



Educating for the 21st century perspectives, policies and practices from around the world

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BOOK REVIEW

Educating for the 21st century perspectives, policies and practices from around the world, edited by Choo, Suzanne, Sawch, Deb, Villanueva, Alison, and Vinz, Ruth, Singapore, Springer, 2017, 490 pp., 135,19 € (hardback), ISBN 978-981-10-1673-8

Those readers who have ever visited one of the Disney parks are familiar with the “It’s a small world” ride. This famed attraction features over 300 dolls with identical faces and in traditional costumes representing people from different cultures around the world, singing the catchiest of tunes and sending the message of unity and love to its visitors. The identical faces are intended to remind us that we are all the same in many ways, despite our apparent differences. The message of the volume, entitled “Educating for the 21st Century Perspectives, Policies and Practices from Around the World”, is a similar one: We may come from different cultures and countries yet we have so many shared issues to consider and problems to tackle. In other words, while acknowledging our uniqueness, our educational goals and aspirations are virtually identical. Hence, this volume is a singular addition to the increasingly international conversation about education.

To communicate this important message, Choo, Sawch, Villanueva, and Vinz offer an impressive compendium of chapters covering a broad range of topics that relate to educating students for the 21st first century. The book is ambitious in scope and geography and varied in tone and focus of its 24 chapters, and thus makes it an enthralling read. The reader has an option of picking and choosing chapters that range from case studies and ethnographies to ruminations about social justice to scholarly reviews of particular issues within or across countries. If you are interested in education and no matter what your philosophical or methodological inclinations are, there is a good chance you will find a chapter to your liking in this book.

The volume contains three main sections. The opening section, “Perspectives: Mapping our futures-in-the-making,” describes processes that are new and specific to the 21st century education and different from what educators had to deal with in the past. One of the key features of modern educational contexts is students’ cyber connectedness and interaction over various social media platforms. Students communicate with people across the globe, transcending continents, nations, cultures, religions, and languages. Do we, educators, use these opportunities to our advantage? Do students get the benefit of burgeoning globalization? The contributors in this section tackle these and many other important questions, providing potential solutions on how to guide students towards becoming productive members of global community, citizens who are concerned with economic and social equality.

The second section, “Policies: Constructing the future through policymaking,” presents a comprehensive picture of how 21st century education is translated into policies. The chapters jointly define and identify core competencies and skills that students should possess to have an advantage in the current milieu. The contributors emphasize the need for globally applicable frameworks and taxonomies of characteristics that would prepare students for the complexities of the modern day workforce. At the same time, the authors stress the importance of acknowledging that visions and expectations for core values and dispositions differ among educational systems in various countries. The authors explore ways to effectively implement approaches towards policy and practice and offer suggestions for policy initiatives and curriculum reform. The examples from the US and Singapore are particularly illuminating. The former chapter calls for a bottom-up approach to the twenty-first century education, wherein policies would

empower marginalized groups to navigate the modern, globalized world. The latter chapter presents a Singapore-specific approach, where top-down government support help individual schools to implement their policies. Overall, and rightfully so, the leitmotif of this section is the emphasis on the key role of teachers in successful implementation of the twenty-first century curricula. From Cuba and the United States, to Finland, Japan, Kuwait, Philippines, and Singapore, the seven chapters in this section provide worthy and thought-provoking examples of how twenty first century skills are defined and implemented across different countries.

The third section, entitled “Practices: Enacting the Future in Local Contexts,” acquaints the reader with specific initiatives that schools in various countries around the world employ to satisfy the book’s main call – educating students in the 21st century. The nine chapters describe examples of policies and intervention programmes that schools in six countries implemented in their attempt to educate globally minded students.

In general, it is undisputed that students need competencies that go beyond the proverbial reading, writing, and math in order to succeed in life, and educators across the globe are grappling with possible approaches on how to enhance these skills in their students (Lipnevich, Preckel, & Roberts, 2016). The twenty first century skills, or social and emotional skills, include interpersonal and intrapersonal characteristics that enable students to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions in the high-paced, constantly changing world (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2017). Intervention programs that are designed to bolster these skills in children have grown increasingly popular in the last 20 years (Humphrey, 2013; Weissberg, Durlak, Domotrovich, & Gullotta, 2015; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Such interventions focus on enhancing social and emotional skills, improved academic performance, decreased problematic behaviour, and increased retention (e.g., Hagelskamp, Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2013; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). This volume discusses school and country-specific curricular and policy issues related to the development and implementation of such programs, but does not discuss the existing – and vast – literature on programs designed to assess and develop these skills. I would have liked to have seen such discussion as well as a chapter on international large-scale assessments of cross-cultural competencies and citizenship.

Finally, it is common for edited volumes to include a concluding chapter that provides a synthesis of themes discussed in the book and offers the editors’ perspective on where to go from there, and for a good reason. The editors of such a volume have a unique perspective on the issues pertinent to the topic, having just edited a vast collection of chapters. The editors here do not offer that summary and vision, and I missed having them provide that wisdom. I was curious to know how the three parts with chapters within them fit together and how we – as a field – can use the story told by this volume to improve educating our students and turning them into successful global citizens. This observation notwithstanding, *Educating for the 21st Century* is both timely and time-worthy as it reminds readers that it is indeed a small world.

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