approach to reform that the seven countries adopted various frameworks. Of course, each approach had different challenges and opportunities to take advantage of, leading to various success rates.

At the meso level, Chapter 2 examines one of the programmes that has reached the most scale in India in specific vocational training, focusing on a wide breadth of skills. The chapter explores the multi-skill foundation course (MSFC) collaboration between Lend-A-Hand India (LAHI), concentrating in the Indian state of Maharashtra. The chapter introduces a novel, multidisciplinary vocational course alternative for students in Indian secondary schools, which targets the increasing gap between the number of highly trained Indian workers needed in the job market and the corresponding number of highly skilled students produced by the school system. The chapter examines the purpose of MSFC and finds that it promotes employability, enhances student retention and increases the appreciation for vocational skills and dignity of labour by uniquely intersecting vocational skills with 21st-century skills in an experiential learning-based pedagogy. Furthermore, the chapter explains the theory of change and the effect of this niche reform in building 21st-century skills and its positive impact on students and their communities by cultivating 21st-century skills, enhancing employability, and improving gender inclusion through quality vocational education. The final section of the chapter

identifies areas of consideration to strengthen further this niche reform and key takeaways from the MSFC.

Chapter 3 examines an ambitious reform to improve the quality of education in Egypt and presents a comprehensive description and analysis of their corresponding national reform plan for grades K-2 (Kindergarten - 2nd grade). The five critical components of the reform are the new multidisciplinary curriculum, technology integration, school management, Continuous Professional Development (CPD), access and infrastructure, and reformed assessment to develop various vocational skills. This chapter analyzed the reform from five perspectives and concluded that a cultural shift, high-quality CPD, and robust accountability system are imperative to sustainable educational reform in Egypt. The nation requires a shared vision and engagement between teachers, parents, and the national Ministry of Education to achieve this. The chapter similarly examines the reform through the five perspectives framework, concluding that the reform lacks explicit consideration of cultural, professional and political perspectives, relying instead on psychological and institutional perspectives.

Chapter 4 introduces the holistic approach that Taiwan adopted to education. Reform directed the students to realize their potential and contribute to increasing national competitiveness by encouraging lifelong learning and contributing to a dynamic and diverse society. This chapter assesses the preliminary implementation of Taiwan's 12-Year Basic Education reform, which consists of the 2014 Senior High School Education Act and the 12-Year Curriculum Guidelines implemented in 2019. Taiwan's 12-Year Basic Education reform works to reimagine society's definition of educational success and broaden opportunities for all students. It expands and diversifies enrolment opportunities for senior high school, revising comprehensive curricular guidelines, supporting innovative pedagogies, and increasing school autonomy. Taiwan's education reform extends compulsory education to twelve years. It uses the curriculum to help students develop diverse and market-relevant skills, building on a previous competency-based curriculum reform that similarly emphasized educating the whole child until the ninth grade. The new curriculum was a comprehensive preparation for work, life, and civic engagement, achieved by emphasizing education for lifelong learning. The implementation theory of this reform addressed a wide variety of perspectives, including curriculum, teacher practice, assessment, instructional resources, professional development, administration, parent participation, and

partnerships with nongovernmental organizations. It further emphasized achieving coherence and alignment across these various reform components. This chapter also analyses the reform implementation using the five perspectives of educational change studied in the course and discussed above. However, the reform faced some implementation challenges. These include insufficient teacher involvement in the curriculum review and design, the perception that the reform increased the burdens on teachers' time, inadequate public understanding of the reform's goals, and resistance to shifting cultural mindsets about schooling and its purposes.

Chapter 5 analyzes Resolution 29 of Vietnam's educational system, passed in 2013. This resolution intended to reform from preschool to higher education fundamentally. This reform proposed eight key solutions: education management and administration, teacher professional development, content and pedagogy, assessment, and resources. Resolution 29 also includes specific mandates to strengthen connections between universities and the labour market, foster education for disadvantaged groups, and improve international cooperation in the educational sector. The authors use the five perspectives framework to analyze the reform and present data from the first seven years of the reform's implementation. The authors highlight vital successes from this reform, including new competency-based curriculum approval and significant changes to high school graduation and university entrance examinations. The authors recommend providing high-quality training for teachers on pedagogical methods and developing assessments with an emphasis on project-based learning to replace traditional modes of learning to build more robust systems for the management of education at all levels. The chapter ends with recommendations for educational policymakers and educators in Vietnam regarding the role of the education sector in the coming ever-disruptive social and economic context.

Chapter 6 examines Cases des Tout-Petits in Senegal, a reform targeting children 0–6 years old, through Fernando Reimer's five perspectives of educational change. This chapter offers insights to policymakers, researchers, educators, and program designers worldwide interested in learning from a dual reform that dramatically shifted Senegal's early childhood development landscape. This chapter focuses on the Cases des Tout-Petits (CTP), an early educational programme launched in 2006 to build 28,000 community-based spaces to provide learning and health services for rural children from birth to 6 years of age. These services included health screening for deficiencies and

disorders, immunization, offering children nutritious meals, and providing early childhood educational activities in literacy, mathematics, technology, and cultural and moral values. Parents and community members were integrated into the program to support whole child development. Community funding was also integrated into the model to ensure local investment and reduce overreliance on governmental support. This reform highlights its unique integration of education and health, demonstrating important implications for future reforms. Through the five perspectives framework, the authors were able to acknowledge the following key challenges to the implementation of this reform. These challenges include a lack of appropriate staffing and training to support the programme's dual purpose in health and education, a more robust financial model to support sustainability, a lack of student achievement data, insufficient coordination among all stakeholders, and a high student–teacher ratio. This chapter argues for a clear focus on teacher professionalization, monitoring and evaluation, and systemic coordination in subsequent education policy

Chapter 7 analyzes the failure to translate the somewhat relevant and crucial global challenge of climate change into Orange County, California classrooms. This, as the authors argue, is primarily due to the decentralized education system in the US, the politicization of climate change, and the lack of adequate professional development and resources for educators. The authors conducted interviews with teachers in Orange County. They simultaneously analyzed best practices in countries successful in wide-scale climate change education (Italy and Sweden), intending to offer a curriculum for education leaders to understand best practices of climate change education. They intended to implement these practices in their local contexts. The theory of change in the curriculum explains if schools have an action-oriented and accessible curriculum, they foster a sense of common purpose with peer-to-peer learning. This practice enables the students to adopt more environmentally conscious behaviours, such as biking over driving. These behaviours could then influence behaviours in the broader community. In addition, the curriculum makes the topic personally relevant, transdisciplinary and solution-oriented with explicit content on systems thinking and addressing the controversy behind climate change.

In Chapter 8, the authors focus on top-down educational reforms. This chapter introduces a different approach to educational reform by analyzing how to translate a niche school-level curricular reform to expand and be applied at a systemic level.

Following on from the focus of climate change-based education, this chapter further outlines the components necessary to make such a programme successful by examining the best practices for creating a rigorous elementary curriculum concerning climate change education and leadership development. The chapter introduces successful elements of such programmes, including participatory learning, interdisciplinary integration, and a focus on community-based learning. Furthermore, the chapter introduces a framework to identify assumptions and risks, implementation steps, achievement indicators, and program evaluation tools, which help to identify key considerations for scaling an elementary climate change curriculum.

Reading this book was an overall satisfying experience for me. It was exciting and insightful to explore research on education reform studies in seven countries and how these countries started and maintained programmes and initiatives to the educational system at different levels of reform within their available resources and in a time of uncertainty and rapid change. The book explores various strategies for reform implementation, theories, gaps, challenges and stories.

As an educational practitioner, reading this book informed me a critical perspective on educational reform and implementation. The book examines various scales of reform, but I feel the book should question the quality of the reforms introduced. In other words, the book does not consider measuring the scale of success and the quality of implementation rather than scaling the size.

Naturally, these questions do not lead to one clear answer or generalization, especially since many factors are involved globally. These factors include but are not limited to national resources, policies, educational systems, leaders in education, and the quality of planning and implementation, particularly its coherence. For example, the book dedicates several explanations to teachers' professional development as a first step to implement reform for them to be 'qualified' to deliver an updated curriculum and use new teaching and learning methods. However, other aspects as part of this 'first step' are largely ignored, such as the development of a new understanding and an updated curriculum.

Therefore, reform at any scale can be successful if there is coherence. In other words, all aspects and all education reform components are considered for a comprehensive strategy. As in the above example, curriculum reform, teacher

professional development and capacity building, teaching resources, administrative support and participation of all stakeholders can go in the same sequence for a successful implementation.

To conclude, this book is a valuable asset. It greatly contributes to the existing knowledge on education reform and reform implementation for researchers, education experts, postgraduate students, policymakers and all education stakeholders. The book presents detailed seven case studies of seven countries around the world. Therefore, the reader is exposed to some research ideas and practical context about the education reform of both theory and practice in academic and vocational education.

Reference

Reimers, F. M., Amaechi, U., Banerji, A., & Wang, M. (Eds.). (2022). *Education to build back better: What can we learn from education reform for a post-pandemic world?* Springer.

To cite this article:

Samara, M. (2023). Book review: Education to build back better. *Journal of Education and Research*, 13(1), 101-107. <https://doi.org/10.51474/jer.v13i1.666>
