

## Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform

reviewed by Ron Byrnes – 2005

**Title:** Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform

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Too often it seems, in edited books, the sum is not greater than the individual parts. Frequently, introductions are cursory, and more importantly, at the end, editors fail to help readers connect the dots of their individual authors' varied contributions. And sometimes, when the quality of individual chapters is uneven and textual errors prove distracting, readers are left wondering how closely an editor read the individual contributions. In *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform*, Iris Rotberg avoids all these pitfalls. Rotberg's preface nicely frames the sixteen chapters that follow, the chapters are similarly lucid, accessible, and insightful, and the concluding chapter is a thoughtful synthesis of the themes that weave throughout the book. In short, Rotberg gets the editing business right; as a result, education policy makers, scholars, and practitioners interested in comparative education reform will find the book's sum is greater than the individual parts.

Rotberg's charge to her contributors from sixteen different countries was to educate readers about education reform in each of their respective nations. The countries represent a nice cross section of the world with case studies from Africa (South Africa), Asia (China, Japan, and Singapore), Europe (England, Germany, France, Sweden, and Russia), the Middle East (Turkey and Israel), North America (Canada and the United States), the Pacific Rim (New Zealand and Australia), and South America (Chile). Most of the contributors begin with a brief historical overview of their country's education reform movement and then outline the particularities of their national educational system. I recommend the book for at least three reasons.

Most importantly, I recommend the book because the individual case studies are informative.

Reading *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education* is like being on an interesting, sixteen stop, world study tour. Readers will be more familiar with some national systems than others, but they will gain new understanding of each country's efforts to improve their schools. Area specialists will find the relevant individual chapters valuable resources as well. The chapters on South Africa's, Australia's, and Turkey's educational systems are especially engaging for two different reasons. Crouch's chapter on South Africa grabs hold of the reader because of the unprecedented magnitude of South Africa's reforms. The Australian case draws the reader in because Luke thoughtfully and convincingly weighs in on the country's most pressing educational dilemmas. Since education is a normative endeavor, I appreciated Luke's informed opinions especially in the context of the other authors' emphasis on objective description and detached analysis. Similarly, in the chapter on Turkey's educational system, I appreciated the way Simsek and Yildirim convincingly advocated for decentralization of educational power in Turkey.

I also recommend the book because Rotberg carefully and thoughtfully pieced together the concluding chapter. Readers who read the book from beginning to end will still be processing the sixteen stories and the wide-ranging content as they begin the final chapter. By identifying the themes that weave throughout the chapters, Rotberg helps the reader make sense of this worldwide intellectual journey. One can almost picture Rotberg at work on the chapter, reading, coding, re-reading, and re-coding the sixteen papers spread out before her. To her credit, Rotberg does more than identify the themes; she illuminates them by constantly referencing the most essential points made by the individual contributors. What results is a theme, example, example, theme, example, example rhythm that provides readers with a thoughtful, manageable, and memorable conceptual framework that should enable them to draw upon the work in their own professional activities.

In the concluding chapter, Rotberg reflects that all of the represented countries have "decided that retaining the status

quo is unacceptable in the context of national and global change” (p. 387). Next, she reviews the major societal pressures that motivated the school reforms and then analyzes the major trends in school reform, the conflicting goals and policy choices that countries face as they attempt to implement reform, and the societal constraints that limit it. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the roles values and political structures play in facilitating or limiting change and thus in the likelihood that a school reform, whether “homegrown” or borrowed from another country, can be successfully implemented (p. 387).

I also like the book’s potential to heighten students’ interest in comparative education. I envision using it in a graduate seminar. I would assign one student to each country/chapter/case study. Students would draw upon the chapter bibliographies to do additional research and then they would either present their cases to their peers or we would stage an international conference on educational reform with the students grappling with the most essential dilemmas from the perspectives of policy makers from their assigned countries. Next, I would organize the students into small groups and challenge them to synthesize what they had learned from one another just as Rotberg does in her concluding chapter. For the culminating activity we would compare and contrast the students’ and Rotberg’s efforts at synthesis.

As with any book, *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education* could have been improved in a few ways. For example, I wish Rotberg had written brief, one to two-page introductions to each of the three subsections. She touches upon the divisions in her preface, but not with sufficient depth and clarity. The cryptic section headings—Dramatic Political/Economic Change, Letting Go, and Transitions—are far too vague.

I also wish Rotberg had encouraged more of her contributors to include in their chapters some symbolic references to specific schools, groups of teachers, or classrooms. The authors’ tell their stories almost exclusively through wide-angle lenses. Their primary use of wide-angle lenses is understandable given their need to set their countries’ stories within historical, political, and economic contexts, but specific examples every once in a while, in the chapters on Sweden, Japan, Canada, and New Zealand for example, would have strengthened the narratives. As a positive example of this, in the chapter on

Chile’s education system, McMeekin explains how Chile’s national test (the SIMCE) influences teachers’ work in classrooms. In doing so, he cites his field notes and includes quotes from six teachers. In terms of engaging the reader, it is one thing for him to write, “Teachers did not indicate the tests caused them, or their students, anxiety” (p. 93). It’s another to include teachers’ voices including one who said, “We don’t make special efforts to prepare for the SIMCE. If a child is doing poorly, we work with them, whether there’s a SIMCE test that year or not” (p. 93).

These minor criticisms do not detract from my positive recommendation. *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform* is an important addition to the comparative education literature. Anyone interested in learning more about what educators are doing to improve schooling in other countries will find it a valuable addition to their library.

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