The World Bank, as the largest single source of aid to education globally, wields a degree of power that has arguably enabled it to shape the educational agendas of nations throughout the Global South. In light of the expansiveness of its influence, the Bank ought to be the object of intense scrutiny. The book The World Bank and Education: Critiques and Alternatives, edited by Steven J. Klees, Joel Samoff and Nelly P. Stromquist, offers this scrutiny from several angles in one comprehensive, engaging and important volume.

The Bank’s work in education has garnered the attention of educational scholars for decades. This volume, however, is a particularly timely addition to the literature as it responds directly to the 2011 release of the Bank’s most recent education strategy paper, The World Bank Education Sector Strategy 2020. Learning for All: Investing in People’s Knowledge and Skills to Promote Development (WBES 2020). With chapters written by some of the most prominent scholars from the field...
of comparative and international education, the book explicitly provides a “broad critique of World Bank policies and, in particular, of its recently released World Bank Education Strategy 2020...” (p. xv). Despite that the WBES 2020 was subjected to repeated external review and consultations, the Bank has arguably remained unresponsive to critiques that might significantly alter its mandate or the paradigm under which it operates. This book is in part a reaction to the World Bank’s lack of openness to dissenting views and its unwillingness to enter into debates on a number of educational issues.

While the volume as a whole indeed offers both critiques and alternatives, the majority of the authors focus on the former. Divided into four parts (Framing the Issues; Learning, Assessment, and the Role of Teachers; Research and Policy; Reshaping the Future), a number of common observations emerge, albeit examined from different perspectives depending on the chapter.

The most prominent overriding critique, underlying many of the more specific problematic features of the WBES 2020, is the World Bank’s unwavering adherence to neoliberal ideology, where market-driven analyses and prescriptions pervade the strategy. For instance, the chapters by Sangeeta Kamat, Klees and Susan L. Robertson explicitly draw attention to the ways in which neoliberalism has underpinned past and present strategies, and framed the arguments invoked to support Bank policies. The Bank’s narrow reliance on economic-based analyses has led to the perception of teachers as human capital, as described by Mark Ginsburg, and has determined the Bank’s definition of quality, as explained in the chapter by Crain Soudain. The economic disciplinary bias associated with neoliberalism, according to the chapter by Antoni Verger and Xavier Bonal, was revealed in past Bank education strategies, and the current WBES 2020 does not depart from this orthodoxy.

The most notable tenet to neoliberal ideology emphasized in the strategy, as highlighted by several authors, is the Bank’s persistent and evidently unproblematic support to increased privatization of education. Robertson’s chapter in particular focuses on the Bank’s past and current support of private sector engagement, referring to the “strange non-death of neoliberal privatization” in the Bank’s educational agenda. Other authors, including Klees, Stromquist, Verger and Bonal, and Angela C. De Siqueira, draw attention to the potential and real impacts of this promotion of privatization, on both equity and democracy.

The volume does an excellent job of explaining how Bank prescriptions such as privatization are associated with, for instance, the depersonalizing of teachers (Gita Steiner-Khamsi, Ginsburg, Klees) and gender inequity (Stromquist), and indicate a neoliberal vision of education as an economically instrumental good, in direct contrast with a conception of education as a human right. A number of chapters critique the Bank’s omission of a rights-based approach to education, including most notably the piece by Salim Vally and Carol Anne Spreen, but also the chapter by Bjorn H. Nordtveit, who performs a rigorous discourse analysis to reveal several shortcomings of the strategy.

In addition to the economistic lens through which the institution designs its policies, the book exposes the Bank’s apparent faith in a “one-size-fits-all” educational program for the world. Related critiques are made by several authors, including Steiner-Khamsi, De Siqueira, Klees, and Samoff, who cite for instance the recent development of the Systems Approach for Better
Education Results (or SABER benchmarking tools), the Bank’s universalizing of its prescriptions to bring about “Learning for All,” and the unproblematized assumption that all nations must follow the same path and arrive at the same destination in order to be considered “developed.” As aptly put by Verger and Bonal: “The goal of developing a universal and irrefutable scientific knowledge base and methodology for evaluating educational reforms, together with a strong belief in market solutions for such development, leads the Bank into dismissing other more context-sensitive approaches for assessing educational policies” (p.130).

A related and equally troubling criticism of the WBES 2020, recurrent throughout the volume, is the Bank’s persistent self-referencing and the very narrow evidence base employed to support its policies. The Bank – priding itself on being the world’s “Knowledge Bank” – overwhelmingly references its own staff-authored publications, or research commissioned by the Bank itself, leading to what Robertson describes as the Bank’s “effort to create a virtuous circle between Bank ‘policy-research-evidence’ and back again” (p.201). Steiner-Khamis also critiques World Bank publications, including the WBES 2020, as reflecting “the tendency of the World Bank to talk with everyone, speak on behalf of many, and listen only to their own” (p.16). Samoff describes this self-referencing as “dependent confirmation of previously asserted certainties” (p.143). Evidence from outside the Bank’s circle is simply ignored, including much research which might offer alternative visions of standard Bank policy, as explained in connection to the topic of gender in the chapter by Stromquist. As Klees explains: “There is no ‘Knowledge Bank,’ only an ‘Opinion Bank,’ and, worse still, an opinion bank with monopoly power…” which he amusingly terms the “Monopoly Opinion Bank” or the “MOB” (p.56).

Finally, the criticisms offered within this volume make clear that the World Bank, which has a mandate to free the world of poverty, does not provide logical strategies for dealing with inequities, and for the most part ignores the intersections of poverty, equity and education. Each chapter provides a different perspective that supports an overarching critique that the Bank’s approach to education cannot truly bring about learning for all.

While a few chapters delve briefly into some alternatives for the Bank (including those authored by Robertson and Samoff), it is the chapter by Anne Hickling-Hudson and Klees that concentrates on where we go from here. The proposal is not to reform the World Bank, but to essentially dismantle the Bank’s education sector and instead create a new global institution, grounded in a rights-based approach, acting in the interest of public education, which channels aid to the Global South in the form of a “Global Fund for Education.” Hickling-Hudson and Klees only scratch the surface of the characteristics of this new institution, focusing mainly on its mandate and the principles under which it would operate. However, the authors point out that were the Global Fund for Education to be designed in a truly democratic manner, its operational structure “must be the outcome of contestation and negation by the parties involved on a global scale” (p.210). Following this alternative vision for international financing to education, the book concludes with an overview of some prominent themes covered by the authors, many of which overlap with those highlighted in this review.

A book that focuses primarily on policy, and predominantly on a single document, is by its nature specialized and thereby slightly limited. For instance, few chapters provide an analysis of specific country-level Bank-funded projects. Nor does the book give an introductory general
overview of the World Bank’s operations beyond education. And so while the volume is a unique and important addition to the field of comparative and international education, it seems to be geared to readers with a relatively strong foundational understanding of the World Bank and the international aid regime in which it operates.

It can be speculated that the audience intended for *The World Bank and Education: Critiques and Alternatives* primarily includes educators, development practitioners, and policy-makers in the Global South, and researchers and academics in the field of comparative and international education. Given the institution’s historic resistance to criticism, debate and change, one can speculate that, unfortunately, those who ought to read this book are those who are least likely to: the staff and, in particular, high-level management at the World Bank.

About the Reviewer

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