

Foreword

In the 1980s and 1990s, education moved from the shadows to the spotlight for policy makers, largely driven by concern about competitiveness in a complex global economy and a realization that education of the young is a necessity for creating educated citizens and ensuring a successful future. Words like standards, accountability, and effectiveness became part of the educational lexicon. As Fullan (1997) pointed out, the pressure for reform emerged in the 1980s without the reality. By the mid 1990s, however, large-scale reform was emerging, particularly in England and the United States, with a national curriculum in England in 1988 and a relentless focus on “education, education, education” by Tony Blair, and George Bush being called “the Education President”, as he introduced “No Child Left Behind” in the United States.

Much of this reform was wrapped up in a package called “standards-based reform”. Even at that time, however, the meaning of the term was different in different places. In the United States, the focus was on creating detailed and specific content and process standards at the state level and developing or choosing a quantitative instrument to assess whether the students knew the required content or could perform the required tasks. In England, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy focused on ambitious standards for learning but did not define specific content or processes. Instead, they established targets for success at a school level and inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) inspected and reported on the performance of every school in the country. In both cases, there was reliance on large-scale assessment, as a mechanism for deciding about success.

Although standards-based reform emerged in the United States and the United Kingdom, the idea has spread across the world as an approach to systemic reform. It might appear that there is a worldwide “tsunami” of standards-based reform that will standardize and homogenize the educational system across the globe. This book makes it very clear, however, that there is no one approach to standards-based reform and countries change—there is a danger in paying attention to its evolution and impact in only one context. This makes the book so valuable. Louis Volante has drawn together descriptions from a wide range of countries, all involved in large-scale reform and using standards and assessments as part of their process. What becomes very obvious is that the language may be the same but the words reflect different contexts and can represent very different ideals, values, and processes.

The collection of papers in this book makes it very clear that large-scale reform is indeed a local issue. Countries, states, and provinces address the issues of improving schools and holding educators accountable in dramatically different ways. Also, the approach to large-scale reform changes over time, sometimes gradually and sometimes dramatically with new governments or changing economic circumstances.

Leaders cannot assume that there is only one way for reform to proceed. Instead, they need to understand their own context well and make decisions within that context to serve the students and their communities by improving learning conditions for students. At the same time, if leaders are going to be visionary and lead for a time that is different from the current conditions, they have the responsibility of understanding the broader global approaches to large-scale reform and learn from other places. This book provides readers (e.g., leaders at all levels, students of educational reform, policy makers) with a powerful tool for standing outside their own particular context and understanding the fundamental issues related to educational reform, not only to move the collective knowledge base forward but to learn from one another and use this knowledge to shape current leadership decisions and actions.

Reading this book has stimulated my thinking and raised a number of questions that I leave with you as you read it—questions that I found myself asking as I considered the leadership issues associated with standards-based reform. As you read each chapter you might want to consider:

- What is the prevailing orientation toward accountability in this country?
- What does the word “standards” mean in this country?
- How is assessment used for educational reform in this country?
- What influence have these assumptions and policy decisions had on the role of leaders at different levels (i.e., schools, districts, states/provinces, and national governments)?
- What are the implications from this comparative analysis for leaders at different levels in your country to consider?

I am sure you will find this book as interesting and challenging as I have—a gem that pushes your thinking and does not allow readers to remain neutral.

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International Perspectives

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