

**Book Review: *Dire Straits-Education Reforms: Ideology, Vested Interests and Evidence* by Montserrat Gomendio and José Ignacio Wert**

Education, as a practical activity to improve the comprehensive quality of human beings, not only plays a role in the transmission and inheritance of culture but also has intimate ties to the growth of life and development of economy and society. In this book, the authors Montserrat Gomendio and José Ignacio Wert discuss the reasons why education reforms are difficult to implement but easy to reverse, taking into account the valuable evidence they have obtained in designing and implementing education reforms in Spain and their subsequent experience at the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) advising governments worldwide. This dialogue on education is like a breath of fresh air for the reader. By comparing education policies from an international perspective and analyzing the interplay between education reforms, ideology and vested interests, the authors provide insights into the positive and negative factors that influence education reforms. The book consists of seven chapters.

Chapter 1 offers a brief overview of the origins, functions, and roles of modern education systems. From the emergence of mass schooling in Europe, the United States and the rest of the world, one key question is thoroughly discussed: how to define the aims of education and the extent to which different views can be aligned. As the transition from “universal access to education” to “quality education” takes place, ideology begins to play a significant role and permeates the main dimensions of the education system. Is the ultimate goal of the education system equity or quality? The authors note that left-wing parties generally support greater levels of investment, smaller class sizes, and higher teacher salaries, which are the main demands of teacher unions, while right-wing parties tend to support competition, accountability, and student and teacher evaluations, which they believe will improve quality and efficiency, contrary to the interests of teacher unions. The authors highlight that a complex combination of ideology and vested interests influence the advancement of education reform. Besides, the authors analyze the general concern regarding how education systems need to adapt to the knowledge society, digitalization and globalization, and megatrends that result in demands from the labor market for higher levels of knowledge and skills. Since education systems need to constantly adapt to rapidly changing environments and sometimes unforeseen circumstances (e.g., the impact of COVID-19), the implementation of education reform requires consideration of many factors.

Chapter 2 focuses on clarifying the complex relationship between education policy and ideology. Ideology in this context refers to any form of politically oriented conception of education. Because ideologies may diverge, the goals of education may also diverge as a result, such as whether the goal of education is to promote equity or advance quality. In this chapter, the authors present the definition of education from the perspective of the state as the provider of education since ancient Greece and the views of different thinkers in modern education such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Fernando Reimers, John Stuart Mill, John Dewey and others. The shares and the development of public and private provisions in different countries and economies have also been analyzed. The concept of “equity” is also a keyword in the authors’ discussion. As an important component in the maintenance of education systems, “equity” is understood differently by the political parties on the left and right. For the left, education means equality, while for the right, education plays an enabling function. It is worth thinking about how to properly balance quality and equity in the education system. Considering the shape of education, the authors analyze the four main dimensions that are most susceptible to ideological influence: architecture, teachers, curricula, and assessments. Among them, regarding teachers, left-wing parties favor hiring as many teachers as possible and oppose performance evaluations or firing them for poor performance, whereas right-wing parties support teacher evaluation and performance-related incentives and are more rigorous and selective in recruitment. These disparities have implications for both the development of the teaching profession and the role that teachers play in education. In the education reform process, since teachers are a fundamental gear in the education engine, their position largely determines the success or failure of reform. With regard to curriculum, its usefulness and relevance to student achievement and the given content all reflect a certain education ideology. Regarding assessment, the authors explain, in the context of its development, how it was initially designed as an objective measure of talent in an effort to break down barriers of wealth, inheritance and political influence. However, due to the limitations of the approach (for instance, not every student receives the same level of quality education), it is increasingly viewed as a tool of discrimination, and the relationship between ideology and assessment varies. In sum, the education policies and ideologies described in this chapter somehow influence the feasibility and durability of education reform in a country or environment.

Chapter 3 mainly describes the relationship between the governance model and the reform experience of the education system. Governance arrangements in education systems are concerned with the distribution of power and responsibilities among levels of government, financial incentives, and control of resources, as well as the interests of stakeholders outside of government. The authors begin by describing the role of various governments in education over time in various countries,

such as Germany, France, other European countries, and the United States. As universal access to education is achieved over time, potential conflicts of interest may arise in the pursuit of efficiency. The authors note that the most powerful stakeholders in education are the teachers' unions, while other stakeholders include parents' associations, employers' associations, non-state providers, research institutions, and non-profit organizations. A small-scale pilot project, followed by expansion depending on its effectiveness, is a viable strategy for reducing resistance to reform (Adonis, 2012). Moreover, the cycle of government change can affect the implementation and progress of reform. The authors next analyze the governance framework of education systems in centralized and formally federal countries. In centralized systems, it may be easier to develop, approve, and implement uniform policies at the national level, but education reforms often lead to mass protests which tend to have a big political impact because there is only one target: the national government. In formally federal countries, governance is more complex and requires more horizontal and vertical alignment, as common standards need to be negotiated among sub-national entities. By considering the Spanish context, the authors also analyze the challenges and potential solutions that can occur when the same percentage of the curriculum is assigned to each subject at the central and regional levels. For some countries, the education system starts centralized and after a process of decentralization, the efficiency and quality of the education system may be compromised. Observing the Swedish case as one of the most illuminating, the authors thoroughly examine it, describing the problems that may arise and the solutions that may be found in the decentralization process. The governance arrangement not only defines the areas of responsibility of the various levels of government in terms of policymaking, but also sets out the relevant rules for those who raise the funds, those who set the tax rates, and those who spend the funds. Using Spain as an example, the authors discuss accountability mechanisms and point out that when accountability mechanisms are absent, assessment of student performance is difficult to implement and there are significant regional differences in student performance, which translate into significant regional differences in rates of early school leaving and youth unemployment and NEETs (a situation in which many young persons aged between 15 and 29 in Europe are not in employment, education or training). Experience from education reform shows that education reform is often difficult when the interests of teachers' unions conflict with those of students, and when teachers' unions feign protection of student interests under a veil of hypocrisy. VET (Vocational Education and Training) governance is a special case in the governance of education reform, and it is only when economic, social, and governmental stakeholders share a commitment to finding common ground in an effort to find ways to align VET governance with labor market needs, can reforms succeed.

Chapter 4 combines data from International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) to uncover exactly what factors have an impact on student performance. As a system of assessment started by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the ILSAs are designed to measure student performance in comparison across countries using the same indicators. There are striking differences in student knowledge and skills due to differences in the quality of education systems, and the difference between the best and worst-performing countries is equivalent to more than seven years of education (OECD, 2016), which may continue to increase over time. Furthermore, there are disparities in student performance between regions within the same country. Utilizing a detailed analysis of the cases of Spain and Italy, the authors conclude that there is no association between the level of investment in education at the regional level and high or low student performance. In addition, class size has no bearing on student performance. So, what factors have an impact on student performance? They include teacher quality, student assessment and school autonomy. However, when measuring teacher quality, it is important to note that teachers in different countries may represent different skill levels within their country. Incentive-based policies and increased teacher accountability may improve student outcomes. While student assessments lead to the desired positive effects, there are still countries, such as Spain and Greece that do not implement standardized assessments as an exception due to concerns about punitive measures on students and teachers, and these concerns about negative consequences outweigh the potential for positive effects. With respect to school autonomy, positive impacts on student performance are predicated on principals having the capacity to be true leaders, teachers being highly qualified, and accountability mechanisms being well-developed and strong. This chapter also discusses how to enhance instructional effectiveness in the face of student diversity. The most common measures include grouping students according to their abilities and setting up differentiated upper-secondary education programs with a predominantly academic curriculum or vocational instructional training to offer flexibility to students with different levels of performance and interests. These measures to reduce student heterogeneity will bring constructive thinking to education reform.

Chapter 5 is based on the data from the previous chapter on ILSAs and focuses on the lessons gained from countries that are performing well and those that are lagging. Due to differences in survey methodology, cycle length and target population, the ILSAs consist of three major assessment systems, namely PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), and in this chapter, the authors focus more on the PISA, the international student assessment program of OECD. It assesses three domains: scientific literacy, mathematics and reading literacy. In interpreting the data, the authors pay attention to the performance of Finland, East Asian countries, Singapore, South Korea, China, Vietnam, Latin America, and countries that have improved recently such as Poland, Portugal, Estonia, and Spain. Among them, Finland, emerged as a top performer in reading early on and the interpretation was that its success was due to a focus on comprehensive education and equity as well as school autonomy, but its performance decreased over time probably because it was basking in the glory of its success and failed to recognize the need for reform; for East Asian countries, the limited power of teachers'

unions to defend vested interests contributed in a sense to the reform of the education system particularly in reaching teaching excellence through demanding training and selection processes; for Singapore, the fact that the same political party has been in power for decades has allowed consistency in how the education system has evolved over time to become the most successful; in South Korea, the Ministry of Education has centralized significant resources and decision-making power, and the government has instituted strong accountability measures, all of which have led to relatively successful performance in these countries. In contrast, in Latin America, inequality in education systems, lack of appropriate selection and training mechanisms, and low teacher performance have constrained educational development. For those countries where educational development has improved over time, the authors similarly analyze the reasons for their progress. Poland, for example, went from below the OECD average in student performance in 2000 to becoming the best-performing country in Europe in 2012 with rapid improvements in student performance, with successful reforms due to improved professional development of teachers, the introduction of standardized external national exams, and a 1-year delay in vocational education and training. The authors conclude with a discussion of the impact and influence of the media on PISA in the context of their own country, Spain, and the reversal of its reform success. The chapter is not only well-documented and comprehensively explained, but the content covered is also quite thought-provoking. In the concluding section, the authors use examples from Spain to reveal some of PISA's weaknesses.

Chapter 6 is an in-depth study and discussion of education reform in Spain. From an insider's perspective and through the authors' direct participation in the planning and implementation of education reform, they present an incisive and insightful analysis of the political costs incurred in the reform process, as well as the real hurdles encountered. The aftermath of the 2012 financial crisis precipitated the inescapable goal of decreasing the fiscal deficit. This, however, had serious negative consequences as people had been led to believe that the reform was responsible for the budget cuts. In addition, the Spanish education system suffered from major deficiencies, such as the high rate of early school leaving, and a mediocre level of student performance which is below the OECD average and has remained stagnated over decades despite substantial increases in levels of investment. Simultaneously, the lack of national and standardized regional assessments at the end of the educational stages has led to huge disparities between regions which represent a major source of inequality. In addition, the rigidity of the education system leads to the neglect of the needs of a diverse student population, and a high rate of grade repetition leads to a high rate of early school leaving. The authors also provide a step-by-step analysis of the multiple elements that ultimately result in high levels of inequality in an education system that is designed to avoid segregation and discrimination while promoting equity. Among the challenges are how to deal with the level of teacher skills and the diversity of student populations. The authors then tell the story of their decision to embark on educational reform against the backdrop of the peak of the financial crisis and difficult politics. The LOMCE (Law for the Improvement of Quality in Education) was the new education reform approved in 2013 and supported by strong international evidence. The introduction of national assessments, the granting of autonomy to schools, and the development of modernized vocational education and training were all part of the implementation of the education reform. Initially, these changes in education policy brought rapid and visible improvements in some areas. However, as political games and vested interests combined, new resistance gradually emerged in the reform process, and evidence-based reforms proved futile in some areas, for example, measures to give schools more autonomy were hijacked by regions from the central government during the implementation phase, leaving no room for schools to enjoy autonomy. In addition, national standardized exams were not implemented due to the rejection of teachers' unions and opposition political parties. The chapter concludes by bringing the time to the present, exploring the content of the current government's reforms, and analyzing the role that PISA should play in the education policy debate.

Chapter 7 summarizes the intricate interplay between ideology, governance, and conflicting interests in education reform. Equity and quality have always been two dimensions of educational goals, with equity being the focus of left-wing parties and quality being the focus of right-wing parties. With different political parties alternating in power, it is difficult to adhere to a particular ideology of reform or to find common ground. The chapter also revisits the governance system of education reform, where centralized countries need to implement the right mechanisms to deal with diversity, and federal countries need to find ways to navigate and balance regional inequalities. When using data to compare educational performance across countries, the authors divide the data into three categories based on their robustness: strong evidence, context-dependent evidence, and weak evidence, and progressively analyze the variables associated with each category and the effects produced in turn.

The importance of education is obvious to all. Whether at the macro or micro level, for society or individuals, the power of a competent education system cannot be underestimated. Education is the main base for innovation, dissemination and application of knowledge, and it is also the cradle for the cultivation of the creative spirit and innovative talents. Quality education promotes the increase of human knowledge and the development of skills, and human capital is the fundamental driver of economic growth and prosperity. Comprehensive, detailed and in-depth, this book combines the authors' personal experience with evidence obtained from the international context, taking the interaction between educational reform, ideology and vested interests as the main topic, and methodically illustrates the impact of these factors on education in each country with a dialectical thought.

A diamond has many sides, and each side can reflect its true nature. The education system is no different, and when viewed from the perspectives of various stakeholders, the opportunities and challenges of education reform become increasingly

tangible. These stakeholders include those who benefit from a quality education system, such as students, parents, employers, etc., as well as those who obtain resources directly in the education system, such as teachers, the textbook publishing industry, educational technology companies, transportation and school canteen companies, and government. When complex educational phenomena are measured through the use of indicators, we should first determine the reliability and validity of the data. Secondly, all stakeholders should overcome potential conflicts of interest and recognize the positive impact of specific policies. Finally, our society should reach a consensus on the education goals it aspires to achieve. As the authors argue, policymakers often have to make difficult choices in the face of ideological debates and powerful vested stakeholders. Those who embrace educational reform and are willing to pay the political price often encounter insurmountable obstacles. The alternatives, then, consist of implementing pilot projects that proceed from small steps to big changes, incrementally, in the hope that reforms in the education systems will have a bright future.

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